

The cover art depicts a dramatic scene from the Mobile Suit Gundam Twilight Axis series. In the foreground, a red mobile suit, the Axis Gundam, is shown in a dynamic pose, surrounded by other red mobile suits. The background features a large, dark, rocky landscape under a bright, glowing sun or moon, with a large blue sphere (likely Earth) visible in the upper half of the frame.

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM

# Twilight AXIS

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TRANSLATED BY  
**ZEONIC**

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# Chapter #1

## Afterglow of the Red Comet

"Hey, Arlette. We're up."

Arlette Almage opened her eyes, disoriented, as a hand roughly nudged her on the shoulder.

"T minus 180."

"Relative velocity to the target is +30."

"No response from the passive sensors."

The operators' voices buzzed about from the speakers next to her ears, as she realized she had fallen asleep. Noticing the vibrations in the seat against her back had grown slightly while she slept, she figured that the ship had begun decelerating. She turned to the large man sitting next to her.

"We're here?"

"Yeah we got here while you were konked out."

As Danton Hyleg muttered in judgment, Arlette's annoyance with him showed on her face. "He's is always like this," she thought to herself, "I just woke up. Would it kill him to be a little more pleasant?" As she was just about to pick a fight with him, she noticed another man standing in the front of the room and quickly sat up, putting on a more professional face.

She took in her surroundings again. There were several men clad in the same normal suit as she was, sitting quietly in simple seats lining the outer wall. It was a cold, dull gray wall, without a single window. It was quite a stark sight.

"We finally come back, and we can't even see the view..."

Just as she was regretting missing the scenery beyond those walls, a voice rang out from her helmet's speaker. It was the young man standing in front of her.

"Ms. Arlette, I'd like you to take a look this."

The man, Lieutenant JG Mehmet Merca, held out a tablet towards her with a peaceful smile on his face, rather uncharacteristic of a soldier.

"Are you certain this is the port you told us about?"

Arlette looked into the screen, which displayed the feed from one of the ship's external cameras. A dock rolled out from a rough, angular rock surface, with a peculiar design drawn on it, exactly like the one she remembered.

"I'm sure of it. That's the research facility's private port."

"Thank you."

Mehmet gave her a slight smile and immediately went back to the control room. Once again, Arlette found herself staring at the windowless walls, and again she thought of the view that lay beyond them.

She was aboard an assault landing craft prepared by Mastema, a unit under the direct control of the Federation government. She knew that one more ship

of the same model was traveling with them nearby. Each ship had a full Mastema company aboard. These two ships were headed somewhere that Arlette and Danton were very familiar with, but it was not the same place they'd once known.

It was Axis, once an asteroid base, a stronghold for Neo Zeon. But on that fateful day – March 12th U.C.0093 – the asteroid was split in half. Their destination this time was on one of those halves.

x      x      x

“Our destination, the research facility, lies on the half of Axis further ahead in orbit – on the side where asteroid Moussa was attached.”

“Yes, but the facility is not on Moussa itself. Moussa only contained residential quarters and some defensive weapons facilities.”

“Is Moussa a special place?”

“To the people who lived on it, yes. It's existence is... how do I put it... a symbol of sorts – a place of origin.”

This is what Arlette explained to Mehmet and the others, as they traveled there in a high-speed transport ship disguised as a civilian transport. During the discussion, Danton just stood to the side, nodding silently. Though he had also lived on Axis for a while, he had never been granted permission to enter Moussa. Newcomers such as him – who'd survived the One Year War and fled to Axis – were never allowed to even step foot in Moussa. It was treated as a kind of holy land.

x      x      x

The increasing vibrations of the seats signaled that they would be docking soon. They had arranged for ship number 2 to land first and confirm that the area was safe, before ship number 1, with Arlette and the crew, would dock. The initiation of the docking sequence on their ship meant that ship number 2 had landed safely and there were no signs of danger. Before long, the light above each seat turned green, and the hatch creaked open, revealing a passage.

“This is some real VIP treatment.”

As Danton sighed, complaining under his breath, Arlette took his hand gently. She switched her speaker to touch communication, and her voice entered quietly into his helmet.

“We've come back.”

“It's not like this is our home.”

“But the fact that it's special hasn't changed, right?”

Arlette's voice was normal, but there was a slight flicker of emotion in it. Danton had been with her long enough to notice that much.

“I guess so. It is where the Flanagan Institute fell, after all.”

“This is where our lives were decided!”

“Yeah...”

Danton's feelings didn't change. They never had, and they never would.

"The only thing I'm thinking about is how to get you out of here alive. That's all I ever thought about."

"Just following the Captain's orders, huh?"

"Of course."

Arlette gave a slight giggle and gripped his hand a little tighter.

x      x      x

Arlette and the crew got off the landing ship and passed through the passage from the docking port, entering the urban district, directly beneath the area where Moussa had been attached. This was where the research facility's personnel and families had once lived.

However, three years had passed since Axis had fallen – more than enough time for the district to cease all functions.

"It feels so different. I remember it being smaller and messier."

"Spaces feel bigger when there are no people around."

Arlette and Danton, along with the Mastema special forces unit, lead by Mehmet, made their way down the district's main street. The entire residential sector was built to rotate to create artificial gravity, but the equipment had stopped functioning. The team kicked off the ground with each step, being careful not to float too high. This made the place feel even more foreign to Arlette.

"The target facility should be at the end of this street, correct?"

Mehmet's voice rang in from the speaker.

The Minovsky particle density inside Axis read very high, as if it were a lingering scent from the war. In their close formation, the radios were working fine, but if they were to spread out enough to lose sight of each other, it was likely they'd lose communications as well.

"It's going to be a hassle if we get separated." thought Danton as he answered Mehmet's question.

"Yeah, it should be..."

"Understood. Thank you, Mr. Danton."

"For what?"

"For your cooperation. I'd like to thank you again."

"Oh. Yeah, no problem."

Though Mehmet and his squad were wearing the same normal suits as Danton and Arlette, each member was equipped with some impressive heavy weaponry.

"You guys are really packing the heat."

"The area may be uninhabited, but you never know if there are automatic defense systems still in operation."

"I see. Good thinking."

The soft way that Mehmet carried himself was severely mismatched with his imposing title, "Special Forces Commanding Officer." His movements suggested that he was more used to socializing with civilians than military types. Then again, that's if you could call Danton and Arlette civilians.

"We'll be out of the urban district soon. We can just follow the passage from there."

The facility, once called the "Maharaja Karn Memorial Research Facility," referring to one of the most influential men involved in its establishment, was also where the Flanigan Institute saw it's demise, and it was the place where Danton and Arlette's futures had been determined. And now, Danton was here, guiding a special forces unit for the Federation that was once his enemy.

But he was seeking something that might be there – something which that man had left.

He wondered what Arlette was thinking about as he walked beside her. Danton was lost in his trivial thoughts, when it happened. There was a sudden tremor and a blinding flash of light.

"Ah!"

His body moved instantly, grabbing Arlette in both arms and diving into a nearby building. A moment later, bullets rained down on the spot they had just been standing, ricocheting off the stone pavement, shattering lights and ripping through billboards along the street.

"Gunfire?! Here?! But why?!" Danton racked his brain, as a shiver ran down his spine. He glanced outside and saw Mehmet and his squad scattering for cover. It was clear that the name "Special Forces" wasn't just for show, as not a single member seemed unnerved by the sudden attack.

But there was something more surprising that caught his attention. This wasn't normal gunfire raining down on them. It was something much worse...

"No. There's no way..."

Danton raised his head in shock, as dust clouds slowly kicked up around him. In the distance, a huge shadow stood between the buildings. There was no mistaking it. It was something he never expected to see in these long-abandoned ruins. A giant puppet, born of human technology and made for one purpose: war. As the giant rose in the dim light, Danton stared into it's ominous eyes, and as the hair stood up on his skin, he whispered its name.

"A mobile suit..."

x      x      x

In an instant, the abandoned buildings had become a living hell. The mobile suit chased after the team as they weaved through the alleys between buildings. They caught glimpses of the machine as they ran, and it was clear it wasn't alone. There were at least two of them. Perhaps more...

No matter how much the Mastema special forces unit might excel at combat, they had no chance against multiple of those 20-meter-tall monsters. There was only one option left to them: to run as fast as they could.

"That was a Jegan... wasn't it?"

"Yeah. An RGM-89. I couldn't get a full look at it from the building, but I could tell that much."

The RGM-89 Jegan – mass produced during the Second Neo Zeon War, as the Earth Federation's primary weapon.

"Then shouldn't it be on your side?"

"Sorry to tell you, but I've never seen that model before."

As Danton snapped at him, Mehmet shook his head in response.

"There are a lot of units that slipped away during the confusion after the war."

"That's some pretty competent supervision you guys have got there! Make sure you relay that to your higher ups when you get back!"

"I'll be happy to, if we get back alive."

Just then, Mehmet received a transmission from one of his soldiers.

"Commander! Everything's set up!"

"Alright, fall back immediately! I'll do the rest myself!"

As Mehmet shouted orders through the radio, he looked back and saw the Jegan closing in on them as it came out from between the buildings.

"3...2...1..."

"Lieutenant, what are you..."

"0!"

As soon as Mehmet finished the count, the buildings on either side of the Jegan erupted in explosion.

"Holy...!"

The blast wasn't meant to hit the Jegan itself. The outer walls of the buildings around it had been blown away, letting out a thunderous roar, and rubble and dust scattered about the area, blocking the Jegan's field of vision.

"What was that?"

"We set up some explosives while we were running."

"Explosives? You even brought explosives with you?"

"We thought we might need them to blow open a sealed hatch. Of course, it's nothing strong enough to take out a mobile suit, but it can certainly bring down some buildings."

"Man, you don't mess around..."

"Don't let your guard down. Here they come."

A shadow moved about in the dust. Another Jegan appeared along with a third mobile suit. Arlette gasped in surprise at the sight of the third mobile suit. It was something she'd never seen in person, but she had seen that unique design in documents countless times before.

That white frame, those twin eyes, that v-shaped antenna...

"It's...a Gundam..."

Arlette's whisper was drowned out by the screaming voice of Mehmet.

"RUN FOR IT!!"

A brilliant blaze of light erupted from the muzzle of the Gundam's rifle. They instinctively leaped into a small alleyway, as a red hot beam of light passed behind them, scorching the pavement.

x x x

Arlette and the others hid in a back alley, peeking out to study the mobile suits as they strode through the streets. Several of Mehmet's subordinates who

had gotten separated from the team had been able to rejoin them, but there were still many they were unable to contact. Fortunately, thanks to the Minovsky particles still shrouding the area, there was no fear of their location being discovered with heat sensors or the like. It would be the end of the line if the enemy indiscriminately shot at the whole area, but they probably wouldn't do something that reckless in such a narrow residential district.

"I never imagined a Gundam would appear... Just what in the hell is going on here?" Danton posed the question to Mehmet's back as the latter surveyed the scene. "Think they're after the same thing as you guys?"

"The probability of that is high, I'd say. Although we still don't know who they really are."

"Tch..."

"..."

Danton shrugged his shoulders dejectedly as a silent Arlette remained deep in thought beside him. There was no doubt that suit was a Gundam type. To be precise, it greatly resembled the Gundam-type mobile suits she was familiar with, but didn't exactly match any of them.

"A type that wasn't in the data... A new model? But, in that case..."

"So, what're we gonna do? We can't just sit here playing hide-and-seek."

"Seeing that we don't have any mobile suits of our own, these aren't the lot we can take on with any decent chance of winning. All we can do is keep moving so they don't find us."

"A mobile suit, huh?"

Those words made a single thought pop into Arlette's mind. If this place was still as it was in her memories, then they did have a way to break out of this deadlock.

"Hey! Arlette!"

Arlette suddenly ran out, and a panicked Danton chased her.

"Ugh, this girl! Always running off the moment she gets an idea!"

"Lieutenant Mehmet!"

Pushing through the fine dust, Arlette rushed over to Mehmet's side.

"Miss Arlette! It's dangerous here, fall back—" Mehmet yelled, but Arlette silenced him with a pleading look, then whispered:

"There's a mobile suit hangar directly below this residential area."

"Did you just say a hanger?"

Mehmet reflexively turned to face Arlette.

"It's a hangar for storing prototype mobile suits the facility made for research purposes. There might be at least one still down there."

Guessing what she was getting at, Mehmet's eyes went wide.

"And you think...it could still be operational?"

"The power supply for everything related to the research facility is independent from the residential area."

"Well...no, even so, it's impossible. Even if there were a functioning mobile suit, there's no pilot..."

"Yes there is. Right here."



Arlette turned to look back with a bold smile. Danton shook his head, making a face as if he'd just bitten into a lemon.

"Who, me...?"

Memories of days spent with Arlette came flooding back into Danton's mind. Their time in the facility, too, and the time after the war's end, when he moved to Side 6.

That's right. This little girl's been getting me into trouble since way back in the day.

At the same time, he remembered something else: no matter how much he expressed his disapproval, she wouldn't listen to a single bit of it.

"He's a former Zeon test pilot. There's no questioning his skill."

"Yes, but that goes too far beyond merely receiving assistance from civilians..."

Danton responded to the bewildered Mehmet in a resigned tone.

"Far as I'm concerned, that's not a problem."

"Mr. Danton?"

"We're already far past that point anyway, aren't we?"

Danton shrugged as he started to walk away, followed by a smiling Arlette.

"See, Lieutenant? He's okay with it, so..."

"Yeah, and who's fault do you think that is?"

x      x      x

Arlette and company distanced themselves from the main streets, heading toward the areas connected to the outskirts. Mehmet and his troops could hold the enemy mobile suits at bay, but probably not for long.

"I'm pretty sure we can take a shortcut through here."

After passing through the gigantic, empty shaft of a disused freight elevator, Arlette and Danton landed in the mobile suit hangar that stretched out directly beneath the residential district.

"It's up ahead. Hurry!"

"Hey, hold on!"

Arlette took the lead as she headed toward the hangar she was aiming for. Danton followed her, but when he noticed the identification number written there, his sour face soured even more.

"Say, this hangar, don't tell me it's..."

"Don't you think this mobile suit is perfect for us?"

"You gotta be kidding me..."

x      x      x

With an experienced hand, Arlette opened the emergency compressed air-style knob and slipped into the hangar. Danton followed close behind her. Just as expected, there was one mobile suit still housed there.

"That thing still active? Do you realize how many years it's been since then?"

"Hey, I made this baby. There's no reason it'd be so weak as to get rusty in a few years."

The huge, crimson fuselage closely resembled the high performance machine which had formerly been the symbol of Zeon during the One Year War: the MS-06. However, this one was bigger overall, and its rugged thrusters, placed throughout, made one feel its superior maneuverability. Furthermore, in many places along its body, it had various armaments the MS-06 did not.

"AMX-011S... The Zaku III Custom. It's been a while. Have you been a good boy?"

The two of them kicked against the floor to float up to the cockpit. When they flipped the entry switch, the hatch opened easily.

"I knew it, the reserve power is still good! Come on, Danton, get in!"

"I know, I know."

Danton sat down in the linear seat, and Arlette sat in front of him. In this position, Danton was practically hugging Arlette, but by now this caused him no discomfort. Back then, they were like this almost every day.

"Please start by activating the main fusion reactor. I'll boot up the base system."

"Since I don't have my personal disk, the settings will have to stay as the Captain had them. I won't be able to fight full strength, you know. The Captain was so picky about the settings..."

"You can take your complaints directly to the Captain. Besides, there's no problem as far as your personal data's concerned."

Arlette winked mischievously, then reached into a pocket of her normal suit to pull out a well-used disk.

"Hey... I thought I told you to get rid of that thing."

"Well, aren't you glad I didn't?"

"Tch..."

Upon inserting the disk into the slot, each component of the suit started setting itself up in accordance with Danton's registered personal data. Next, when Danton activated the fusion reactor, the panoramic monitor in the cockpit lit up, displaying a CG view of their surroundings in the hangar. The light in the monoeye came on with a dull, "vwoon" sound.

"No rifle, huh? Guess I shouldn't have expected one here."

"It's okay. The internal weapons will be more than enough."

"Easy for you to say..."

The setup was completed as they continued their conversation, and all system indicators switched to green.

"Alright, we're taking off! Hold on tight!" Danton yelled. The moment he was about to close the front hatch, Arlette suddenly stood up and nimbly exited the cockpit.

"Hey!"

"You won't go all-out if I'm on board, right? I'll be waiting with Lieutenant Mehmet, so make quick work of those guys then come meet up with us."

"Hey, there's no guarantee I won't get killed instead! See if Mr. Lieutenant can protect you when that happens!"

Danton cursed at Arlette, who simply smiled mockingly while waving her hand as she walked away.

"You've got the Captain's orders, right? Do your best! I love you as a father!"

"You little brat!"

The cockpit hatch snapped shut as if to add a parting slap.

Awakened from its transient slumber, the red giant took off with a roar.

x      x      x

Meanwhile, in the residential district, Mehmet and the Mastema Special Forces under his command were engaged in a battle for their lives. Hiding within the cloud of debris, Mehmet sneaked up on a Jegan from behind. Without making a sound, he leaped into the air, and just when he'd reached the Jegan's torso, he immediately backed away.

"Alright..."

In that instant, a blazing light split the area around the Jegan's cockpit open. The large frame of the mobile suit faltered.

Having noticed the confrontation, another machine rushed over, but Mehmet was faster: he aimed the muzzle of the small rocket launcher he'd brought along at the wounded Jegan's cockpit and immediately pulled the trigger. Riding the bomb blast, he got away from the scene. Behind him, the huge Jegan went limp, like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

"I trained in low gravity hand-to-hand combat countless times, but never imagined I'd take on a mobile suit like that..."

With a wry smile, Mehmet confirmed the situation. Attacking in waves with explosives set in various places and with the arms they carried, they had succeeded in immobilizing one enemy mobile suit. For having fought a mobile suit in the flesh, it was an astounding military gain. However, the losses were proportionately larger: more than half the unit had already been taken out. There were still two other enemy mobile suits. More importantly, the Gundam type remained unscathed.

"...!"

Mehmet looked up and bit his lip. There, right before his very eyes, was the Gundam type suit. Rifle at the ready, it slowly descended toward him. The muzzle was aimed dead at him.

"I knew I couldn't stay hidden forever..."

At this point, what resources he had left were not enough to even try mounting a counterattack. With the Minovsky particles interfering with communications, he couldn't call for reinforcements from the squad he'd left on the perimeter either.

"Well...there's nothing else I can do."

Mehmet closed his eyes in resignation, but then —

Suddenly, the ground in front of him exploded with a thunderous roar.

"?!"

A red flash crossed the dim airspace. In that instant, that's how Mehmet's eyes perceived it. The large, radiant crimson body cracked the stone pavement

as it soared upward, crashing head-on into the Gundam type. The entangled mobile suits ascended until they smashed into the dome above the residential district.

Mehmet, who had automatically hidden in the rubble; his subordinates; and the Jegan type that had been after them; all of them could do nothing other than stare, dumbfounded.

"Shit! Just as I thought, this thing's got way too much pep to use in a narrow space like this!"

Firing thrusters, Danton tried to peel the body of his suit off the dome by force. The Gundam type remained motionless, sunken into the dome. With that one blow, it had been rendered temporarily inoperative.

Trying to help its partner, the Jegan type on the ground started shooting.

"No need to get impatient, I'll spar with you next!"

Skillfully dodging the spray of bullets, Danton closed in on the Jegan with the Zaku III Custom. Just then, Arlette's voice rang out.

"Danton, you can't blow up the mobile suit's fusion reactor! Smash the cockpit instead!"

Looking down at the sub monitor, Danton saw Arlette running with a portable laser comm device in hand.

"Easier said than done! I'm not the Captain, you know!"

"The Captain's former test pilot shouldn't whine!"

"Dammit!"

Cursing, Danton turned his attention back to the Jegan before him. He set his sights on the cockpit at its abdomen, and pulled the trigger without hesitation. The mega particle cannon mounted on the Zaku III Custom's chin blew out the Jegan's cockpit with precise aim.

"One more to go..."

Turning his back on the silenced Jegan, Danton once again fired up his thrusters to soar into the air.

x      x      x

"Incredible..."

Mehmet could only watch on in blank amazement as the Zaku III Custom's fierce attack brought down the Jegan in the blink of an eye. Arlette walked up to his side.

"Is that... Mr. Danton inside of that red mobile suit?"

"Yes, it's him."

"I'd heard it had been a very long since he piloted anything..."

"That's right. But that's not the type of thing that would cause him any problems."

"Oh?"

"Because...even that person acknowledged Danton."

x      x      x

The Zaku III Custom rose on its thrusters. Up ahead, the Gundam type which had been half-buried in the dome thanks to Danton's ramming attack was just then recovering from its system shutdown. Its twin eyes lit up with a "vwoon."

"Oh, you should've taken a longer nap!"

But it was already too late.

"I don't know if he's trying to evade or counterattack, but at this range, I better fly at him before he can make a move. I'd rather immobilize the suit without smashing the cockpit so I can find out who's behind this, but..."

As Danton was thinking that, in the next instant, his overconfident smile froze on his face.

"?!"

The Gundam forcefully fired up its thrusters, heading toward Danton.

"He's fast!"

The Gundam closed the distance between them in a flash, bearing down on the Zaku III Custom. Danton had planned on flying into its chest, but at this rate, he would end up being rammed into it instead.

The Gundam raised its free arm as if in an uppercut, aiming for the Zaku III Custom's head.

"Like I'd let you hit me!"

Danton immediately bent over backwards to evade. But right then, the armor on the Gundam's arm slide back without warning, and a dimly gleaming muzzle peeped out.

"...?!"

In an instant, a glaring flash filled Danton's field of vision. The hidden weapon built into the Gundam's arm — probably a beam cannon — unleashed its fire.

x      x      x

"Mr. Danton!"

Mehmet, who had been watching with bated breath, screamed.

At point-blank range, no matter how capable Danton was, not even he could have evaded that...

"It's okay."

"What...?"

Mehmet turned around without thinking.

"It's okay. He... won't lose."

At Mehmet's side, Arlette watched over the battle unfolding high above with a gentle smile on her face.

x      x      x

As if in shock, the Gundam type froze for a second. Its beam had barely grazed the Zaku III Custom's nose.

The Zaku III Custom balled up its fists, and started whaling on the Gundam's arms.

“!!”

The beam cannon mounted on the Gundam's arms let out violent sparks.

“Hmph!”

From that position, Danton twisted his upper body to deliver a roundhouse kick.

“!!”

Although the Gundam immediately guarded with both its sparking arms, it fell out of its stance, and fired up its thrusters to put some distance between them.

“I...won't lose.”

Danton muttered to himself without realizing it.

He'd made a promise. There was absolutely no way he could sully that person's name while fighting in their mobile suit. Especially not against a Gundam type!

“Danton!”

Arlette's voice rang out from the communications device.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

With a roar, Danton stepped on the throttle, fired his thrusters again, and charged at the Gundam.

The front armor at the Zaku III Custom's waist sprang up, revealing a beam cannon which served as a saber loaded within .

The two mobile suits closed in on each other. The Gundam immediately tried to aim its beam rifle, but the damage it had sustained earlier seemed to be slowing down its movements. At about the same time, the Zaku III Custom's beam cannon blasted the Gundam's rifle away. Having lost its weapon, the Gundam type shook violently, losing its balance, but it fired its thrusters to rise up into the upper airspace.

“You're not getting away!”

Danton was about to give chase, but a transmission from Arlette made him stop short.

“Wait, Danton!”

When he looked, he saw the Gundam gaining altitude, escaping toward the hatch that connected to the interior of Axis.

Danton didn't try to pursue it. If he tried to fight there, he would put Arlette in danger. He was curious about who his opponent had been, but right now, her safety was the top priority.

By the time Arlette and Mehmet had run over to the mobile suit's feet, the Gundam had already flown out of the area.

x x x

“A red mobile suit...”

Mehmet muttered under his breath as he stared at the Zaku III Custom standing still in the abandoned streets.

“It really took me by surprise... That form, it's exactly...”

Next to him, Arlette smiled quietly.

"This mobile suit... A certain woman made it for the person she loved."

"Eh?"

"Poor woman, just pushed around by the waves of destiny, the future of Axis left in her hands... She developed that mobile suit just to try to get the person she loved to pilot it."

With that, Arlette closed her eyes, as if to remember something.

"She said it was so that he would stay on Axis... forever by her side."

"That's..."

"Of course, he left this place behind without piloting it even once."

It was exactly as if she were talking to her past self rather than explaining things to Mehmet...

Meanwhile, Lieutenant JG Mehmet Merca listened to her words absentmindedly, while staring at the huge crimson machine towering above him.

## Chapter #2

### Looking Back: At Riah

Side 5. Known as Riah, the area had declared its neutrality at the very beginning of the One Year War as Side 6, and was one of the few Sides who escaped the horrors of war. Even after the numbering was changed due to the Colony Reclamation Project and it became known as Side 5 did it rarely get involved in major battles.

One of the colonies of Riah was the Libot Colony.

Its pastoral townscapes, reminiscent of 20th century Europe, was home to key figures of political and business circles of both the Zeon and the Federation. The quality of life was good. And a good living meant that various trades were able to flourish. Thus it was here that the Danton Cleaning Firm was able to enjoy the fruits of the colony's prosperity.

Hanging her last freshly cleaned bedsheet on the line, Arlette Hyleg stretched her arms towards the sky. Looking up at the sky from the rooftop, she could see vast expanses of green on the opposite side of the cylindrical colony. According to the daily weather forecast from the colony's management system, there was no rain to be expected all day. Left on the line, the sheets would be completely dry by evening.

Arlette tossed aside the clothes basket, leaned against a railing on the rooftop and decided to take a little breather.

One hundred years had already passed since mankind made its way into space, and for sure, there was no need to dry clothes in such a primitive manner, but it was this analog way of doing things that made the Danton Cleaning Firm popular with nearby clientele.

Not only were the clothes dried in the sun, but they came back pristine. The multitude of sheets billowing in the wind in front of her were, without exception, a gleaming white.

"Yup, doing pretty good."

Arlette couldn't help the satisfied grin on her face, pleased at the performance of the washing machine that she herself had modified. It was a budget mass-produced thing that Danton, the shopkeeper, had brought from somewhere, but she had tuned it to peak performance. She was sure that no matter where you looked, in Riah or even in the Earth Sphere, would you find a better washing machine. If anyone saw this who knew her engineering skills, they'd hang their heads in despair at the talent wasted. But Arlette herself found only satisfaction in her job.

Instead of looking back at the past, now was about focusing on day to day life.

She was grown up enough to think about it like that, at least.



Just as midday passed by, and her mind wandered to lunch, the cowbell in the vestibule made a sounc.

"Hm? A customer?"

Stretching forward from the railing and leaning over the side, she spotted an Elecar she'd never seen before parked in front of the shop.

Two men got out, both dressed in tight suits, and quietly entered the shop.

"..."

Arlette's brows furrowed ever so slightly into a frown.

Two men in suits were not the kind of clientele they expected at the cleaners.

Pushing her anxiety aside, Arlette began to climb down the stairs.

x      x      x

The manager of the Danton Cleaning Firm, Danton Hyleg, looked at the sudden arrivals like there was a bitter taste in his mouth. He wore an apron, but it was clear that it didn't suit his large frame, and when he shifted moodily, the wooden chair holding his weight creaked softly. It might seem strange for a shopkeeper to not welcome customers, but Danton wasn't a very enthusiastic shopkeeper to begin with. So long as they had requests from a few regulars every day, Arlette and he would at least have food on the table. He didn't feel the need to turn his passion to the trade. Even now, he was killing time with a jigsaw puzzle, whose pieces were scattered across the counter.

Having roughly gathered them together and restored them to their box, he turned to the two customers.

"What can I do for you?"

The men's suits were a dull gray.

One looked like a young elite from some firm or another. The other was a little older, but from his behavior, it seemed like he was a subordinate. Neither seemed like the type that needed to visit a cleaning joint. But beyond that, Danton's attention was drawn to the well-trained muscles hidden beneath the suits and their wary bearing.

Soldiers.

This was hardly surprising. He had anticipated that people from the military would one day knock on his door. The problem was what they wanted.

No matter how things went, it would be ugly. So how do I deal with this...

As he turned these thoughts over in his mind, the door behind him opened, and Arlette, coming down from the roof, popped her face through the gap.

"Customers?"

"Yes."

Turning around, he gestured for her to stay out back. But Arlette stood nonchalantly in front of the door, refusing to budge. It wasn't that she hadn't noticed, she only pretended to.

"Seriously..."

He felt he was being treated with less and less respect as the years went by. As Danton thought on his woes, the younger of the arrivals spoke up.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Danton Highleg. And it's Ms Arlette Almage, I believe..."

"!!"

On hearing this, Danton and Arlette both held their breaths. On paper, they were supposed to be father and daughter now. This man however knew Arlette's real name. They didn't know how much the man knew, but it was clear now that this was no ordinary customer.

"You soldiers? Or civil servants?"

"No pleasantries, I see... My name is Mehmet Merca. And this is..."

"Now wait a second. If we're going to talk about things like that, let's do it somewhere else."

Having stopped the the man who called himself Mehmet from introducing his companion, Danton stood up from his chair, made his way around the counter and stood in front of them.

"There's a little cafe on the other side of the street. Why don't you go ahead, I'll catch up."

Undonning his apron and throwing it to Arlette, he threw a glance to the men.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna run or hide."

The older man looked like he wanted to say something, but the younger one stopped him and nodded. As the men exited the door, Arlette checked that the door had closed before finally opening her mouth.

"Those people know about me."

"Looks that way."

"Looks like we'll have to move again..."

"..."

Before opening the cleaning business, Arlette and Danton had already made their way through a number of towns.

Their history, siding with the losing Neo Zeon army in the second Neo Zeon War a couple years back, was one of the reasons.

After the war, having lost their base on Axis, they had scattered all over the Earth Sphere and begun a new life. Many regions still harbored anti-Zeon sentiment, and it was clear that not all areas would give them a warm welcome. But apart from that, there was another reason why Arlette could not stay in a town for too long. Though they acted like Danton and she were father and daughter, the truth was that they were not related by blood.

During the One Year War, she was the subject of many experiments in the Flanagan Institute, a Newtype research institute of the Principality of Zeon. As a result, the flow of time in her body was abnormally slow. That is, she didn't grow old at the right speed.

That was why they couldn't stay in one place for too long.

Even the people of this town would begin to get suspicious if she remained young.

"You know I really liked this town..."

"Well, let's see what these men want. If we can deal with it peacefully, then that's the best way out."

Replacing the apron with his own jacket hanging on the wall, Danton made his way to the door.

"Mind the shop. Father's orders."

"Sure."

Giving Danton a little wave, Arlette quickly donned the apron and sat down on the chair behind the counter.

x x x

Entering the cafe, Danton surveyed the room and quickly found the two men he was looking for sitting at the back.

As he sat down across from them, the owner came over to take his order.

"Just give him another of what we had."

The young man who had just introduced himself as Mehmet raised his coffee cup to the owner, but as he was about to speak again, Danton cut him off.

"I'll have the usual."

The owner gave a slight bow and headed into the back. A few minutes later, he came back out with a cream soda and slid a straw into it. Danton cleared his throat and took a swig. The others looked at him oddly, and he responded casually.

"It's my favorite drink."

"I see..."

Mehmet gave a vague smile, as he pulled a business card from his jacket and slid it across the table. Danton picked it up and looked over it, straw still hanging from his mouth.

"The Ministry's Department Six...?"

He furrowed his brow at the unfamiliar name.

"We're an intelligence bureau that works directly under the Federation."

"Intelligence... I run a rundown cleaning service. What do you want from me?"

"Well..."

Mehmet paused and gave a sidelong glance toward the owner standing at the back.

"Don't worry. That man's not the type to stick his head where it doesn't belong, and there's no one else in the store right now."

"I'll take your word for it..."

Danton set his eyes on him as if inviting a challenge. Mehmet met his gaze and slowly began speaking again.

"I'll be frank. I'd like to ask you to be our guide... through Axis."

"I'm sorry...?"

"Axis. I'm sure you know of the place."

How could he forget? Danton and Arlette used to live there, under the direct supervision of Char Aznable, the commander of Neo Zeon. Danton was the test pilot for Char's own mobile suits, and Arlette worked in development. He still remembered it all like it was yesterday.

"I don't understand. Why would you ask me?"

"Naturally, we know all about your history there."

So that's why you're here...

"How much do you know?"

Mehmet smirked as he replied.

"I know enough. I know that you were a member of the AEUG before joining Neo Zeon. And before that, you worked alongside Char Aznable, since the One Year War.

"Excuse me?!"

"It's common knowledge that Char joined AEUG during the Gryps campaign under the name Quattro Bajeeena. There's still a fairly large amount of data on that period in the Federation archives."

"I see..."

Danton sighed as he took in the situation.

"It wasn't all that difficult to find the two of you after looking at Quattro Bajeeena's records. We just profiled your behavior and thought patterns from some personal data and searched all the places you were likely to be, until we came here."

"Sounds like you went through a lot of trouble. Does the Ministry's Department Six have that much free time on their hands?"

Danton replied sarcastically, as he evaluated the men in front of him. What are they after?

"You went through all that work to get us to guide you through Axis? There's been nothing but ruins there since it was split in two during the war. I doubt there's anything to see."

"We're going because there is something to see."

"What?"

"To be precise, there might be."

"What exactly are you..."

"The psycho frame."

"Huh!?"

Mehmet's sudden answer left Danton speechless.

"It began about six months ago."

Mehmet brought his hands together as he began his story.

"What do you know about the Laplace incident?"

"Only what I've heard in the news..."

"The details have been covered up, but during that incident, a certain mobile suit equipped with a psycho frame demonstrated some remarkable combat abilities. I'm sorry – those words don't do it justice. Put simply, that mobile suit exhibited abilities that could completely undermine preexisting mobile suit weapons systems."

The psycho frame... a technology once developed at Axis which builds computer chips directly into mobile suit frames at the metallic particle level. Char brought that technology to Neo Zeon as well as the entire Federation, contributing tremendously to the expansion of mobile suit capabilities. However...

"That's quite a strong statement."

"It's not an exaggeration. That mobile suit succeeded in neutralizing a Colony Laser, and it even displayed self-regenerating abilities."

"Are you serious?"

Danton had previously witnessed a battle between two mobile suits equipped with psycho frames, the MSN-04 Sazabi and the RX-93 Nu Gundam. Sure, those two were extremely strong, but they didn't have that kind of power... Wait a minute.

Seeing Danton's stunned expression, Mehmet nodded heavily.

"You saw it too, didn't you? During the Second Neo Zeon War, when one half of Axis was falling towards Earth. A power that lifted that giant rock back into space. And that mysterious light..."

"Are you saying that was caused by the psycho frame?"

"That's what we think."

Mehmet's gaze pierced Danton.

"Currently, the psycho frame manufacturing techniques that were brought to the Federation are under tight security. But what if the research materials on Axis are still there? What if someone got their hands on those materials? What if they recreated it? Deployed it?"

"There's no way..."

"It's not impossible. Our duty is to make sure that doesn't happen. Would you be willing to help us with that, Danton?"

Mehmet and his subordinate bowed deeply as they made their request. Danton didn't know how to respond. On that fateful day when Axis was destroyed, he had prepared himself to die at Char Aznable's side. He was sure Arlette felt the same way. But that's not how things turned out.

When the battle between the Sazabi and the Gundam came to an end, Char Aznable disappeared. They couldn't be there for him. Even now, Danton felt a sharp pain in his chest at the thought.

"Of course, we're prepared to compensate you for your troubles with an appropriate sum. Further, we've arranged to have both of your criminal records completely erased. You can start over. A clean slate."

"Hmm..."

Danton crossed his arms as he considered the proposal. He couldn't swallow everything he'd just heard. The risks were too high. But given how much they had on him, backing out would be difficult.

More than anything, Danton was resistant to going back there, back to Axis. He didn't like the idea himself, but more importantly, he didn't want to put Arlette through that experience again. He didn't want to lose the quiet life they'd finally found.

So, how am I going to get out of this one... Danton's hesitation was cut off by a voice from behind him.

"We're in."

"Huh, wait a second!"

He didn't even have to look to know who it was. Arlette, wearing one of the store's aprons, smiled as she took a seat next to Danton.

"Arlette, what are you thinking?!"

"Don't worry. I punched out for my break."

"That's not the issue here!"

"I know, I know. Relax for a minute."

After calming a flustered Danton, Arlette turned to face Mehmet.

"I was just thinking about how I'd like to take a trip back."

"Really?"

Mehmet's eyes widened with surprise at Arlette's eagerness.

"Arlette..."

"Just kidding. I was actually trying to forget about the place a moment ago."

Arlette gave a roguish grin, but her eye's didn't show the slightest hint of hesitation.

"But if we have a reason to go back...then I want to do it. Really."

Danton grasped her small hand under the table.

"I want to know what happened to the Captain and the Sazabi..."

"..."

Danton watched her intently for some time and finally resigned with large sigh.

"Fine. You win, my princess."

"Meaning you'll..."

"We'll do it. We'll guide you through Axis."

Though Danton dropped his guard in defeat, Mehmet maintained his gentle smile and offered a handshake.

"Then let me reintroduce myself. I'm Lieutenant Mehmet Merca, commanding officer of the Mastema Special Forces under the Federation. I look forward to working with you."

"Arlette Almage."

"Danton Hyleg. Don't forget about our payment."

At that, Danton gulped down what was left of his melon soda. He savored the unnatural taste of artificial sweetener. It's going to be a while before I can taste this again. He enjoyed this sort of thing – experiences unrelated to war.

x x x

"Danton?"

Danton lifted his head as Arlette's voice rang in from his speakers.

"Are you okay? That was your first battle in a long time. You must be tired."

"No, I'm fine. I was just recalling how we got involved in all of this."

He pressed some buttons on the console, opening the cockpit. He poked his head out the Zaku III's cockpit and saw Arlette and Mehmet below, waving to him.

"It really feels like home now, huh?"

He turned back towards the cockpit and whispered to himself.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I ended up bringing her back here."

Those words were meant for the man who should have been sitting in that seat – the man he had looked up to for so long but could never reach – Char Aznable.

“But I’ll look after her. I’ll protect Arnette. That was your final order, after all...”

He gave a small salute.

## Chapter #3

### In Pursuit of a Red Phantom

"Looks like it's time to part with this little guy. I'm going to miss him..."

Arlette spoke with a sense of sadness in her voice, as she took out the system disk from the cockpit of the Zaku III.

"It can't be helped. This thing's too big to bring with us."

Danton responded quietly, as he looked at the cockpit that had carried him this far.

"I know..."

After working the console for a bit, Arlette took a quick breath and lifted her head.

"I've finished formatting the OS. This guy won't be waking up any more."

"Thanks..."

Danton murmured sympathetically, looking up at the red giant that stood silently before him. As long as Axis were to continue its course away from Earth, that Zaku III would never see a human being again. It would just drift through the darkness of space, amidst an infinite silence.

"Sorry to wake you so suddenly. You can rest now."

"That's not like you. First time in a cockpit in a while, and you get all sentimental?"

"Shut it."

As Arlette crawled out of the cockpit with a grin on her face, Danton turned toward Mehmet below and called out.

"I'm done over here, too."

"Well done. We've finished our preparations as well."

Kicking aside some rubble to get through, Mehmet stood silently before the two of them.

"We're gathering the injured from the battle and returning them to the landing ship. I've reorganized a unit with my remaining men."

"Okay..."

A quick look around showed a total of six remaining Mastema members, including Mehmet. Along with Arlette and Danton, the eight of them would continue exploring.

"I'd like to avoid losing any more of my men."

Danton gave a grunt in response to Mehmet's wry smile.

"All we can do is pray that we don't see that Gundam again."

"Indeed."

"Mehmet, any idea where that Gundam came from?"

Mehmet shrugged his shoulders in response.

"No clue."



"How about you, Danton? Did you notice anything while you were fighting?"

"It was small."

"Ah...yeah, I thought so too."

At Danton's quick answer, Arlette gave a slight nod.

"Nothing in the Zaku III's database matched that Gundam, but it was a tad smaller than the current mobile suit standards. Smaller than a Jegan. That's probably similar to the mobile suits that were used before the Gryps conflict, maybe even as far back as the One Year War. Though, I'm sure the parts have been tuned up to something more modern..."

"Hmm..."

Mehmet rubbed his head as he thought over the situation.

"Since the end of Char's rebellion, Axis has been under the surveillance of the Federation, but there have been more than a few people who've sneaked in to make a profit. Most of them are civilian junk dealers and scavengers. I figured that was the case for the guys we just ran into... But if they have a Gundam in their possession..."

"There was a Jegan with them, too."

"There might be more to this than meets the eye."

Mehmet turned around and called to one of his subordinates who was about to head to the landing ship.

"Locke."

"Yes, sir?"

The soldier, Locke, passed an injured man he had been helping to one of his comrades and walked over to Mehmet.

"Once you return to the ship, I want you to track every vessel traveling through this area. I doubt those guys left anything that would give away their identity, but just to be sure."

"Understood."

"Thank you."

After sending his subordinate back out, Mehmet checked his watch on his space suit.

"We don't have much time. We have to leave this asteroid within two hours if we don't want to join it for a trip into an asteroid belt."

"I'll pass on the asteroid belt."

"Let's head for our original destination."

"The Maharaja Khan Memorial Research Institute, right?"

"Yes, that was the primary location for Psycommu-related research and development."

"Alright, let's hurry. If you would please take the lead again, guides."

"Sure thing."

Mehmet turned towards his team.

"All soldiers, move out!"

x x x

Arlette, Danton and the Mastema team of six left the residential quarters and headed toward the research facility. They took as many side passages as they could, hoping to avoid another encounter with a mobile suit. Of course, there was a possibility that there were enemy soldiers nearby as well, but if it came down to hand-to-hand combat, the Mastema special forces would have the upper hand.

The advance continued silently for some time, following Arlette's signals.

"Huh?"

Feeling Arlette's hand on his shoulder suddenly, Danton looked back.

"Danton."

He heard Arlette through his helmet speakers. When she had been talking with Mehmet a moment ago, she had kept her voice to a whisper, but now he heard her clearly. He looked at his visor display and saw a message reading "touch channel." She was talking with him directly, instead of using the Mastema shared communication.

"I wonder where the Sazabi is."

"What!"

Danton heard exactly what she'd said.

"Wait a minute. What are you talking about?"

"The Sazabi. Did you forget about it?"

"How could I forget? You're looking for it?"

"Yeah. Honestly, that's more important to me than the research facility."

"What are you thinking?"

"I remember where the Sazabi was when its signal was cut off. We might find some clues there."

"Clues about the Captain?"

"Of course. Why do you think I came back here?"

"Why are you telling me this through a touch channel?"

"I don't want them asking questions about the Sazabi."

"Ah, the Sazabi was equipped with a psycho frame. If any of the wreckage remained, I suppose it would be the perfect target for them."

"I don't want them interfering."

"You don't want them stepping on your memories of the Captain..."

"Do you think there's any way we can split up from the squad?"

"Are you crazy, Arlette? Do you realize the situation we're in?"

"What? The time limit? Two hours is plenty."

"There are enemies out here! What are you going to do if the Gundam shows up?! This isn't some comfy trip home anymore."

"That's why you're here."

"Arlette..."

Danton scratched his head in desperation.

"We don't even know if the Sazabi is still on Axis. It might have been thrown into space."

"Maybe."

Arlette gave a slight smirk.

"But there might be some hints about what happened to it."

"I can't believe you..."

Danton sighed, at a loss for words.

"In any case, we're heading for the research institution right now. If you insist on looking for the Sazabi, you can figure out how to do it on your own. I'll pass."

"Fine. I'll do it by myself."

Arlette released her hand, and the "touch channel" message disappeared. Danton's helmet went silent.

"Goodness... this is going to be trouble."

x x x

Around the same time, a strange light that had dashed out from the residential quarters was soaring along Axis's outer walls. It was the Gundam that had fought with Danton's Zaku III Custom. In the cockpit, a young man was biting his lip in irritation.

"Son of a bitch! What the hell was that damn Zaku?!"

He punched the console in frustration.

"That geezer, Meitzer, said the enemy wouldn't have any mobile suits!"

A portion of his panoramic monitor displayed battle data from the encounter with the Zaku III.

"That tackle he hit me with had a force of over 300G! If I weren't a Cyber Newtype, I'd be out cold and foaming at the mouth right now..."

The angry young man wore a purplish-blue normal suit. It was different than one's used by the Federation or Neo Zeon, but it was clearly not a civilian suit. It had the distinct wear of battle experience.

"Jeez. Ever since I fled the Federation, everyone I run into is trouble – friend or foe."

Muttering to himself, he fixed his grip on the control lever.

"I know, Tristan. We haven't shown them what you're really capable of. We'll take them out this time for sure."

As if in response to the man, the Gundam type known as the Tristan, gave a roar of its verniers.

"Still, this is bad. Bailey and Gibson were both taken out. If Walter finds out about this, I'm going to get a mouthful... Ahh, this sucks!"

The man changed his monitor display to a structural map of Axis and confirmed his destination.

"For now, I'll leave the search for the psycho frame to him. I guess I'll head back to Echinacea once before we finish up. I didn't think I'd actually need that special precaution I brought, but it looks like I might get to use it."

Staring out at the deep, empty space on the other side of his monitor, the boy grinned viciously.

"That damn red Zaku pilot. I don't know who he thinks he is, but he's going to regret making a fool of Quentin Fermo!"

x x x

Some time earlier at the residence of the Federation Prime Minister on Earth.

A limousine departed silently, and in the back sat a stern-faced, middle-aged man surrounded by smoke. The vehicle glided down a gentle slope and onto a main road, lined with lush trees. As the car switched into cruise mode, the man pulled a bottle of mineral water from a cooler and drank it dry.

“...”

He took a deep breath, and the man to his side, who appeared to be a secretary, quietly began to speak.

“How did it go, Engeist?”

Engeist Ronah, the oldest son of the Ronah family, gave a short reply.

“It’s done.”

“Meaning?”

“I’ll report to father. After that, Meitzer and father will probably take care of the rest.”

“Understood.”

Staring out at the view beyond the window, Engeist sunk into his seat and muttered to himself.

“Looks like it’s time for Birnam Wood to make a move...”

x      x      x

Despite the grandeur of the Ronah main residence, it sat in complete silence. The Ronahs were a well-known noble family that had once flourished in Europe, but the current family head, Scharnhorst Ronah, did not carry the Ronah blood. His career began in a small junkyard. Showing a rare talent for business from a young age, he developed the company to become the Buch Concern, an enterprise that is active in places across the Earth Sphere in just one generation. He had bought the name “Ronah,” as a title befitting his status. In a back room, used primarily for personal business, Scharnhorst Ronah was listening to his son’s report.

“We just finished our private meeting. It’s been settled.”

Engeist’s deep voice rang through the room. The thick, soundproof walls made sure there was no chance of being overheard, even by their servants.

“A psycho frame recovery mission is being conducted for certain. There’s a high possibility that there are still research materials in the facility.”

“I see. Well done.”

Sinking into the sofa, Scharnhorst no longer showed the generosity of the man who had once been known as a monster of the financial world. But set deeply under his wrinkled brow were eyes that shone with the same sharpness and insight.

“After the First Neo Zeon War, the Federation confiscated Axis from Haman Karn and quickly handed it over to Char. There’s no way they could’ve examined that entire fortress in such a short time. A mistake on their part...”

“Yes.”

Engeist consented to the raspy but heavy voice of his father.

"The recovery mission is proof of their insecurity. The government, the military. They're all scared witless. Scared that there's something unknown out there..."

"Indeed. And thanks to them, we can make our move."

Scharnhorst raised one eyebrow and let out a cunning laugh.

"We know what to do now. I'll take care of the rest. You stay out of it from here on."

"Understood."

"We need you alive, in case something happens to Meitzer and I. If you can remain ignorant, you won't likely be prosecuted. As long as the Ronah bloodline continues, there will always be more opportunities."

"Understood, father."

As his son bowed deeply, Scharnhorst softened his voice.

"By the way, how's the construction of the new Side coming?"

"A name was decided on two days ago."

"Hmph. Even after all this time, we've only got a name. So, what is it?"

"The Frontier Side."

"Oh... Frontier, huh?"

Scharnhorst smiled cynically. Not fully understanding the meaning behind that smile, Engeist continued.

"However, it will still take some time before we can begin the actual construction."

"I imagine it will. The Federation has grown too large. Everything takes too long, creating more problems."

"Yes, Father..."

"A model example of letting the foolish masses rule..."

It was unclear whether Scharnhorst's muttering was one of scorn or resignation.

x x x

"Turn left at the next corner."

"Roger."

Following Arlette's directions, Mehmet and the Mastema Special Forces unit progressed through Axis's interior smoothly.

"I'm amazed you can remember how to get navigate all these passages."

"Isn't that what you brought us here for?"

Mehmet smiled wryly at Danton's sarcastic comment.

"I suppose it is."

"I've always had a good memory."

Danton studied Arlette's smile as she spoke.

"You know, there are things that are better off forgotten, missy..."

Danton cut himself off at the last moment. He was in no position to lecture her, after coming this far himself. For now, it would be best to let her do as she pleases.

"You really never change."

“Right back at you.”

Mehmet, ignoring the playful conversation, was deep in thought. These are two of the only remaining people with knowledge of Char Aznable's mysterious past. I might be able to learn something about it by monitoring them. This was also for the sake of the mission, but Mehmet himself was curious.

Born Casval Rem Deikun, he was the orphaned son of Zeon Zum Deikun and eventually the Principality of Zeon's ace pilot. Acting under the name, Quattro Bajeena, he was a key figure in the AEUG, after which he declared war against Earth as the commander of Neo Zeon. Mehmet had always held an interest, beyond his professional duties, in this man with many faces and a checkered past.

More than anything, Mehmet was interested in Char's work as a technocrat. Since becoming a pilot, he had been actively involved in mobile suit developments, even more so after becoming Neo Zeon's commander. His work alone played a major role in defining modern mobile suit development systems.

The final manifestation of that work was the psycho frame, a next-level technology using microscopic computer chips with psycommu functionality and building them directly into a mobile suit's frame at the molecular level. The results exceeded all expectations. Mobile suits equipped with psycho frames displayed capabilities beyond their specs, and it wasn't long before there were reports of impossible displays of power.

The person who leaked the manufacturing methods to the Federation was supposedly Char Aznable himself. There are various theories about his motive, even pulp-style ones about how he just wanted to fight his longstanding rival, Amuro Ray, on even footing.

And now, standing before Mehmet were two people who actually knew the man. He couldn't deny that their presence had him a little on edge. Of course, he wouldn't let that interfere with the mission. They had already received a serious blow in the recent battle with an unexpected mobile suit. “This is Mastema, and we will carry out this mission, no matter...” As soon as the thought hit his mind, an uncomfortable sensation came over him.

“Oh no...”

There was no rationality for it. It was intuition – intuition he'd developed through countless battles as a member of the special forces – that told him something was waiting for them ahead.

“Stop!”

Mehmet's voice rang short and quick.

“What's wrong?”

While Danton and Arlette stumbled with their braking mechanisms, the Mastema members stopped immediately, without making a sound.

“...”

Mehmet's previous expression of excitement was nowhere to be found, as he focused on the area ahead of them.

“Arlette, is the research facility close?”

“Huh? Oh, uhmm...it's not far beyond the large passage up ahead...”

Arlette stuttered to answer.

"That explains it. It seems someone has beaten us to the punch."

"What?"

Glancing back at the confused Arlette, Mehmet swiftly delivered signals to his subordinates with eye movements. They nodded and silently advanced toward the intersection, readying the miniature cameras equipped to their space suits and directing them towards the other side of the passage.

"What the...!"

As the images were transmitted to each member's visor display, Arlette and Danton instinctively let out a small gasp. In the passage ahead of them, in a slightly open space, stood a massive silhouette.

"A mobile...suit..."

Unlike the Gundam or Jegan they had fought earlier, it had a peculiar form with long arms extending from jutted shoulders. A vibrant shade of violet covered the large frame – a striking contrast to the cold, drab walls around it.

"The RX-160... Byarlant."

Such was the name of this oddly shaped giant.

## Chapter #4

### Birnam Wood

Arlette and the group had almost arrived at the research facility to find three mobile suits guarding it.

"A Byarlant type..."

Arlette recalled her knowledge of the Byarlant. \*A model with a high level of output; primarily used within the atmosphere. This one was likely remodeled to handle outer space combat as well.\*

"I wasn't expecting them to be packing this much firepower..."

Mehmet cursed thier enemy for taking the facility first, and one of his older subordinates gently tried to calm him. It wasn't just the Byarlant standing there. The Gundam type and the improved type of Jegan they had fought earlier were waiting as well. It was clear now that they were all part of the same group.

"Three mobile suits...? We should've brought the Zaku III with us."

"No, if we had brought it, they would've sensed us coming, and we'd be dealing with an ambush right about now."

"I suppose you're right..."

"It looks like we haven't been noticed yet. As long as we have the initiative, there are ways we can fight."

Mehmet spoke with a fearless smile on his face.

"But there's no doubt about it now."

"Yep, there objective must be the pyscho frame or the research materials for it."

"Who the heck are they?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

Not only the Gundam type but a Byarlant as well. And multiple Jegan types to boot. For what looks like some civilian junk dealers, these guys are way too equipped for battle. On the other hand, this is likely all of their forces. If they intended to sneak into Axis with a select team, this is about the max size possible. Any larger and they would classify as an army, and Mehmet was aware that there were no forces that large on Earth at the moment.

"Arlette. Is there any way to get into the facility without passing through this here?"

"It's not impossible, but it'll be a huge detour."

Arlette shrugged her shoulders as she answered.

"They conducted a lot of highly classified research there, and there were often materials they didn't want people to see."

"Okay..."

Mehmet furrowed his brow as he thought over his options. In that case, it looks like we'll just have to force our way through here. But we're likely to end



up face-to-face with three mobile suits. There's no room for error. We need a plan...

"That is if you pass through this passage."

"What are you saying...?"

For a moment, Mehmet failed to understand Arlette and raised his head to her. She smiled back with a roguish look in her eyes.

"That facility worked on a lot of mobile space weaponry."

"So that's it..."

After giving it some thought, Mehmet was satisfied. The phrase "research facility" had me imagining a laboratory cut off from the outside, but in reality this was a military facility for developing mobile suits and mobile armors. In order to test those, there would've had to be a hatch to launch them into space.

"We'll just have to enter from the outside."

"The outside? As in walk across the surface of Axis?"

I have no idea how easy it will be to move around the surface without being detected. This idea came up during our tactical meeting, but we didn't have time to consider the details. However, with an elite corps standing in our way, the outside is definitely a safer option. Having made his decision, Mehmet turned towards his subordinates behind him.

"We'll split into two groups. Six of us, including Arlette and Danton, will take a detour to the surface and head for the research facility. The other two will stay behind and observe the enemy's movements. If anything happens, contact us and let us know. In the event that we fail, fall back and save the combat logs."

"Roger."

Their reply was short and simple.

"Arlette, where is the closest exit to Axis's outer wall?"

"I'll show you."

Danton sighed loudly behind them, but Arlette and Mehmet chose to ignore it.

x      x      x

Mehmet, having separated from his men, made his way toward the exterior of Axis with Danton and Arlette. After some time, they turned a corner to find their path blocked by a cold, metal gate. Judging from the identification number on it, it appeared that their destination was beyond this door.

"Just a sec."

Arlette raised her small hand, bringing Danton and Mehmet to a stop, and walked over to a console mounted near the door.

"Good news. It looks like the electrical system is still working."

Her fingers danced nimbly around the keypad, and the gate let out a dull groan as it slowly began to open.

"Let's go."

Unlike Arlette and Danton, Mehmet was unfamiliar with Axis, so he just followed their lead, stepping through the gate. There was an immediate shift in

their surroundings. Until a moment ago, there had been plenty of signs marking the passages. But the severe lack of signage in this area indicated that it was a special division, only meant to be accessed by a select few.

"Where are we?"

"Up ahead is a private dock for Imperial Guard mobile suits. We should be able to get to Axis's exterior from there."

"The Imperial Guard..."

"Publicly, it was a group of personal bodyguards for Mineva Zabi, but as I'm sure you know, the Mineva that travelled with Haman Karn was a double. In reality, they were probably Haman's private forces."

Danton moved along the passage as he disinterestedly explained things. Along the way, they encountered several gates blocking their path, but Arlette unlocked each one without difficulty.

Finally, their view opened up all at once.

x      x      x

"Woah..."

Mehmet's eyes went wide. They were in a storage dock for mobile suits, where several were stood together in a jumble.

"These over here are Galluss series models. The ones lined up in the back are Gaza series..."

As Arlette murmured away, she made her way toward the back dock, where there were a variety of mobile suits that had been developed in Axis. Though a lot of them looked as though they had been abandoned half-way through maintenance, there were others among them that appeared operational.

"This is amazing. I can't believe there were this many mobile suits left inside Axis..."

Trailing behind the others, Mehmet looked around in wonder.

"These were developed around the time Haman was in charge. Just like the Zaku III Custom we saw, these guys probably never had a chance to be deployed in the Second Neo Zeon War. Though who's to say what would have happened if the fighting dragged on longer..."

In the middle of his explanation, Danton came to an abrupt halt.

"..."

He lifted his head with a scowl. Directly ahead of him stood a single mobile suit.

"Ahh..."

Arlette turned around as she realized what it was.

"What a blast from the past. So this little guy's survived as well."

"So it would seem..."

Danton stared at the mobile suit in front of him with a sour look on his face. It had a more slender build than the others around it, and its figure was reminiscent of a medieval knight. Combined with a light purple-on-white coloring, it gave off a refined atmosphere that one would expect from a work of art, not a weapon. The AMX-104 R-Jarja – a prototype made for close quarters

combat, which drew from the YMS-15 Gyan model from the former Principality of Zeon's army.

"So you were left behind as well, huh?"

Arlette gazed up at the R-Jarja with a look of nostalgia in her eyes.

"It really feels like old times, doesn't it."

"Hmph..."

With a pout, Danton turned around and walked off.

"Let's go. The gate to the outside is up ahead."

"Ah, Danton!"

As Arlette chased after Danton, Mehmet followed after them from behind.

x      x      x

At last, the three of them had reached the edge of the dock, where there stood a massive gate used for deploying mobile suits. Half of the gate had been dislodged, perhaps from when Axis was split in two, leaving the exit partially open. The void of outer space peered in through the gap.

"Looks like we've been saved the effort of opening it."

Arlette made her way towards the opening, dodging the rubble that had been scattered about.

"We'll exit through here and head towards the facility, following along Axis's outer wall. Got it?"

At Danton's brief instruction, Mehmet gave a slight nod.

"Understood."

"Be careful as you step. We don't have lifelines, so if you slip, you'll be thrown into space."

"Don't worry. I'm used to this sort thing. At least more than someone who runs a cleaners would be."

"Fair enough..."

The three of them had stepped through the opening onto the outer wall, exchanging clever retorts, when the figure of a massive bird flew over their heads.

"What the...?!"

They quickly ducked and hid themselves in the shadow of the gate. The figure flew off into the distance, its thrusters scattering a trail of light in its wake.

"That's..."

The three of them stood baffled by what they'd just seen.

"A Byarlant..."

"What's that doing here? Wasn't it waiting to ambush us in the passage?"

Just then, Mehmet's transmitter received a call sign. It was the the unit they'd left in the passage. He quickly worked the touch panel to begin the call.

"Th(...)its(...)ats(...)"

The transmission was filled with static, so they couldn't make out what the men were saying. We might be able to get a clearer signal from a more open location, but we'd risk being noticed. We set up some small relays on the way

here, but it looks like they aren't doing much. Mehmet switched the tuning from automatic to manual and focused his attention on the voices of his subordinates.

"Thank goodness, Commander. We finally reached you."

It looks like they've been calling us for some time now. Though I can hazard a guess at what it's about.

"The Byarlant is on the move."

"I know. We've made visual contact."

Mehmet's eyes were fixed on the back of the Byarlant as it flew along the outer wall.

"This is unexpected, but perhaps it's a blessing, seeing as we have one less enemy to deal with. Are the two Jegans still there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then continue monitoring them. We'll stick to our plan and head towards the destination via the outer wall."

"Roger."

Cutting the transmission, Mehmet turned to Danton and Arlette.

"You caught all that? Let's hurry."

"Yeah, but..."

Danton looked off in the direction the Byarlant had flown.

"What about that guy?"

"..."

After a moment in thought, Arlette suddenly looked up at them.

"You don't think they're after the landing ship?"

Mehmet clutched his fists.

"Most likely..."

"Why wait us out with an ambush, when they can just eliminate our means of escape?"

"The landing ship is equipped with some basic defensive weaponry, but they're not prepared for a mobile suit. We'll have to hope they can stay hidden."

Mehmet tried to reach the landing ship with his transmitter, but all they got was static.

"Damn... so it's come to this, huh?"

Dropping his shoulders, Danton begrudgingly turned back towards the mobile suit dock they had just left.

"Arlette."

"Yeah?"

"Lend me that disk one more time."

"Are you serious?!"

"I'll do it. I'll get rid of the Byarlant."

"Danton!?"

Mehmet shouted out in surprise.

"The mobile suits here have been on standby, ready to be sent into battle when needed. They've got weapons; they can fight – as long as they have a pilot, that is."

"Danton..."

Arlette looked like she wanted to say something, but Danton grabbed her by the shoulder and raised his voice.

"I've already fought once. There's no point turning back, anymore. Now, give me the disk!"

x      x      x

Danton leaned back into the cockpit of the R-Jarja and continued checking the gauges. Everything was in shape – all parts functioning normally, like time itself had been frozen since they left. The White Knight of Axis was about to return from the dead.

"Danton."

Arlette sat between Danton's legs, fiddling with the console, just as she had done earlier in the Zaku III Custom.

"Are you sure you want to use this one? There are other functioning mobile suits..."

"I'm sure. I'm taking this guy."

Danton cut off Arlette, who was showing a rare display of consideration.

"This is the machine you took care of."

"Yeah..."

As he watched the monitor icons light up one by one, Danton sunk into thought about the last day he had piloted this mobile suit...

x      x      x

It was all shaking.

Countless stars were shaking violently in front of Danton. For a brief moment, his mind had gone blank. It took him some time to realize that it wasn't the stars that had been shaking but his mobile suit. The R-Jarja he was riding had lost its balance and was trembling non-stop. Sparks crackled and leapt from the thruster on its back, and its usual jet stream had been replaced by a plume of black smoke. There was no doubt that the propulsion system had been damaged. In front of the staggering machine was the entrance to a familiar facility, the gate open.

"Danton! Can you hear me?"

"Yeah..."

"The test has been aborted! Can you make it back to base?"

"I'll see what I can do..."

He glanced over his monitor, checking on the condition of each portion of the mobile suit. Firing the remaining thrusters on the arms and legs ever so slightly, he regained control of the machine using AMBAC. Alright, looking good. Now I'll just direct this guy to the gate. The mechanics and engineers that had been waiting for him looked like specks, as they scattered about in a fuss. Finally, the mobile suit landed on the dock with a crash. Shaking violently, it collapsed, and the mechanics all came bustling back towards it. Danton felt a bit like Gulliver among the Lilliputians.

"Hey, Danton! You still alive?!"

The hatch began to open from the outside, and a flustered mechanic peeked his head in.

"I'm in one piece."

"Danton, you..."

Extending one hand to the stunned mechanic, Danton crawled his way out of the cockpit, and stumbled over to the corner of the dock.

"Why didn't he just abort...?"

Hearing a bewildered mechanic muttering in the distance, he rested his back against the wall of the dock, and dropped to the floor as though he had just let out all the tension from his body.

"..."

He sat there for some time, eyes closed.

"..."

Suddenly feeling a gaze above him, Danton lifted his head. His eyes met with Arlette's, as she looked down at him unhappily.

"Hey..."

"Danton..."

"Don't look at me like that. We managed to get some good data."

Danton offered her a broad grin, as she was clearly worrying about him.

They were in the Maharaja Khan Memorial Research Institute on Axis, the forefront of Neo Zeon's weapons developments. Though it might seem strange for a young lady to be hanging around a place like that, the researchers that frequented the area paid her no heed. Indeed, they were two of the longest-serving members of the facility.

"Why didn't you abort?"

Arlette pressed him with a critical tone.

"I warned you it could get dangerous this time if there was too much strain on the thrusters. That's why I told you to get out of there if something happened..."

"If I pulled out, we would've lost control of the R-Jarja, and it would've crashed into Axis's outer wall. It would've all been for nothing."

"And if you made one mistake, you would've gone down with it!"

"I wouldn't screw up like that."

"Danton!"

"Enough. Go fix that guy up, already."

"..."

Arlette looked like she still had something to say, but she let out a sigh of submission and raised her head.

"Fine. I'll fix it for you."

"Good."

"In the meantime, you'd better at least rest yourself a bit. I'll talk to you later."

Danton gazed at Arlette's back as she stomped off, and he muttered to himself.

"If I destroyed the machine you built, I wouldn't be able to face you. Nor him."

He let out a small laugh and clenched his fists.

"There's nothing else I can do for you right now..."

x      x      x

"Danton."

"Huh...yeah?"

At the sound of Arlette's voice, Danton came back to his senses.

"I've finished with the activation sequence."

"Alright, thanks."

"All thrusters are operational. Weapons as well."

"Okay..."

On the weapons control monitor, a graphic flickered on and off; it showed the link between the R-Jarja's bayonet-equipped beam rifle in its right hand and the operations system. Danton stared motionlessly at the light.

"Are you sure everything's okay, Danton?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well...nevermind."

Smiling, Arlette stood up and stepped away from Danton.

"Don't do anything too reckless, Pops."

"Don't worry. I'll wrap this up quickly and be back in no time."

After Arlette exited the cockpit, Danton closed the hatch and made sure she had backed up far enough.

"Alright, then. Here we go!"

Danton put the throttle to max, and a sharpened beam sword surged out from the R-Jarja's bayonet beam rifle. Destroying what was left of the damaged gate, the pure white frame flew out into the jet black of outer space.

x      x      x

Meanwhile, the Byarlant Isolde, piloted by Walter Fermo, was flying along Axis's outer wall, scouring the area with its sensors. The monitor displayed a map of Axis obtained by their employer, Meitzer Ronah. It didn't show the particulars of the inner passages, but it was more than sufficient for finding the many space ports that dotted Axis's outer wall. Synchronizing the map with the visuals from the main camera, he intended to scan every inch of Axis's surface if necessary.

"Laying low for an ambush isn't my style, anyway. Bringing the fight to the enemy is how we Birnams do it. Am I right, bro?"

Chuckling, Walter looked at the monitor, and his eyes narrowed, as though he had just seized his prey. Isolde's sensors had picked up on a faint temperature reading that ran straight to the space port ahead of them.

"Looks like the traces of a combustion agent. Bingo!"

He changed the Isolde's flight path to follow the temperature reading, but it quickly split into two directions.

"Damn..."

Walter cursed as he hit the brakes, and he considered the situation.

"Which way...?"

For now, the trail heading upward leads into the port. I'll start there. If I can wrap things up quickly, I should be back before the second trail fades. Just as he fired his thrusters to enter the port, a series of continuous blasts shook the Isolde's armor.

"What the...!"

He quickly took evasive action, gaining distance and turning around. That was gunfire. That won't cause much damage, but whoever fired it must realize that as well.

"What game are you playing at?"

He fired up the thrusters again and plunged into the space port. In that moment, a blinding light covered his panoramic monitor.

"Ah!"

In that moment of confusion, a shadow flew through his field of vision. No doubt about it. That's the landing ship.

"You think you can stop me with some fireworks!"

The monitor's dimmer system quickly adjusted for the light from the flash chaff that the landing boat had scattered. The bright light that had engulfed him returned to normal, and the monitor showed the landing ship as it tried to escape into the shelter of a rocky area.

"You're not getting away so easily!"

He skillfully maneuvered, chasing after the fleeing ship. As long as I have sight of them, there's no way a landing ship can outmaneuver this Isolde. He caught up with the ship in the blink of eye, passed over the head of it, and hit them with several shots of his beam rifle from close range. Inertia continued to carry the landing ship along its path for a bit, but the back boosters began emitting flames, and it soon erupted in an explosion, pieces scattering in all directions.

"One down..."

With a grin of satisfaction, Walter veered the Isolde around.

"No mobile suits on guard? What a thoughtless bunch... Time to take care of the remaining one and head back."

Suddenly, an emergency call rang through the cockpit.

"Huh!"

Walter instinctively leaned into the lever. With the sudden push from the g-force, the Isolde lost its balance, and a ray of light grazed its head.

"A beam?!"

Regaining its posture, he turned toward the direction of the attack.

"So you finally showed up, huh? The Zaku type Bro told me about!"

Isolde's base model, the Byarlant, was originally developed for atmospheric use, but the Isolde had been tuned for special missions and could make full use



of its maneuverability in zero gravity environments. There's no way I'm going to be outdone by a dated model like the Zaku. Or so he thought...

"What!?"

By the time he had turned around, the enemy mobile suit had already closed in on him.

"Son of...!"

He dodged the incoming beam saber by a hair and gained some distance before confronting the enemy. Before him stood a slender white mobile suit in the resemblance of a knight – the R-Jarja.

"That's no Zaku..."

Walter scowled suspiciously as he kept his eyes locked on the enemy in front of him. That's not the mobile suit Quentin reported. Are the enemy numbers larger than we'd thought? Or perhaps...

"Ah, screw it."

Rather than thinking about it, Walter decided to make a move. Using my head isn't my strong suit, anyway. Let's deal with this guy first.

"Think you can entertain me for a while, Whitey?"

With a piercing roar, the black bird swooped savagely down at the white knight.

x      x      x

Around that time...

After seeing Danton off, Arlette and Mehmet made their way along Axis's outer wall toward the research facility, as planned. They moved with caution, so as not to lose their footing.

"Ah!"

Arlette's foot slipped on a crevice in the rocks and she lost her balance, but Mehmet was quick to catch her hand.

"Tha...thank you."

"No problem."

Offering a smile to Arlette who was hanging her head low, Mehmet looked into the distance, in the direction that Danton had flown with the R-Jarja.

"Arlette, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"Danton was a test pilot, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Does he have any combat experience?"

"I don't believe so."

"His fight earlier with that Gundam type was exceptional. With that level of skill, why hasn't he fought before?"

"Danton is..."

As she began to answer, Arlette held her tongue.

"...I'm sorry. Could you ask him directly, later on? He'd probably be upset with me if I talked about it myself."

"I see..."

Mehmet didn't push the topic any further.

"Arlette, Danton has been with you since the One Year War, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"It's difficult to believe...that you, well..."

"It's not as nice as you'd think – one's appearance never changing."

"I'm sorry. That was intrusive."

"It's okay. I don't mind."

As Mehmet watched Arlette continue forward with a smile on her face, he spoke again.

"Do you think we'll find one? A psycho frame, that is."

"We'll find one."

"You're not just hoping, are you? You're sure of it?"

"Of course."

Her back turned towards him, Mehmet couldn't see her expression, but her voice was filled with strength.

"I'm grateful to you, Mehmet. For bringing us here..."

As she spoke, Arlette came to a halt.

"You've given me a chance to learn what his last moments were – Char Aznable's last thoughts."

Arlette spoke softly, biting her words, as she fixed her gaze ahead of her.

"..."

Realizing what she was focused on, Mehmet swallowed his breath. The Maharaja Khan Memorial Research Institute. The entrance to their final destination stood before them.

## Chapter #5

### Memories

The Maharaja Khan Memorial Research Institute.

After finally arriving at their intended destination, a sudden gun battle awaited the party. In the blink of an eye, Mehmet drew Arlette close. As they laid low in the shadow of the gate, several bullets flew over their heads.

The echoes of bullets ricocheting off the lab walls vibrated furiously against the visors on their normal suits. It was only luck that had enabled them to narrowly dodge this attack. Aware of the sweat pouring down his forehead, Mehmet calmly verified the situation.

It appeared the other soldiers under his command had been able to take cover nearby. He carefully raised his head, and scanned the surrounding area. The interiors of the lab were rather large, about the size of a small hangar. Inside, several testing devices were crammed in rows. The black box visible in the center was most likely the main server for this lab. Surrounding it were several consoles which appeared to be terminals.

The psycho frame data was, in all likelihood, stored inside that main server.

Seeing his objective finally in front of him, Mehmet unconsciously swallowed his breath.

"Mehmet...?"

"Don't move."

Again bullets zipped by overhead, and Mehmet ducked his head down.

The gunfire was coming from the opposite side, with the lab standing between them. They appeared to be coming from the entrance that led to the interior of Axis. They must have been the same ones who had attacked them at the settlement, and had sealed off the roads a while ago. Just as Mehmet's group had arrived from the perimeter of Axis, they too had arrived at the same time traveling from the interior.

"Oh boy... I guess we're just like peas in a pod."

Now that things had come to this pass, there was little doubt that their objective was the Psycho Frame research data left here at this lab. But, most likely they had only just arrived as well. They probably had not gotten their hands on it just yet.

If so, then...

"Fine. These things are better when they're simple."

"What?"

Arlette raised her voice incongruously in response to Mehmet's fearless grin.

"Stay hidden here, Arlette. I'll finish this in 3 minutes."

With those words, Mehmet leaped off the floor and dashed away.

x      x      x

Meanwhile, the men who fired upon Mehmet's soldiers were taken aback by this unexpected counterattack. To begin with, why were their enemies here? The Jegans should have already sealed off the route that led to here. Even if they had gotten through, there's no way they could have reached here first.

So when they entered the lab, and were just about to start their search – and suddenly faced with an unknown group arriving from the gate leading in from the outside, they fell into a mild panic, and began wildly shooting their guns about. Even though that valuable research data might still be there inside.

The man tasked to lead the unit ground his teeth at this unexpected mishap. They were called Birnam.

A private military group, they were shepherded by the Ronah family/Buch Concern conglomerate – a major corporate entity that had shown remarkable growth in recent years and was now expanding into politics. Acting on the orders of Meitzer Ronah, the group had in the past conducted a variety of illegal missions.

Having begun as a simple debris collection company, the Buch Concern eventually entered the field of mobile suit development, and in a short while began to establish themselves prominently – a successful rise which was secretly powered by their activities as superior industrial spies.

However, they remained nothing more than a private military collection of civilians. While many in their ranks had military experience, in terms of leadership they were no match for a real army. As Mehmet and the Mastema unit launched their counterattack, it took little time before their forces were disabled.

x      x      x

“Hmph...”

After securing the man who seemed to be leader of the enemy unit, Mehmet let out a sigh of relief.

“You kept us busy there for a moment... But I wouldn't quit your day job if I were you.”

“Damn...!”

Perhaps having lost any remaining will to resist, the man simply dropped his head.

“So then, we can take our time questioning them later. But first we need to fulfill our objective. Arlette, you can come out now.”

“Oh, okay.”

Having been called, Arlette poked her head out from behind the gate.

She could see the enemy troops – completely clad in black normal – scattered about the lab, captured by the Mastema members. But that wasn't the sight which held Arlette's gaze.

“Oh...”

Arlette was rendered speechless by the scene which unfurled before her eyes.

The Maharaja Khan Memorial Research Institute.

It had once served as the only place she had ever belonged.

And now, she had returned.

She looked around, deeply moved. The white walls emerged in the faint light. A variety of devices used in various experiments were dotted throughout the facility. And there in front, lined up in orderly fashion, were several monitors and consoles. The data acquired there would be sent to the main server in the back.

One corner of the outer walls was glassed-in, and beyond it was supposed to be a hanger where the prototype mobile armors were stored.

But ultimately, those mechas would never be deployed in battle or experience any fighting, and the facility was abandoned.

Could they still be there, lying dormant?

Everything remained just as it was back then. She could remember the days when she worked here as if it were yesterday.

Before she knew it, Arlette found herself transported back in time to those distant memories.

x      x      x

The One Year War.

An unprecedented tragedy in the annals of human history, whereby half the total population of the Earth Sphere perished. However, Arlette had barely any trace of acute sensation or memory of the war itself. While of course, she had been a young girl at the time, her lack of memory was due to living a life isolated from the outside world as an enhanced human test subject.

The Newtype research facility established by Side 6 – The Flanagan Institute.

That was her entire world at the time.

She could hardly remember anything of her life before being placed in the Institute.

By the time she became self-aware, she was living in a white-walled room, sharing a communal life with other children who were dressed in white just like she was. After the war, she had read several books written about the Institute.

They were typical of those kinds of publications – describing the dark acts of the military and inhumane experimental facilities, and Arlette found herself reading these accounts and feeling strangely detached – as if these were someone else's affairs. In reality, it was believed that many inhumane acts were often conducted there. As proof, the many children around her began to decline in number – before she knew it, another, and then another.

But at the time, she did not think of it as out of the ordinary.

She accepted this as normal.

But then one day, something occurred.

Arlette was summoned by the officer in charge of her education, and went to the visiting room. There in front of her was a jumbled mass of materials. In those materials was every bit of personal data on her – recorded from the moment she had arrived at this facility.

Her physical abilities, kinetic vision, reflexes, decision-making abilities, etc.

A cold enumeration of statistics – detailed measurements of every single ability and skill that would be approximated as necessary for a soldier. And then the officer spoke in a voice which to her ears sounded just as dry as those stacks of numbers.

“〇〇...”

Hearing her name called, Arlette raised her head. She no longer remembered the name she was given back then. It could hardly be called a name – merely an identifying codename. Today, there was no one who would call her by that name anymore.

“You understand why you were brought here, don’t you?”

As she received those quietly spoken words, Arlette nodded.

No matter how generously one might view her, she could not be described as having high-level skills as a pilot. Compared to the other children who had entered the facility at the same time, her stats were exceedingly mediocre. If it were peacetime, the idea that a young girl like her could operate a weaponized mobile suit would be astonishing. But the children who were being researched and developed here were no ordinary pilots. Nonetheless, Arlette was unable to meet those expectations.

“So I guess I’ve outlived my usefulness...”

It meant that finally her number was being called. Her thoughts wandered to her comrades who had quietly been eliminated from the facility. She already no longer had much memory of their faces or voices – these children aged similarly to herself. She had no idea what had happened to them, nor did she care. Because the same thing would happen to her anyway. When she disappeared, nobody would care or notice... While she vacantly thought about such things, the door behind her opened.

“Well, hello there.”

...?

Unexpectedly hearing such a friendly voice, Arlette was taken aback. It was not the voice of the Institute’s scientists or staff.

It was a young, male voice.

Arlette found herself turning back, and then she froze, her eyes widening. This young man who entered the room was wearing a strange mask.

Char Aznable – that’s what the man called himself.

“An... engineer?”

“Yes. You have a talent for that.”

Arlette was uncertain whether to believe these words spoken by Char. True, she did enjoy handling machines, and she even thought herself skilled at it. She couldn’t make any sense of operating the mobile suits. But on the other hand... When it came to structural studies and maintenance technology of the mobile

suits – which were compulsory subjects for the pilots, she had earned high marks.

“Would you please come with me?”

Those words would change Arlette’s destiny.

x x x

A young girl, never meant to be anything more than a disposable experiment, was now being ushered in to the mobile suit research area, located in a separate section of the Institute.

Arlette Armage.

That was the new name she had been given. She was there to participate as a researcher in the development of Newtype exclusive mobile weaponry.

“Being a Newtype does not necessarily mean that a pilot has a talent for combat.”

Arlette remembered Char’s words to her as if they had been spoken only yesterday.

“In the coming era, people like you will also be needed.”

As if in response to those words, Arlette rapidly began to distinguish herself. Since she demonstrated remarkable ability in the fields of dynamics and structural studies, it was not long before she found herself in charge of a portion of the development project.

From its inception, the Flanagan Institute had been a gathering of individuals shunned by the traditional scientific community. Nobody around her objected to her origins.

Praise was rewarded based solely on results.

Such a simple concept both surprised Arlette, and filled her with joy. Here was the first place where she was not an experiment, but a human being. While she had previously been almost machine-like, rarely showing any emotion, she had now come to resemble a normal girl her age, laughing, getting angry, and even occasionally telling jokes.

It was only natural that Arlette came to hold a faint admiration for Char, the man who had found her, and shown her this new way of life. But she was sure to never betray those feelings to anyone around her.

Char Aznable was a man forever out of her reach.

Char always concealed his face behind a mask or sunglasses, not even revealing himself to his superiors or those directly under his command. The official story was that he did this to hide facial scars he had suffered in his youth, but strong rumors were stirring that he, in fact, had another reason to avoid showing his face.

Even Arlette, who at the time was still a child, could see that Char did not allow anybody to get close to him.

After all, until recently, she had been the same way.

Between Arlette and Char there stood an invisible wall, tall and wide. However, there was one exception, one person who overcame that wall with ease and could stand beside Char.

Lalah Sune, a natural newtype who Char had discovered prior to Arlette. Arlette had been part of the research team that had developed Lalah's custom Newtype mobile armor.

While she was most often aloof, and kept her distance from the other researchers, for some reason Lalah had often spoke with Arlette. Perhaps she sensed the similarities they shared.

Their conversations never amounted to much more than reporting seeing a bird outside of the facility, or mentioning that the stars happened to look exceptionally beautiful that day, but Arlette always looked forward to them.

Perhaps she also felt a sort of sympathy for Lalah.

If I had an older sister, maybe she would be someone like this...

At some point, Arlette began to think that way.

Char. Lalah.

I want to help them.

I want to repay these people who allowed me to have normal, human, feelings. At the time, this was truly how Arlette felt. However, not long after, Lalah perished in battle. She had been shielding Char from an enemy attack. Arlette had not been present at the time.

Char said nothing upon his return, but Arlette felt the invisible wall that separated him from the rest of the world growing ever taller and wider.

Not long after that, the peace agreement was signed, and the One Year War came to an end.

Char disappeared from the public eye.

He changed his name and appearance, and made his way through various organizations. Arlette chose to follow him. She could have chosen to leave him and live out a normal life. However, for Arlette, the idea of living a "normal life" was well outside the scope of imagination.

The only place for her to live was under Char's command.

Even if she was never able to climb over the invisible wall separating them.

Many years came and went.

Char, who had still retained the aura of a young boy about him when they had first met, passed through his youth, and small lines began to appear on his face. However, Arlette did not change. The plethora of experiments she had been subjected to in her childhood significantly hindered her growth. Arlette felt as though her body was trying to return to that time— attempting to avoid becoming an adult.

In the end, Arlette was never able to climb the wall.

x      x      x

"Hey, what are you doing?"

The unexpected sound of Mehmet's concerned voice snapped Arlette back to reality. She saw the man who appeared to be the enemy leader, who up until now had been standing idly with his head down, blow past Mehmet and take off at a sprint.

He had something in his arms.



He was headed for the back of the lab.

The location of the main server room!

"Arlette! Take cover!"

Mehmet ran over and pulled Arlette to the ground. Just as she was falling, everything was engulfed in light.

x      x      x

"Are you alright, Arlette?"

"Y-Yes."

Arlette's voice was muffled under Mehmet's arms.

Slowly, reluctantly, she raised her head and gazed out upon the gruesome scene. One corner of the lab had been completely blown away.

The surrounding terminals and experimental equipment had also been destroyed in the blast. Even if something in that area happened to remain, there was no way it would still be in working order.

"He got us. Who would have thought he'd blow himself up...", Mehmet whispered dejectedly from behind Arlette.

Surveying the area in despair, Arlette happened to see a large dark shape sprawled on the ground out of the corner of her eye. Without thinking she squeezed her eyes shut.

"It's best not to look."

Mehmet settled Arlette into a crouching position, then stepped out of the rubble.

"This is horrible."

Glancing again at the destruction around him, Mehmet let out a sigh.

"Commander!"

From the shadows, crew members of the Mastema began to emerge. It appeared they had all been able to take shelter from the blast.

"Apologies, commander. The prisoners we had in custody managed to get away. Shall we pursue them?"

"No, there is no time. More importantly how are things over there?"

"Y-Yes, commander, we are fine."

"I'm not talking about you! I'm talking about the servers!"

Mehmet pushed past his subordinates, and ran towards the main server room.

"Shit."

Mehmet's handsome face contorted with disgust. Having suffered the damage of an explosion at point-blank range, most of the server mainframe had been crushed, and sparks were flying out from various spots. At the very least, most of the data would be lost, at worst it was possible the servers had suffered a complete crash.

"They got us good."

"So they'd rather die than hand over their treasures, huh? What a bunch of savages."

With the crestfallen voices of his subordinates behind him, Mehmet pondered the best course of action. What to do? Could it still be possible to transfer data out of the server in its current condition...?

“Arle—”

As he turned to speak to her, Arlette had already started to work behind Mehmet. Glancing around the area, she searched for a terminal that was relatively undamaged. Seeing the blueish-white light of an LED from one corner of the lab, she ran over to inspect it.

It still had power.

“It might just be possible.”

Upon hitting the switch, the screen immediately lit up and the OS began to boot up. Arlette’s fingers moved rapidly over the keyboard.

“Alright, the circuit is intact.”

She turned and reported to Mehmet, who had followed her over to the terminal.

“It seems I can still access the main server. If there is any surviving data I might be able to salvage...”

“I’ll leave it to you!”

Before Arlette could finish her explanation, Mehmet leaned over and shouted.

“Understood.”

Arlette began quickly typing again. Her emotions upon touching a keyboard, which she had been using almost every day, almost overcame Arlette. Resisting this, she entered the command to access the main server. Mehmet watched with bated breath as Arlette silently worked at the terminal.

“If this doesn’t work, there is nothing more we can do...”

Various windows flashed on and off the monitor, each time causing Arlette’s fingers to tremble slightly on the keyboard. One after another, countless error messages appeared on the screen, each serving to make Mehmet more anxious.

“Please... be intact. We can’t go back empty handed, having gained nothing...”

Eventually the sound of Arlette’s keystrokes stopped, and the window open on the screen displayed a wall of text and equations.

“How is it? Is the data still salvageable?”

Arlette nodded slightly to Mehmet, who was peeking at the screen nervously. The other Mastema crew members let out a cheer.

An excited Mehmet urged on Arlette, “Perfect, can you keep working on this?”

“Yes.”

As she answered, Arlette took her PDA (Personal Data Access port) from her pressure suit and attached it to the terminal. Quickly inputting commands, data began to download from the terminal to the PDA. The data transfer indicator starting blinking on and off.

“Thank you so much, Arlette. It was definitely the right choice to bring you here.”

As Mehmet thanked her and bowed deeply, Arlette added on, "Um, Mehmet..."

"Yes?"

"There might be some more surviving data in addition to this."

"Really?"

"Yes. Not digital data, but materials that have already been taken out from the servers. It was a- um... yes, a red binder, I think. It may have gotten destroyed in the explosion, but if not..."

"A red cover, right? Ok, leave it to me."

Mehmet turned to his subordinates.

"You heard her! There is not much time. Let's search for as long as we can."

Nodding, Arlette turned away from the soldiers who had taken off to search various spots in the lab, and her fingers again began dancing on the keys.

"Thank you"

After a quick word of thanks, Mehmet took off after his subordinates.

"..."

Left alone in front of the terminal, Arlette quietly bowed her head in the direction of the departing Mehmet.

"Mehmet, I'm so sorry..."

She had lied.

No matter where they looked, the crew would never find a red binder in the lab. She had needed to distract them for a while. Arlette turned around. The wall behind her was made of pressure-resistant glass, made to allow direct observation of the prototype Mobile Suit test flights in space. Beyond the window was only the immense darkness of space. The faint light behind her cast Arlette's reflection onto the surface.

She fixed her eyes out into space.

The day the Second Neo Zeon War ended. Char had gone into battle, piloting the Sazabi that Arlette had prepared, and departing the Neo Zeon flagship, Rewloola. Char was headed into battle against Amuro Ray, his fated enemy, and the one who had killed Lalah.

He would never be seen again.

Arlette bit her lip whenever she thought about how, right before he left, all she could bring herself to say to him was something meaningless like "Good luck".

At that time, she thought he slightly smiled at her. What could he have been thinking as he went out to fight his greatest enemy. There is no way to know now.

However...

If there is something to be found.

If there is a way to be even a little closer to him that day.

The wreckage of Char's Sazabi, destroyed in the battle with Amuro Ray's v Gundam, should still be on the surface of Axis. She knew that the coordinates were not that far from the lab in which she stood now. It was right there, almost within reach...

x      x      x

The monitor in front of her signaled that the data transfer was complete. Arlette disconnected her PDA and turned around.

With this, the Mastema crew's plan was a success. But that wasn't the reason Arlette had come.

Mehmet and the others were still searching the lab. They could only remain there for less than 15 more minutes. They were likely planning to search until the last possible moment. No one was looking back towards her. With the debris from the explosion, the area around the terminal was out of their view.

"..."

Arlette set her PDA down in clear view on top of the console, and walked away from the terminal. She moved slowly, continuing to use the objects around her to stay out of view. She headed for the hatch they had entered earlier, the hatch that led to the Axis outer wall.

She peeked behind her.

Nobody seemed to have noticed her.

"Wait for me, Captain, I'm on my way."

Opening the hatch, Arlette again floated off into the darkness of space.

## Chapter #6

### Sazabi

“Wait for me, Captain, I’m on my way.”

Stealing away from the lab under the Mehmet team’s watch, Arlette escaped to the outer wall of Axis, and walked towards a small garage hidden in the rocks. Parked there, she found several petite mobile suits – built for mobilizing on the outer walls. Most of them had been blown out into space due to the shock from the fissure of Axis, but a few appeared to still be in good shape.

Arlette climbed into one, and quickly activated it.

The petite mobile suit leaped and soared over the cliff faces.

Arlette activated the navigation system inside the suit, and verified her current position.

Her objective was to reach the location where the damaged Sazabi suit had been abandoned when Axis was destroyed. The location that was tracked from the signal sent to the Rewloola at the time shouldn’t be too far from here.

“Captain...”

After pinpointing her directions, Arlette accelerated the petit mobile suit.

x      x      x

Meanwhile...

In the skies above where the Mastema transport ships lay moored, Danton’s R-Jarja and Walter’s Byarlant Isolde continued to do battle. A flash of light splits the pitch-black darkness.

“I’m going to have fun with you, white one!”

The flashes emitting from Isolde’s mega particle gun screamed towards Danton’s R-Jarja unit.

“...ngh!”

Barely dodging the blast, Danton ran his finger quickly to the trigger of his control stick. Weapons selected. From the R-Jarja’s shoulder armor missile pod, 6 missiles launched in unison.

“Hmph... How clever!”

Without so much as a flinch, the Isolde fired back with 2 oscillating beam sabers in each hand. In a sweeping motion, the Isolde cut down the approaching missiles. And then, in a sudden acceleration of speed – as if to swat away the explosive flames, it charged upon the R-Jarja.

“What!?”

The saber thrust grazed the R-Jarja’s shoulder, scorching its armor.

“Such unbelievable speed...”

A cold sweat began to trickle down Danton’s forehead.

The Byarlant Isolde was primarily a customized version of the RX-160 Byarlant – which was developed to be used on land – now specialized for space battle. The fusion reactor jet engines which made flight within the atmosphere possible for the mobile suits were modified for use in the vacuum of space, and now demonstrated their perfected and massive output.

Walter was particularly adept at using their propulsive power to launch a spring attack strategy. On the other hand, Danton's R-Jarja unit was a mobile suit specialized for close combat developed by the knights on Axis. It must be said that it was ill-suited against an opponent who could maneuver at high speeds.

"So I guess this is the worst possible matchup for me... oh boy."

Even while cursing his luck, Danton never once lost sight of the enemy standing before him. He found himself unconsciously squeezing the grips. The sensation unexpectedly brought back a long-ago memory for Danton...

x      x      x

At the time of the One Year War...

As a young mobile suit pilot, Danton was expected to have a bright future. His grades at the military academy were excellent – even among his fellow cadets, and his mobile suit operational skills were overwhelmingly great. He could freely operate the manipulators of his mobile suit, was able to quickly master any number of weaponry, and could run across any unstable terrain without difficulty or losing his balance.

He was often praised – that his mobile suit moved so effortlessly, as if it were a flesh and blood human. To be truthful, the new age mobile suits had evolved from industrial use mobile workers, and were able to conduct rather complicated, human-level movements. However, as it turns out, only a small handful of ace-level pilots – such as Char Aznable, were able to operate these suits to their full capacity in real combat situations.

At the time, Danton already showed glimpses of the potential to achieve such heights as a cadet.

However...

In the end, Danton would never realize much success as a mobile suit pilot. The reason for his failure was quite simple.

He did not like war.

Of course, there are very few people who enjoy killing others. And Danton himself would encounter many situations in which he would have to pull the trigger against his enemies in order to save himself or his comrades. But still, Danton never experienced such a life in long enough quantities to ever become used to waging war.

After finishing a battle that had produced immense casualties on both sides, Danton decided to resign from his duties as a mobile suit pilot. He loved operating the mobile suit itself. When he operated such an enormous humanoid machine structured on complicated mechanisms, it was as if his very soul could drive the equipment.

He was always interested in mechanical devices as a child, and for someone who liked nothing better than to tinker with machinery, this was a joy that could not be surpassed.

And that was why he could no longer bear a life whereby he was compelled to murder others using these mobile suits.

And then...

During his visit to the military office in order to conduct his discharge procedures, Danton finally met him.

Char Aznable.

The name was so prominent as to reach even the ears of Danton – who had no ambitions for advancing his career. The masked man, who achieved the rank of Captain at such an extraordinarily young age. There were many dark rumors swirling about the background of his success. Char wore a sanguine smile beneath his mask, and his very first words to Danton were thus.

"I have come here to recruit you."

He learned that Char had his eyes on Danton's operational skills for some time. But this was not a welcome proposition for Danton. He had already intended to quit the military. So he would not be able to fulfill the Captain's request...

Hearing Danton's reply, Char continued speaking.

"Has killing become unpleasant for you?"

"..."

Having been so perceptively analyzed, Danton found himself averting his gaze.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of. It's only natural for any normal person to feel that way."

So saying, Char smiled with a tinge of self-mockery.

"You have no need to worry. The only thing I want is your operational skills."

In order to speak further, Char brought Danton to the lounge.

As it turned out, Char wanted to recruit Danton to be his mobile suit test pilot – so that he could determine his own fit and needs.

"Why do you want me? If you're looking for good mobile suit pilots, there should be plenty of others.

"No, it has to be you."

So saying, Char smiled faintly.

"Your piloting is similar... to my own style."

"I'm... similar? To you, Captain?"

"Yes. Your complicated movements and the way you use your weapons... It's all quite similar."

"Oh..."

"I believe you are aware, but I am in the position of securing my own specialized mobile suit. Before I use this mobile suit in actual combat, I have another pilot test the unit... But if I allow an incompetent pilot to run these tests, the structure tends to acquire some strange peculiarities. And so..."

Halting his speech, Char gave Danton a look.

"That's why I need you. Danton Hyleg."

“...!”

“If you’re only a test pilot, there should be no need to shoot at any enemies, no?”

“Well...”

He felt this to be a deceptive argument.

Even if he himself were not the one to pull the trigger, this wouldn’t change the fact that he was involved in the waging of war. But more than anything else, it was that Danton could not personally feel any favorable disposition towards the man standing before him – Char Aznable.

This man who – in this time of war – would make his living by killing others.

It could certainly be said that his way of life was in complete opposite to that of Danton’s.

However...

He could operate a mobile suit, without firing at others. This proposal had an undeniable appeal to Danton.

“...Please... let me think about it for awhile...”

He left the room with those words, but for Danton, there could be no other choice.

A few days later, Danton contacted Char, and agreed to become his exclusive test pilot.

x      x      x

And so, Danton visited the mobile suit R&D base at Side 6, and there he met his future partner and engineer – the young girl Arlette Almage. At first, he found her to be an arrogant little girl.

“I’ve added a thruster to this new unit, so its output has increased by 3%. That will change its maneuverability, so please be careful.”

“...Yeah, sure.”

When it came to conversations between the two, it often came down to impersonal instructions – as friendly as orders from above. Danton was not exactly the friendly type either, so the two of them continued in this awkward manner for awhile. To someone looking in from the outside, they might appear to be at each other’s throats.

But, as they continued to carry on in this manner...

Something changed in Arlette.

For some reason, she began to increasingly tease him, and would even laugh and smile every once in a while.

And her smiles would especially be directed towards Char – a fact that even Danton, who was often teased for being unsociable, could perceive. However, as the distance between them began to shrink, little by little, Danton found himself increasingly having more opportunities to smile and laugh.

Arlette would crack a joke, and Danton would respond bluntly. This banter of theirs – like a friendly brother and sister – would come to be an everyday occurrence at the facility.



The drab mobile suit R&D facility would gradually evolve to become a place of comfort for Danton...

x      x      x

When the One Year War finally came to a close, and Char changed his name to Quattro and joined the A.E.U.G., Arlette chose to follow him without a moment's hesitation.

"What about you, Danton, what will you do?"

As was often the case, Danton sounded less than pleased as he answered Arlette.

"If I don't go with you, just who do you think is going to test out the mobile suits you calibrate?"

At that time, his place was already with Arlette, and even after Axis was destroyed and Char disappeared, their relationship would never change.

That day.

As he headed out into combat, Char had put his hand on Danton's shoulder and spoke, "Protect Arlette."

x      x      x

"...!!"

The impact shook his craft, and snapped Danton back to reality. The Isolde had latched on to the variable shield on the R-Jarja's left shoulder with its right-hand claw.

"Dammit..."

"I've got you now, white one!", Walter shouted.

The barrel of the Isolde's left arm turned towards the R-Jarja.

If he were to sustain a direct hit from the mega particle cannon at this close range, Danton, in the cockpit, would surely be vaporized.

"Dammit!"

With a split-second decision, Danton extended his beam rifle. The R-Jarja's beam rifle was a bayonet-type, with a short beam saber attached to the tip. It's not that powerful, but if I strike at this close range...

"!!"

Noticing, Walter pulled the trigger on the mega particle cannon. Just as the burning particles erupted from the muzzle, the R-Jarja's saber split the barrel open.

The exploding particles missed their mark, blowing away the R-Jarja's variable shield that the Isolde had had in its grasp.

"Gaahhh!!!"

Freed from the Isolde's grip, with its left hand, the R-Jarja drew the beam saber from its hip and slashed at the Isolde underhanded.

"Bastard!"

Firing its rear thrusters at full power, the Isolde distanced itself from the R-Jarja.

“ ... ”  
“ ... ”

The two mobile suits, each having lost an arm, one with the variable shield, the other with the mega particle cannon, again readied their remaining weapons and faced each other.

“Ahh... now I see why my brother had some trouble with you.” Walter purred from the cockpit of the Isolde, enjoying himself. “To think I’d be able to fight someone like you in this of all places... I’m glad!”

Danton, however, had conflicted feelings. Of course, it was not a good feeling to fight against someone, but on the other hand, really piloting the mobile suit, and pushing it to the limits of its capabilities, was somewhat satisfying.

“What a paradox...” with a wry smile, Danton whispered to himself.

Yes, a paradox.

The Danton who hated war, and the Danton who loved the weapons, mobile suits. Similarly, Danton still felt no affection for Char, but simultaneously felt indebted to him for having been given a place to be.

“I’m just filled with paradoxes...”

From deep within his own heart, Char’s final words returned to Danton.

“Protect Arlette...”

Why me...? I’m just a test pilot... Why would the Captain... Why would Char say such a thing...?

As he passed though the many lights sparkling in the black of space, Danton continued to seek answers from his own heart.

x      x      x

And then... Making her away along the Axis outer wall in the mini MS, Arlette eventually noticed something shining on the rock wall in front of her.

“...!!”

Unable to control her quickening pulse, Arlette moved swiftly towards the light. After passing over several boulders, the view suddenly opened up before her.

“There it is.”

Within Arlette’s gaze lay a massive crimson object. The large body was covered in various scratches, its sprawled-out limbs devoid of any power. The embodiment of Char Aznable, who had fought as the banner of Neo Zeon.

The MSN-04 Sazabi.

Having fulfilled its role, the giant lay quiet.

“Sazabi...”

Exiting the small mobile, Arlette walked, step by step, towards Sazabi. Below the, now darkened, mono-eye, the hatch on the head portion was open wide, revealing only darkness behind it. The cockpit block which had been there was already gone. Under the light from Arlette’s pressure suit, the exposed frame shone back dimly. Approaching the fuselage, Arlette gently ran her fingers over the surface.

"I've come back... Captain...

The sound of Arlette's whispered voice instantly melted away into the surrounding darkness. There was no longer anyone there to respond to her words. For a moment, Arlette tightly closed her eyes. She had known there would be nothing there.

Char's cockpit block had, along with the v Gundam, supported the plummeting Axis as it fell, never to be seen again.

However, even so...

Walking forward, Arlette crawled inside. Inside the head portion, covered by the crushed frame, pieces of broken parts lay scattered about. The battle between Sazabi and the v Gundam was said to have culminated in hand-to-hand combat, both combatants attempting to destroy each other's manipulators. It was understandable that the interior would be in such a horrible state.

In fact, it was impressive that the escape pod equipment had managed to perform so well. Arlette bent over and picked up a small piece that lay by her feet. With its distinct shine, the piece was definitely a fragment of the psychoframe. If Arlette were to take it back with her, Mehmet would surely jump with joy.

But that wasn't why she was there.

As though weaving through the wreckage, Arlette made her way to the very back of the head. There, the joint portion that connected the cockpit block to Sazabi's main body was exposed. Taking the terminal from her pressure suit, Arlette connected it to the joint.

Fundamentally, for confidentiality, a mobile suit's fuselage data was kept in the main computer of the cockpit block, which also served as the escape pod. There was little chance of any data remaining within the main body's sub-computer. Nevertheless, if there was anything, anything at all, related to Char still there... If there was even the slightest way to see what he was thinking and what he was feeling at that time, Arlette wanted to know.

"That's why. That's why I'm here."

As if praying, Arlette began to access Sazabi. To find the past that had slipped through her fingers on that day.

## Chapter #7

### Shadow of Kurwenal

Wrapped in the darkness of space, the scream of the colossus rung out, a wing torn from its body.

The Byarlant Isolde had already lost one of its mega particle guns, yet it drew its beam saber and charged back at the R-Jarja once again.

“What!?”

The R-Jarja took the blow with its own beam saber.

The mobile suits continued to push, and the battle raged on.

“It seems like you’re a fan of swordplay too!”

Walter laughed fearlessly and pushed down on the throttle.

His rear thrusters roared to life and he charged forward as if trying to smash the R-Jarja onto the surface of Axis.

“Gah!”

A normal pilot would have tried to push back, but Danton didn’t fight the flow. Their bodies entangled, the two mobile suits hurled towards the surface. In a flash, Danton swung up his variable shield and smashed it into the side of the Isolde’s belly.

“What!?”

The entangled suits began to rotate, dragging the Isolde underneath, ready to be smashed onto the surface.

“Gaaargh!”

“Take this!!”

Danton quickly re-gripped his beam saber and brought it down on the Isolde’s head. But the Isolde’s boosters came online just in time. It slid parallel to the ground, ripping away the rocky surface, narrowly escaping the R-Jarja’s saber.

Missing its mark, the saber struck deep into the ground.

“...Aaargh....”

Resting on one knee within sight of the R-Jarja’s line of sight, the Isolde slowly raised itself.

“Haha... Pretty impressive movements there...”

From within the Isolde’s cockpit, Walter murmured in a low voice.

“Fun... this is so much fun, white one! No wonder you gave my brother such a hard time!”

It had been a long time since he had such a worthwhile prey to hunt... No, this could perhaps be his very first such prey. Walter couldn’t believe his luck on what he thought would be a boring mission; his face, a mirror image of his brother’s, broke into a wicked smile.

Meanwhile, Arlette was trying to access the main body of the Sazabi left on the surface of Axis. Normally, the avionics of a mobile suit was contained in the cockpit block, doubling as an escape pod. The electronics on the main body were purely auxiliary.

Thus, there was little chance there would be any data left.

But the Sazabi was an extremely special case.

Designed to be an exclusive craft for the Neo Zeon Supreme Leader Char Aznable, all of Char's combat data since the One Year War had been fed back into its development. Plus, the area around the cockpit contained psycho-frame technology. The psycho-frame had tiny computer chips embedded at the molecular level inside the metal; the unit could retain memory.

Most of it had been lost along with the cockpit block, but the parts where the cockpit block connected with the body, though limited, did make use of psycho-frame parts.

Thus, there was a notable chance that some information about Char could be found there.

That was what Arlette was here for.

"Captain..."

Arlette continued to hit the button, like striking a bell in prayer.

Suddenly, the terminal lit up, displaying a number of files.

"!!"

As predicted, the psycho-frame in the Sazabi had retained some of the data. But there was no time to look at them carefully. Arlette continued to copy whatever she found onto her device.

"I've got to bring back as much data as I can..."

Arlette watched impatiently as the bar showing how much data had been transferred slowly grew longer, bit by bit.

Then, it happened.

A large shadow passed over Arlette's head.

"!?"

An enemy attack!?

If the enemy was after information about the psycho-frame, there was a high chance that they would have their eyes on the wreckage of the Sazabi. If she was attacked now, Arlette would have no way to defend herself.

But for her, her biggest concern wasn't her safety, it was ensuring that the Sazabi wouldn't fall into anyone else's hands. This suit was the only memento that Char had left in this world.

If it came to it, she would have to defend it.

In the kit that came along with her normal suit, there should be a small gun meant for self-defense...

Arlette steeled herself, but her bravery wasn't going to be needed.

"What...?"

Arlette looked up at the sky in disbelief. Reflected in her eyes, she could see a large hunk of metal floating casually across the sky. Its silhouette was

asymmetric, twisted, with long gun barrels stretching out from its body, with countless containers dotting its surface.

Initially, she thought it was a battleship.

She thought that the enemy was attempting to escape from Axis on that ship. But she immediately put that thought aside.

She was an engineer; she knew better.

It was a mobile armor.

Such size, and such a shape... There was no doubt about it.

She had heard rumors of a craft like it while she was in the AEUG. A mythical craft, secretly developed by Anaheim Electronics. With a Gundam-type mobile suit at its core, a fortress type mobile armor that would complete once connected to an Armed Base.

Its registration was deleted, but the concept lived on, influencing a countless number of projects. And its descendant was now in front of her. From her situation, it was clearly an enemy craft, just like that Byarlant and Gundam type.

Wait — it was probably that Gundam Type was at its core.

Who could have thought that they'd come up with something like that...

Arlette braced herself, but it didn't seem like the massive mobile armor was coming down.

It passed overhead, and slowly headed towards...

“!!”

In a moment of panic, Arlette turned the transmitter in her normal suit, that had been disconnected the entire time, back on.

x      x      x

The massive mobile armor drifted past the Sazabi.

In its cockpit was indeed the pilot of that Gundam-type, the Tristan, Quentin Fermo himself.

“Who knew we'd actually use this in combat...”

The armed base “Kurwenal” was Tristan's own exclusive reinforced armament unit. This mission was a trial run of the Tristan, the Isolde, and this Kurwenal, but its use in combat wasn't something that had been anticipated.

The Birnam's mission was, firstly, to obtain information about the psycho-frame left on Axis. The Tristan and Isolde were there just in case Axis' automated defense system would come online.

Their other mission was to ensure that the same information wouldn't make its way into the hands of others, that is, destroy everything that was left of the research facilities.

That was what the Kurwenal was for.

One-sided destruction of a stationary lab wasn't his idea of fun. But Quentin's prayers would be answered by an unexpected prey. The pilot of that Zaku III Custom... surely he would put up a good fight.

He could destroy the lab later, at his leisure.

He'll probably have his hands full with Walter now...

“Don't you die before I let you!”

His usually calm visage distorted with excitement, the very image of his younger brother, Quentin rammed the throttle.

The rear thrusters roared to life, and the gigantic steel body of the Kurwenal picked up speed.

x      x      x

Mehmet and the others in the lab realized Arlette's absence a few minutes after she left.

"Arlette... What's she trying to do..."

Rather than surprise, Mehmet was bewildered and buried his head in his hand.

Considering the circumstances, it was highly likely that Arlette sneaked out of the corner of their eyes onto the surface of Axis, as there was no way that the Mastima team would not notice if she went through the corridors inside the lab.

"Arlette! Arlette! "

He tried to call out to Arlette over the communicator but got no response. She must have cut off the comms on her end. As someone put in charge of a civilian, he had made it a point to be attentive to her behavior. Arlette had been acting very cooperative up until now.

He never expected her to act on her own without his permission, even now. It was Mehmet's regrettable mistake for taking his eyes off of her, even for just a few minutes.

Could she have put up an act as an obedient civilian, anticipating this...?

Mehmet recalls Arlette's sad and longing expression when looking at Axis a few hours ago and started panicking. They couldn't just sit and wait for her return, and they couldn't remain on Axis for much longer.

Moreover, there could be more hostiles heading their way.

Other than the Byarlant that Danton went after, the Gundam-type they engaged earlier could still be around. They need to return to the landing craft as soon as possible. If it came down to it, he might have to consider abandoning her... As the thought crosses his mind, the comms on Mehmet's normal suit buzzed with a voice drowned in white noise.

"....met..."

"!!"

As the Minovsky particle concentration around the lab was not that high, the communicator's calibration mechanism quickly kicked in and muted out the noise.

"Mehmet, do you read me?"

"Arlette! Where are you?!"

"Sorry. I went outside. I had to confirm something..."

"Confirm something...? "

"We'll talk about that later. We've got a situation on our hands right now. The enemy's mobile armor is heading for the port."

"A mobile armor... Are you sure?"

Unable to grasp the dizzying turn of events, Mehmet could only repeat what Arlette told him.

"I believe it is the Gundam-type we encountered earlier this time with an armed base attached to it."

"And it's heading for the port? "

"Yes. Danton and the landing craft are in danger."

"Eurgh..."

Mehmet clenched his teeth under the normal suit. While he is curious about Arlette's actions, they are in a desperate situation if she is telling the truth. Danton's R-Jarja should still be engaging the Byarlant. Now, an unidentified mobile armor appears out of nowhere. If they take out Danton and destroy the landing craft, they would have no way to return to the Earth Sphere.

"It's all over, huh..."

"No... Not yet."

Arlette's voice over the comms expressed strong willpower.

"Huh?! Arlette?"

"Get everyone in Mastima to take the data that has been collected and head to the port immediately."

"But the enemy's mobile armor is going to the port..."

"I will handle that."

"HUH?!"

"Just leave it to me. Hurry!"

"Wait..."

Right after saying that, Arlette cut the comms on her end. Mehmet stared at the severed comms link on the visor, feeling utterly disturbed.

"Commander..."

Mehmet shook his head while responding to his subordinate, who called to him anxiously.

"We're pulling out. Return to port."

"But she's..."

"She said she'll take care of it. She must have something up her sleeve. I will take responsibility."

"...Understood."

Goodness... She looked so meek, but she's such an unruly girl.

While still frustrated, Mehmet quickly started preparing for their withdrawal. She's their best bet now, though. Either way, they don't have time to waste. Quickly finishing up the withdrawal preparations, he looked back at the desolate, rocky stretch outside the window.

"I'm counting on you... Arlette."

Mehmet made a salute to Arlette, who's out there somewhere, before leaving the lab with his subordinates.

× × ×

A sandstorm was raging on the surface of Axis.



The Isolde, with its thrusters at maximum, closes in for the attack while gliding just above the surface. Danton's R-Jarja parried the Isolde's attack with its variable shield and drew its beam saber as they passed each other. The two sabers threw off sparks and lit up the barren land of Axis.

"As expected, he has the upper hand in mobility..."

The R-Jarja, which was mainly designed for close combat, couldn't keep up with the incomparable thrust of the Byarlant. Danton continued to dodge Isolde's attacks coming from all sides with minimum movement.

"Alright, white one! Let's see what you've got!"

Walter exclaims in delight inside the cockpit of Isolde. In all his years in the military, even after being hired as a mercenary for Birnam, he had never experienced a more exhilarating battle. He always thought of the enemy's mobile suits as nothing more than targets and preys that earned him money. However, this guy is an exception. He's totally different from the rest.

He wields the mobile suit as if it were his own body. He had never had the chance of encountering one on the battlefield, but he's probably the type they call ace pilots. If he could fight such people, maybe becoming a mercenary wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"But..."

While passing the R-Jarja, the Isolde extended its left arm.

"!!"

Its sharp claws penetrated the R-Jarja's shoulder armor; the same left arm was the one that lost its mega-particle cannon after being fired at point-blank range just moments ago. After that, he had engaged in close combat with the beam saber on his right arm. To make him think that that attack disabled the left arm. However, it is still functioning, and it can at least stop his foe in its tracks.

"You're finished!"

The Isolde thrust its right arm into the body of the R-Jarja, which had been stopped in its tracks.

My mega-particle cannon is still functioning. If I can fire it at point-blank range...

"Arghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Danton roared.

The R-Jarja raised its beam saber and cut off its own arm together with the Isolde's manipulator in one sweep.

"What?!"

Pivoting around the Isolde, which lost its balance and fell to the ground, the R-Jarja turned around and got behind its back.

"I..."

He quickly swung the raised beam saber down.

"...can't die here!"

"!!"

In sync with Danton's cry, the beam saber was buried into the back of Isolde.

"Eurgh..."

The light in the monoeye of the Isolde flickered for a while before slowly vanishing. The R-Jarja stood in silence as it looked down at the disabled Isolde. Danton breathed heavily inside the cockpit.

"...Finally... it's over..."

Looking back, he saw the Mastima landing craft hidden in the port. Danton sighed in relief as he realizes he had successfully defended their means of returning.

Zzzt... Zzzt...

The communicator buzzed with a voice mixed in static.

"...Eurgh... I lost, damn it... You're... strong..."

It must be the pilot of the Byarlant in front of him. Danton replies to the voice, which was younger than expected, with a worn-out voice.

"You too."

"...May I ask?"

"What?" "

"You're not a soldier, are you? Who are you?"

"I'm... just a laundry cleaner."

"...Huh? "

Hearing the surprise in the enemy pilot's voice made Danton smile wryly.

"Drop by if you ever come to Libot. I'll give you a discount."

After saying that, Danton dropped deep into his seat.

I'm done. All I have to do now is wait for Arlette and the Mastima's return. I guess I'll take a little break until then...

That was when it happened. The monitor displayed CAUTION in red, and the alarm echoed through the cockpit.

"What?!"

He panicked and looked around.

"What the hell... is this?"

The R-Jarja's main camera captured the silhouette of the large object coming towards him. Apparently, the Byarlant pilot also noticed this and blurted something nervously over the comms.

"Brother...? "

The massive mobile armor—Kurwenal—approached them with the inky blackness of space in its background.

x      x      x

Meanwhile, Arlette climbed into a Petite Mobile Suit and returned to the lab. Mehmet and the others were nowhere to be found. They probably set a course for the port first, as they were told.

I've gotta hurry. Danton should still be in combat with the Byarlant. If that mobile armor comes into the picture, not even Danton stands a chance of winning.

Arlette jumped off the Petite Mobile Suit and ran to the back of the lab towards the large dock behind the hatch at the rear.

The abandoned prototype is still here.

In order to save Danton, the landing craft, and Mehmet, she had to boot up this mobile suit.

"Captain, please..."

She grabbed the terminal on her chest while running and said,

"Just this once. Please help me... just this once."

## Chapter #8

### Legacy

Arlette, back in the lab, slid herself into the hangar hidden in the back. She stared into its depths, following the illumination of his light. A massive, unusual mobile armor stood within it.

Its battle-ready silhouette had sharp, deep crimson angles reminiscent of the red dragons of legend. The binder extending out of its back would be its tail.

Arlette kicked off the floor and approached the cockpit.

She quickly ran her fingers over its electrical parts, and the hatch slowly opened with a muffled thud.

She slid into the cockpit and connected to the terminal.

It contained Char Aznable's ID that she took from the Sazabi.

"Captain..."

A green light flashed on before Arlette, who sat staring intently, as though praying.

The unit recognized Char's ID and accepted her as the pilot.

One after another, the gauges lit up, and the panoramic monitor displayed the surrounding landscape as a simplified computer-generated image.

"It was still here..."

As Arlette looked down at the console, her gaze wavered, slightly sentimental.

AMA-X4, Ahava Azieru.

That was the unit's name.

Arlette reminisced about her time working on the development of this unit as she checked over the gauges.

x      x      x

"So this is the Maharaja Khan Memorial Research Institute..."

It was sometime in Universal Century 0088, shortly after the end of the Gryps War, when Arlette joined the lab as an engineer and Danton as a test pilot. The two had joined AEUG during the Gryps War, along with Char, who had changed his name to Quattro Bajeena. At the time, the AEUG had many people who were once apart of the former Zeon, so it seemed quite natural for them to join ranks.

It was there, too, that Arlette thoroughly demonstrated her talents as an engineer and contributed to the development of the AEUG's various mobile suits behind the scenes, but that's another story. Eventually, the Gryps War came to an end with the collapse of the Titans, and Quattro returned to being Char Aznable. However—

Arlette and Danton were given a new mission from him.

They were told to go to the Axis and take refuge under Haman Khan.

There were several years between the end of the Gryps War and Char's reappearance on the stage as Neo Zeon's leader. There are many theories as to where he hid himself during that time, but it is still a matter of debate—

Char had Arlette and Danton go off on their own during that period to hide out in the mobile suit development labs on Axis. One first reason was that it was preferable to have few people around you, to live in seclusion. Another reason was to get Arlette exposed to Axis mobile suit development. After the end of the One Year War, Axis, which had hidden itself in the asteroid belt under Haman Khan's leadership, had established its own mobile suit development system.

He wanted Arlette to learn from them.

"Will you do it for me? Arlette Almage."

"Yes."

Arlette never turned down Char's requests.

"I will too."

Danton had no reason to refuse either.

By then, watching over Arlette had become a part of his daily life.

Thus, they joined the Maharaja Khan Memorial Research Institute, Axis' mobile suit development facility, as engineers and test pilots. It would be a lie to say that Arlette, who was leaving Char's side for the first time since the One Year War, was not worried. While her relationship with Char was a secret, her talent was already widely known among the engineers. This, however, did not lead to them being ostracized or persecuted. The AEUG technology she brought with her was judged to be useful in Axis innovation.

Arlette was given unparalleled authority as an engineer, and Danton was assigned as her direct test pilot to develop new weapons. The Ahava Azir was a testbed for new psychowave technology being built in secret before Arlette came to Axis, further advancing the development of the psycommu, which was still in its infancy. The Ahava Azir was equipped with what later became known as a psycho frame.

In other words, this unit was a Newtype use exclusive unit.

Arlette was once shown to have the potential as a Newtype, having been raised in the Flanagan Institute facilities. Her potential as a pilot was never put to use, but there was never any doubt about her talent. Her background brought her to work on the development of the Ahava Azir for a time.

She never dreamed that she would be able to move this unit herself.

But now she has no choice.

It should be possible.

No, it has to be.

Arlette was the only one who could move this unit at Axis.

She grabbed the arm rakers with intent.

"Please, Captain..." she quietly whispered and gripped down.

"Give me your strength."

Ahava Azir's monoeye emitted a dazzling light, as if in response. The door of the hangar opened with a rumble. Each part lit up, and the dragon-like unit slowly rose into the air. The mounting arms retracted, and the cables connected to the fuselage were torn off one after another.

"...!"

She pushed into the arm raker with a look of intent. The crimson unit let out a roar and danced off into the pitch-black expanse of the universe.

x      x      x

"That's...!!"

Mehmet and the others were making their way along the surface of Axis to meet up with the landing craft and stared up in amazement at the massive figure that flew over them at high-speed. It seemed to have taken off from the lab they had just left.

"Arlette...?"

It had to be her inside. She couldn't intend to fight using that, could she? She didn't have any training to be a pilot.

"What is she...?!"

But all they could do was stand there and watch. They had to rendezvous with the craft as soon as possible and make preparations to escape Axis, along with meeting up with Danton and Arlette.

"Let's go. While they've got the attention of the enemy," Memet said to his men and began to advance faster.

x      x      x

Around the same time.

After Danton defeated Walter Fermo's Byarlant Isolde, his twin brother Quantan Fermo's Gundam-type – the Tristan – appeared in front of him. But he looked much different from how he had when they met inside Axis. Equipped with the armed base Kurwenal, Tristan had become a giant weapon, its entire body covered in armaments.

"You have a different suit... But it's you, isn't it, the pilot of the wannabe Zaku."

Gazing at Danton's R-Jarja on the panoramic monitor, Quentin's face twisted into a smile of delight. His eyes were those of a predator with his prey. He licked his dry lips and yelled.

"I've been waiting for you!"

The massive Kurwenal charged toward the R-Jarja, the hatches on the missile containers mounted on the front of the unit burst open, releasing a barrage of missiles into space.

"Kuh!"

Danton reacted reflexively and pulled the lever before he could see it coming. He turned all of his thrusters and danced around all of the missiles heading toward the R-Jarja.

But—

"Not too shabby!"

The R-Jarja lost the variable shield on one of his arms in the previous battle with Isolde. It has lost most of its maneuverability.

"But, I'm not letting you get away!"

The Kurwenal cried out as it made its approach.

Just as its guns were taking aim at the R-Jarja, a bright light glared out and lit up the darkness.

"—!"

"What!?"

A high power beam cut through the space opened between the two units.

"You...!"

The Kurwenal turned in rage, its hunt disturbed. It saw a shadow followed by a red trail of light, charging toward it. A second beam was fired.

"Hah!"

The Kurwenal cut it away with its massive beam saber unit. The scattered mega-particles turned into bits of light and danced around them. A massive crimson shadow appeared from beyond them. Danton was so surprised to see it that he could do nothing but whisper.

"Ahava...Azieru...?"

"Danton..."

There was no mistaking the voice coming through the static on the transmitter. It was Arlette, who he was supposed to be protecting.

"It's okay... I'll protect you."

x      x      x

Danton looked up from the cockpit of the R-Jarja in surprise at the crimson giant that appeared before him.

"Ahava Azieru...?"

It was a unit that was under construction while he was at Axis. They had left Axis when it was still being made, so he never had a chance to see the final product. But there was no mistaking it.

Someone started it.

But who?

There was only one answer.

Only one person in all of the universe could operate the Newtype unit.

"Arlette..."

x      x      x

"Danton!"

Arlette desperately clutched the arm raker inside the Ahava Azieru.

When was the last time she got into mobile armor like this?

The intense G's pushing on her body, the dizzying, flashing lights of the console, and most of all, the pressure of controlling a weapon designed to kill tortured her mind.

"Danton... I didn't realize it was always like this."

Her hands grew sweaty as they gripped the arm rakers. The person she was at that time, the person deemed unfit to be a pilot, could not have stood here now. She was told that she had no place on the battlefield. Char made a place for her as an engineer, and Danton had always protected that place.

He was always by her side as her test pilot.

Now it was time for her to protect him!

She pushed down on the arm rakers with everything she had.

Her back thrusters roared, and the Ahava Azieru maneuvered toward the Gundam before it.

x      x      x

"Bastard...!"

Quentin turned his back to the R-Jarja that stood before him and fired at the mysterious mobile armor charging toward him. He swerved around the massive red figure as it rushed toward him as if to tackle him.

"What the...?!"

The mobile armor refused to shoot for some reason; as it swung its colossal body around, it pursued the Tristan piloted by Quentin.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

Quentin evaded, but the stabilizer on the back of the mobile armor swung like a tail and snatched Tristan's armed base – Kurewenal's container – as he passed.

"Ugh!"

The violent impact from the collision of the massive frames hit Quentin as he sat in the cockpit.

x      x      x

Arlette frantically ran her fingers along the console of the Ahava Azieru as she made repeated desperate battle cry at the Gundam Type in front of her.

The Ahava Azieru had been abandoned in the middle of production, so most of its armaments were unequipped. She managed to get the mega particle cannon working, but the barrel, which had fired a high heat beam without being adequately adjusted, had sustained considerable damage. Plus, its energy was not yet fully charged, and she did not know how many more shots she had.

She was left with no choice but to force a dogfight. But, that was not the way this machine was designed to fight. Whatsmore, Arlette knew almost nothing about being a pilot.

Her enemy, the Gundam before her, was different from the one she had seen inside Axis and was like a cluster of weapons, with its entire frame covered by a weapon unit.



She did not know how long she would last in this situation.  
Arlette began sweating beneath her normal suit.

x      x      x

Quentin Fermo was calmly analyzing the battle situation as he fought off the incoming red mobile armor.

The unit appeared to be incomplete.

With such a huge body and without any kind of manipulators, it was unlikely that it was designed for combat.

Much like the Kurewenal, it was probably designed initially to raid bases and overwhelm them in one go with its abundance of armaments.

But its weapons appeared to be mostly unusable.

The pilot operating it also seemed to be lacking in skill as they could not control the unit's high output at all.

"You think you can control such a beast with skills like that!"

There was no need to panic or flee. Their next charge would be their last.

"So you won't give me any fun, huh?" Quentin muttered, bored, as he focused on the light of the thrusters burning in his monitor.

He moved his finger on the trigger slightly.

The hatch on the Kurewenal's container opened, and countless missiles blasted off toward the mobile armor before him, dragging trails of smoke behind them.

x      x      x

"...!"

Arlette didn't have the skill to avoid the barrage of missiles raining down toward her. Countless missiles struck the Ahava Azieru, and tore into its armor.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Inside the cockpit, shaking violently by the impact, Arlette could only scream.

x      x      x

"And that does it."

Quinten Fermo thought to himself as he stared at the red mobile armor engulfed in flames on the monitor. He manipulated the console and magnified the two mobile suits on the edge of the panoramic monitor.

One was the Byarlant Isolde, his little brother, Walter's, unit.

It had lost one of its shoulder thrusters, a significant part of its appearance, making it a sorry sight.

He's good, though not as good as I am.

He never imagined his brother would have so much trouble.

This one will show me a good time.

With a ferocious grin, Quentin laid his piercing eyes on the other mobile suit.

A knight-like appearance, colored white and purple. The R-Jarja, was it?

It was an Axis mobile suit used during the First Neo Zeon War. It wasn't this unit he had fought before, but there's no mistaking it.

He's the pilot.

Their encounter lasted only a few minutes, but it was the first time in a long while time that Quentin's heart filled with excitement.

He had no doubt.

This pilot was one worth fighting.

He had been looking for such an opponent since the first time he pulled the trigger in a mobile suit.

x x x

Quentin and Walter Fermo were born in an impoverished part of Earth. The two were orphaned at a young age after losing their parents in the One Year War. During the Gryps War, they were admitted to a Federation research institute because of their Newtype abilities. They were excited to become Titans pilots and worked hard in training, but eventually, the Gryps War ended, and the Titans fell apart.

They had nowhere else to go, so what they found was a way of life as mercenaries. Their employers ranged from weapons development companies to informants who traded secrets between nations. They took care of the illegal requests from clients that needed to be kept from the public. While there was fulfillment or delight, and though they earned a lot of money, their hearts remained empty.

The two were picked up by Buch Concern, which was planning to expand from a junk shop to become part of the military industry at the time. Meizter, the son of Scharnhorst, the founder, believed that it was necessary to use illegal means to obtain the aircraft and technology that would form Buch's base to move into full-scale mobile suit development.

They created the Birnam Special Forces for this purpose.

In a sense, it was inevitable that Quentin and Walter, who were already known as skilled mobile suit pilots in the underworld, would be chosen to be key team members.

And so the two came to work for the Ronah family. The Ronah family were originally commoners but used their wealth to attain status as nobles.

This fact provided the orphans with some hope.

If they could make a name for themselves as pilots, they could attain wealth and glory even without any backing.

For the pair, the word "strength" represented everything that was.

x x x

Quentin turned his gaze toward the white unit in front of him once more. Their mission to obtain information about the psycho-frame had failed.

But he would defeat this thing.

The word loss being carved into their track record was unacceptable.  
The red behemoth was already on its last breath.  
Now all that was left was to finish it off.  
The Tristan's twin eyes let off a sharp beast-like gleam as he gently turned toward the R-Jarja.

x      x      x

"Shit."

Danton bit his lip in the R-Jarja's cockpit as he rushed to try to get his heavily damaged unit back up.

The monitor showed the wrecked Ahava Azieru.

"Arlette... You..."

You started that beast.

You aren't even a pilot.

Just to save me.

Her actions weighed heavily on him.

What could she be doing?

She was his daughter.

She had no place on the battlefield.

She should be behind him, tinkering with weird machines and laughing, as she always had.

But now, she was a wreck.

"You got some nerve, missy!" He pressed the throttle, irritated.

The R-Jarja responded, lifting its face. She may not know her limits, but her smile had saved him countless times. He was able to love mobile suits purely as a machine rather than as a tool for killing because she was always smiling next to him. Char had told him to protect her because she was a talented engineer.

That may have been the only reason.

But by protecting her, he was able to remain himself.

Just as I protected her, she protected me.

There was only one thing to do!

The R-Jarja's monoeye emitted a bright light, and its main thrusters screeched violently.

"What!?" Quentin reacted slowly to the sudden movement of the R-Jarja.

"Get back, Arlette!"

The white knight unsheathed its saber and leapt at its enemy.

"I'll protect you."

## Chapter #9

### Those Left Behind

As Danton's R-Jarja moved towards the enormous foe before Arlette's eyes, she could do nothing but watch from behind with sorrow.

With its options exhausted and its chassis covered in battle scars, Danton's machine looked like it could collapse at any moment. Only the sheer force of the pilot's will, it seemed, kept it moving at all.

Arlette knew he couldn't possibly win against the other machine. That if she let him go, Danton's life would come to an end right before her eyes. Yes, Arlette knew that better than anyone. Yet, at that moment, she found herself powerless to do anything else.

"Danton..."

It had suddenly dawned on Arlette one day that he was always there, right by her side. Danton was inflexible and straight-laced to a fault, and whenever he opened his mouth, it seemed like nothing came from it but an endless stream of complaints. At points, she had found it outright depressing, and she couldn't count the number of times they had quarreled over silly, meaningless things.

Yet before she met him, Arlette had been unable to feel even those sorts of negative emotions. Her heart had been completely closed to the world. And if she had begun to feel like a person again, it had undoubtedly been down to the help of that same awkward, standoffish test pilot.

Even after life had taken them away from the battlefield, and they had begun to live for a time as parent and child, that relationship had never changed. He had continued to treat her like he did any other human being. And before she had realized it, his presence in her life had saved her, just as her presence had saved him.

Now, in that very instant, that same man was right before her eyes, struggling to cling to life...

"Never!"

Suddenly, strength seemed to return to the fingers that Arlette had wrapped around her machine's Arm Raker. She wouldn't let him die. They would return together. To the home they shared. To that tiny shop on the tiny street corner in the tiny colony.

She still had far too many things she needed to tell him. He needed to be nicer to their customers. He needed to stop coming into her room and tidying up without permission. He was eating far too much sugar, and she had to make him cut down to one cream soda a day...

There were still so many things she had to say. So, no matter what...

"Move! Ahava Azieru!"

She pulled feverishly at the Arm Raker. Yet, just as she did, there was a discharge of bright light from something in her vicinity. It bathed the inside of Arlette's cockpit in light, and she looked up, eyes wide with surprise. Searching for the source of the light, Arlette found that it had come from the sample case attached to the waist of the normal suit.

Arlette had seen that same warm light before. It was a light she would never forget. The same light that was discharged by the two mobile suits that fought on the day Axis fell. It was a light that had bathed the whole battlefield in an instant.

The light of the psycho-frame.

The fragment of the psycho-frame recovered from the Sazabi was shining brightly in response to Arlette's thoughts. With a low rumble, her machine's previously dead consoles began to burst into light, one after the next. And a green lamp lit in front of her, signifying that the suit's once locked features were now usable.

"Captain..." Arlette whispered as she looked at the light with eyes filled with tears. "Lend me your strength."

x      x      x

The light of the psycho-frame discharged by the Ahava Azieru reached as far as the R-Jarja and Tristan as they engaged in combat.

"W-What the...?!"

Quentin was shaken by the sudden flash, and his attacks momentarily abated, giving Danton's R-Jarja the chance to regain its balance. The light grew to swallow the whole of the surrounding sector of space, and soon the consciousnesses of the two pilots left behind their machines, and began to drift through the vast, white expanse.

x      x      x

"What the..."

Danton gazed with astonishment at the sight that lay before his eyes. He was in a room, surrounded on all sides by pure white walls. There, a girl sat alone, typing furiously upon a keyboard. Her profile was devoid of any expression, just as it had always been, back when they had first met. And before Danton knew it, he too had started to change to match these new surroundings.

Catching sight of a normal suit painted in moss green, Danton suddenly realized that the scenes before him were familiar. And just as this realization hit him, the door behind him opened without a sound.

"Hello there. I see the two of you have hit it off."

The man who entered addressed Danton and the girl in a relaxed tone. He was dressed in a casual suit, and his still youthful features were covered with an odd mask. He was someone Danton would never forget. The man who had changed his destiny, and Arlette's too.

"Char..."

Yes, the man who entered was none other than Char Aznable, as he was in his younger years.

"Then this light must be..."

Before Danton knew it, the images around him had changed. This time, the scene was of himself and the others lingering around a mobile suit dock. A wild-looking machine stood before them, painted in red and black. An MS-14S Gelgoog. The first suit Danton had ever operated as a test pilot.

"So that's what this is about..."

This is mine and Arlette's past. The light from the psycho-frame is synchronizing our memories.

"Psycho-waves... I'd always taken the stories with a grain of salt, but I never imagined I'd experience that same phenomenon myself..."

As the scenes from Danton's past played out before his eyes like a kaleidoscope, the scene began to shift again. This time, the memories were of a time further beyond the days he had spent within the A.E.U.G together with Char, then going by the name of Quattro. They were of his time on Axis. Of a time when he had always been by Arlette's side, in time growing so comfortable in that role that he had forgotten that they were even waging war.

He thought about the questions that had always played on his mind. Why had Char taken in Arlette? Why had he paired the two of them together? And why, after changing his name and appearance and moving through several different camps, had Char not only not rejected Arlette but actively kept her by his side as she remained set on following him wherever he went? Danton had always longed to know the answers to these questions. Yet Char had remained tight-lipped to the very end. And before Danton could press him for answers, he had disappeared, leaving behind both himself and Arlette.

Still, as he retraced his memories again at that moment, Danton found himself coming upon a certain theory. He and Arlette never had minced words with one another and had frequently clashed, yet they each provided something that the other was missing. They had even been teased at times by those around them, who compared their relationship to that of a close brother and sister. Perhaps when Char had looked at this relationship, he had seen some reflection of the past he had lost. The warmth of his younger days that he himself had once cast aside: the appearance of a "family."

x      x      x

With a jolt, Danton suddenly came to, finding himself once more in the R-Jarja's cockpit. Looking at his instruments, alarmed, he found that almost no time had passed. The Gundam-type machine in front of him was still silent. The journey into his memories, which had felt like a long, long dream, had actually been nothing more than a momentary flashback.

Danton shook his head, casting off the lingering remnants of the vision, and looked towards the enemy in front of him. And as he did, his eyes grew wide with astonishment. Light particles had begun to gather inside the cannon's

barrel mounted on the tip of the shoulder of the Gundam-type machine before him. It was a mega-particle cannon... Surely they weren't planning on firing it at such a close distance?!

"Tch!"

Clicking his tongue in anger, Danton feverishly pushed on the control stick.

x x x

"Danton!"

Arlette began to move at that very same instant. The Ahava Azieru came charging from behind Danton, expanding its I-field. Decaying rapidly under the field's repulsive force, the cannon's mega particles scattered away into nothingness like petals falling from a flower. Arlette's sudden attack took Quentin by surprise, and he cried out in shock as she allowed her machine to continue to barrel forward into his, grabbing hold of the Gundam-type.

x x x

"You piece of shit!"

Reeling from a level of g-force that would have rendered any ordinary pilot unconscious, Quentin made a sudden braking of his suit and recovered its balance.

"Stay out of this, you big hunk of junk!"

Launching a flurry of diversionary missiles, Quentin drew some distance from the two machines he now found himself facing.

"Tch... What the hell was that?"

Rubbing his head, he glared at the red mobile armor displayed on his monitor. As the light had surrounded his machine, he had found his mind filled with unfamiliar images; the sight of a young man and girl he didn't recognize. His instincts told him that they were the pilots' memories that sat in the cockpits of the two machines before him. As Cyber-Newtype, Quentin had shared Arlette's memories on a much deeper level than Danton had, not only seeing and hearing as she did, but sharing in her very emotions.

"It was just like..."

Quentin's own memories flashed through his mind, seeming to overlap with the things he had seen and felt through Arlette. Of a time when he had lost everything and lived out his days with no one else around him but his younger brother.

"After I worked so hard to forget that damned shit..."

Eyes filled with rage, Quentin gave the red mobile armor a piercing glare. Conserving bullets was clearly no longer an option.

"Get the hell out of my way!"

Quentin's fingers danced across the console, and in an instant, the Kurwenal discharged its entire remaining stock of missiles.

x x x

"Shit! "

The R-Jarja's monoeye lit up brightly and the saber it brandished also lit up brilliantly. Its saber cut down the countless missiles that rained upon Ahava Azieru.

As he mowed down the missiles with miraculous dexterity, Danton recalls a past memory.

Char Aznable...

"The Red Comet" considered us family, you say?

We will never know now if he truly felt that way.

It could all just be Danton's own selfish sentiment.

However, if he truly felt that way, even in the corners of his heart...

"If it's true, we can't die now!"

If his will was for the both of us to stay alive...

A flash.

After splitting the final missile, Danton shouts to his partner behind him.

"Shoot! Arlette!!"

x      x      x

"Oo... Rahhhhhhhhhh! "

In response to Arlette's battle cry, the funnels on the tail of the Ahava Aziel spread out one by one.

The psycommu. A psycho-wave weapon.

She was never able to activate it at the Flanagan Institute successfully. So, she was deemed to be incompatible as a pilot and doomed only to wait to be disposed of... until Char Aznable saved her.

x      x      x

The countless funnels that lined up in front of the red mobile armor started to attack the Tristan one by one.

"You won't hit me!"

Quentin quickly hit the control lever as he shouted, but Arlette's attack was slightly faster.

"Eurgh!"

The Tristan, surrounded by the funnels on all sides, was rained upon by countless beams.

In an instant, a bright light emitted from the explosion of the large machine illuminated the surface of Axis in red.

x      x      x

"Phew..."



Arlette sinks into the seat of the cockpit of Ahava Aziel after using up all her strength. The psycho-frame stopped glowing, and silence returned to the cockpit.

"I... used the funnels..."

Arlette mutters as she stared at her trembling fists. While it was but an instance, it was without a doubt that the psycommu did activate.

Was it just a miracle caused by a small fragment of memory, or...

Arlette was overcome with surprise for a moment before she was pulled back into reality by a silhouette that appeared on the screen in front of her.

"?!"

x      x      x

The silhouette of a machine appeared from the center of the explosion. It was the naked body of the Tristan Quentin was piloting. Right before it took the brunt of the funnel's beams, he purged the Kurwenal, his armed base which was spent on bullets and had become dead weight.

Quentin smiles boldly as he fixes his eyes on the enemy in front of him.

"I told you... 'You won't hit me.'"

However, the Tristan was almost at its limit too. The jet plume of its thrusters was so weak that it could disappear at any time, while its various mechanical joints that had been pushed to the limits were throwing off sparks everywhere.

"Now, let's end this..."

Quentin smirks at the mobile suit blocking his way as if it were a white knight defending the massive red mobile armor.

x      x      x

Likewise, Danton moved forward desperately in his worn-out machine. Arlette's spent voice came through the speaker.

"Dan...ton..."

"Rest. I'll take it from here."

He smiled as he cut the comms.

"Let's...end this."

While staring at the Gundam brandishing its beam saber and coming towards him on the monitor, Danton muttered.

"This will be the last time I kill someone..."

I need to bring Arlette home...

Danton brandishes his saber, and the flicker of doubt in his eyes disappears. Both mobile suits slowly brandish their weapons to face each other.

"...Forgive me, Arlette..."

As they held their sabers above their head and prepared to slice each other in half...

"Wait."

"?!"

"!!"

The silhouette of another machine comes in between and stops them in their tracks.

It was...

x x x

"Walter..."

Quentin muttered as he acknowledges his younger brother's machine on his monitor. The Byarlant Isolde also suffered damages as extreme as the Tristan and R-Jarja. A voice mixed with static came through the speaker.

"We're out of time, brother."

"Non..."

Quentin was about to bellow, "Nonsense!" but resisted the compulsion at the last minute.

"If we don't return to the ship now, we will be space debris along with Axis until the end of time."

"...'No, thanks' to that."

The light of the beam saber brandished by the Tristan vanished quietly. At the same time, he acknowledged that the R-Jarja in front of him also sheathed its saber.

"While there's life, there's hope, huh?"

Quentin snickers at his own bad luck.

He didn't expect his own baby brother to come and stop his fight.

"Did you see it too? What she did?"

"Uh huh."

Walter's voice through the speaker sounded as calm as always.

"So, we're the same as they are..."

"...It appears so."

Now that it has come to this, there is no more meaning to fight them. Now that they empathize with their enemy...

Quentin recalls the final moments of Axis, which he watched in an archive video in the past. The soldiers of the Federation and Neo Zeon, who had been at each other's throats moments ago, cooperated to change the trajectory of the falling Axis. It was a sight that had once seemed incomprehensible, but now it seemed somehow understandable.

x x x

The Byarlant carried the Gundam as it flew into the abyss of space. Danton and Arlette watched them disappear into the background, feeling perplexed.

"...Hey, Arlette."

"Uh huh."

"Why do you think he came to stop us?"

"I wonder..."

If the Byarlant's control systems had recovered, they could have chosen to take down Danton two against one. Without the funnels, Arlette was no longer a threat, and Danton could not have lasted long. Still, Danton was prepared to bring either one of them down together with him if that happened.

"But I'm glad that you're still alive."

"I was about to die, though."

"Moreover..."

Arlette continued with a murmur.

"You didn't have to kill anyone."

"...Arlette..."

After she said that, Danton realized that he still had his fingers on the trigger."

"Oh, yeah, you're right."

Danton slowly released his grip on the lever and stared at his fists.

That's right.

These hands shall never take another soul.

"Let's go home."

"Yeah. We've got lots of laundry piling up from our regulars."

They saw the landing craft, which Mehmet and his party were on, coming out of the port. In the distance, the huge body Sazabi lingered in silence. Axis would probably leave its orbit and disappear into the abyss of space.

Arlette looked back and bid a humble farewell to the man she once looked up to and would never meet again.

"Farewell, Captain."

## Final Chapter

### And Time Keeps on Spinning

"God, I'm so bored."

"You can say that again."

Quentin and Walter Fermo let out a simultaneous sigh as they lay on top of their beds in a spacious hospital room. They were at a medical facility inside the Buch Colony owned by the Ronah family. Both of them were being treated for the injuries incurred during the battle at Axis a week ago.

The Axis infiltration mission was in no way a success.

All the data on the psycho-frame that might have been left there had been lost, and the two custom mobile suits that they brought along under the guise of operational testing were moderately damaged while the prototype Armed Base was never even recovered.

However, they did achieve one thing: a real battle with a Zaku III Custom and an R-Jarja, which were considered rare in this age and time. Additionally, the data collected from the combat with the mobile armor equipped with a psycommu system would greatly help Buch Concern's future weapons development.

"So, we came out even. Sigh, how depressing."

As his brother blurts out regretfully while leaning on one arm and looking out the window, Walter speaks out in protest.

"It's your fault, to begin with, oh shameless brother of mine. How could you lose to some random person twice?"

"Need I remind you that you got your ass handed to you too?!"

"No, I didn't! I was about to win until you, and that red one came to spoil the party! "

"Shut up! If I didn't come to your rescue, you'd be dead by now!"

"That's my line! If I didn't save your sorry ass, you'd be flying into the abyss of space together with Axis by now!"

Spittle flying, they spouted insults at one another. It may not be too long in the future before they make their next move.

x      x      x

Meanwhile, at a dry cleaning shop in a town on Riah at the new Side 5, standing at the counter of Danton Dry Cleaners looking bored, is a burly man with an apron that looks out of place.

A large bandage is spread over his wry face making him look sullen, while his muscular arms bulging out of his shirt's sleeves are bandaged.

Almost one week has passed since Danton Hyleg returned from Axis.

He was solving a crossword puzzle to kill time, getting tired of waiting for the store's poster girl who went out for delivery when the cowbell hanging at the entrance rang.

"Welcome to—"

Danton raised his head as he greeted but stopped halfway with a grimace.

"Greetings. It's been a while, Mr. Danton."

The young man in a suit standing at the entrance smiled at Danton nonchalantly.

It had been a week since Danton saw Mehmet Merca.

"It's you again..."

Ignoring Danton's clearly uninviting tone, Mehmet walked straight into the store.

"Here's something for a quick recovery."

He handed over the basket he was holding with a smile. The basket was filled with a variety of fruits in red, yellow, and green. They looked especially colorful in the dry cleaning shop, which was mostly covered in white.

"Look at this melon. Doesn't it look delicious?"

"A melon..."

"It's an authentic muskmelon grown on Earth. I spent a lot on this. I remember that you liked it."

"...?"

He wondered for a while if he ever told him such a thing. In any case, melons aren't really his favorite anyway.

"Oh..."

He finally recalled something. When he first met this man at that coffee shop, he ordered a melon cream soda. He really just liked the pretentious sweetness and utterly unnatural green color of the drink, which made it feel very much like what a soft drink is supposed to be; he doesn't actually like melons. That drink doesn't even taste like melons.

"Look..." Danton tried to explain.

"Oh? Was I wrong?"

"No, I like it. Thanks."

Danton tried to explain, but as he looked at Mehmet's innocent face smiling in front of him, it didn't matter. He took the basket from him and set it down on top of the counter.

"I'll have it for dessert after dinner. Arlette will be delighted too."

"Where is she, by the way?"

"Out on a delivery."

He answered while grabbing an apple from the basket and biting into it on the spot.

"She went out before noon and hadn't come back. I wonder where she's loafing about..."

"I guess I missed her. That's a shame."

While making that remark, Mehmet sat on the sofa set up for customers, looking like it was the natural thing to do.

"Why are you sitting down? You have something else to talk about?"

"Here comes the real deal. I wanted to report back to you on what happened afterward."

"Sigh..."

Danton rested his elbows on the counter as he lets out a long and obvious sigh.

"I thought I told you to keep us out of it. We were only hired as your tour guide, by the way."

"Yes, that was the case in the beginning. But now that you're in this deep, it's not very nice of you to say that, you know?"

"Tch..."

Danton emerged from behind the counter with a scowling face and turned the sign hung on the entrance door from "OPEN" to "CLOSED."

"So, what about it? Did you find out who those people are?"

"About that..."

x x x

"So, we turned up nothing."

"I'm terribly sorry to have to report that, sir."

Mehmet bowed deeply in response to the utter disappointment in his superior's voice.

The report with the Axis investigation results by the Mastima Special Forces failed to meet the Federation government's top brass's expectations. While they managed to infiltrate Axis and reach the research facility, they encountered and engaged an unidentified armed organization. As a result, the psycho-frame and all its research data were lost. The top brass was most concerned about the leaking of data on the psycho-frame to the armed organization. However, after checking the video footage from Mastima's normal suit camera, they concluded that there was no reason to worry about that for now.

After all, the research facility was destroyed, and given the duration of their stay, they could not have had time to extract any data. But as to who they might be, it was concluded that investigations would continue as they had. Seeing that the organization was operating a Jegan, Byarlant, and a Gundam-type suit, they could not have been mere junkers or pirates. They could even be an organization with ties inside the Earth Federation government.

Mehmet speculated that the top brass must have decided that delving too deep carelessly could expose their suspicions for no good reason.

Either way, they have completely erased their concerns of the psycho-frame technology being stolen. From their calculations, the Axis trajectory is taking it further away from Earth. Soon, it would leave the asteroid belt and depart to a place nobody will be able to reach.

That is the conclusion reached by the top brass of the Earth Federation government.

x x x

"So, that's why I don't think we'll have the chance to ask you to guide us through again."

"As if we'd agree to go again. Sheesh..."

Watching Danton taking a bite out of his apple in a bad mood, Mehmet continued as if nothing happened.

"By the way, Mr. Danton. May I ask something?"

"Hm?"

Sensing that his tone changed slightly, Danton looked up at him.

"After we headed back to the landing craft, Arlette fought with that red mobile armor, correct?"

"Uh-huh..."

"We didn't get a good look at that skirmish, but... I believe Arlette is an amateur at piloting a mobile suit. I understand that you were extremely worn out from the previous battle, so I'm quite impressed that you got out of it alive."

"What are you getting at?"

"Oh, it's nothing... While you were fighting, I thought I saw a bright light appear out of nowhere. You know..."

While his soft-spoken manner, Mehmet shot a piercing stare at Danton.

"It looked exactly like the radiance from a psycho-frame."

"..."

Danton returned Mehmet's stare without answering his question.

The sound of him biting into the apple broke the silence that had descended upon the store.

"You must have imagined it."

"I... guess so..."

Mehmet seemed like he was struggling to find words and then casually smiled and shrugged.

"The psycho-frame is now gone together with Axis... That's that."

"Uh-huh. That's that."

"May I have one of those apples? Watching you eat it made me want to try one too."

"Why not? You brought it after all."

Sighing again, Danton grabbed an apple from the basket and threw it to Mehmet.

x      x      x

A lone elec-car sped along the path, clinging to the colony's outer wall. The vehicle's motor was top-notch, and a pleasant hum tickled Arlette Hyleg's ear. She decided she would tinker with the suspension next Sunday as well. Danton would probably shake his head disdainfully and question why she was tuning a dry cleaner's delivery car to its limits. But she didn't care. Mastima would probably be paying them a big reward, so perhaps she could even take the chance to replace the battery.

Arlette turned the steering wheel in high spirits, humming along to the classic tunes playing on the car radio. Dressed in a fresh, clean white dress, she

had cut away most of the hair that she had previously worn braided and was sporting a short cut that rested at her shoulders. The expression on her face, too, carried a somewhat more refined, adult expression compared to previous years. It had been a week since she had returned from Axis and resumed her job as a cleaner. And her sense of time, which had previously come to a halt, felt like it was slowly grinding into motion once more.

She started to see fewer and fewer buildings on both sides of the road until finally, the car entered the recreational area where the natural park was located. Ordinarily, you would never have seen the temperature changing with the seasons in a colony. But there on Riah, the four seasons were artificially recreated through moderating the temperature and the colony's exposure to sunlight. The calendars currently showed that the colony was in spring. And the trees at the side of the road were covered in fresh leaves.

Climbing a gentle slope, the elec-car came to the top of a hill with an impressive view. An artificial lake stretched out before Arlette, its surface twinkling as it reflected the sunlight streaming in through the colony's outer windows. It had been her favorite spot ever since she had moved to Riah. It was the middle of the week, so many people were likely working, and the area was mostly deserted. Pulling onto the road's shoulder and coming to a stop, Arlette exited the vehicle and walked towards the lakeside at a leisurely pace.

When she arrived, she leaned her body against the wooden fencing, gazing at the lake for a few moments. Arlette loved the scenery there. Spending her childhood in a facility and her early adult life mostly holed up in labs, she had very few memories of being able to connect with the natural world. Of course, the scenery before her was far from a work of nature, and was little more than an imitation crafted by human hands. Still, for Arlette, it was something of a novelty.

A gentle breeze rippled across the surface of the water, and the tips of her now shoulder-length hair tickled her cheek pleasantly. Brushing away the stray ends of her hair, Arlette smiled to herself slightly, realizing that she was starting to get used to it that way.

A small silver pendant hung glistening upon her breast, and she weaved her fingers through its delicate chain, holding it up to eye height. The pendant caught the light from the lake, and its surface gleamed. It was a small metal fragment, too warped and misshapen to be a precious stone of any sort.

"It's no different from any old pebble now..."

Arlette giggled slightly, and stared intently at the pendant, a fond, nostalgic look in her eyes. The psycho-frame fragment they had retrieved that day from the wreckage of the Sazabi at Axis. The same fragment had worked a small miracle then, saving the lives of both Danton and herself. They had been forced to abandon the Ahava Azieru back at Axis, but she had managed to bring the fragment home in her normal suit.

She hadn't told Danton. She hadn't even told Mehmet. She felt bad about it, but the fragment was the last proof of the tie that she had shared with Char, and she had no intention of letting anyone else take it away.

"Captain..."



In that moment, the fragment had reacted to her cry of distress, and Arlette and Danton had seen a glimpse of scenes from their past. And within those memories, she had found Char again, just as he was whenever she thought back fondly to her days with him.

She still didn't feel like she fully understood who the real Char was. The orphan child of Zeon Zum Deikun, Casval Rem Deikun. The Red Comet, Char Aznable. Quattro Bajeena of the AEUG. And the leader of the Neo Zeon movement. It would be difficult to say that any of the many masks he had donned represented his true face. Yet equally, these disparate individuals were all undoubtedly the same man.

Perhaps, however, that wasn't so strange after all. For Arlette herself had worn many masks as well. It was difficult to believe that the very different roles she had played in her days at the Flanagan Institute, during her time as a mobile suit engineer, and her current role as the face of a dry cleaner were all the same person. And yet, she could not deny that all of those seemingly different people had still been her in some way or another.

Looking keenly at the pendant once more, she mulled over the question that had bloomed in her mind during her days with Char: why had he picked up the two of them, and why had he allowed them to stay by his side?

She had asked Danton what he thought when they were aboard a transport on their way back to Earth. He had sat for a few moments with his arms folded in silent contemplation and had then begun to answer her little by little, choosing his words with a degree of care that was unusual for him.

Danton had told her that he thought that Char had been looking for the warmth of a family in the two of them. That he had entrusted them with the same sense of family that he himself had once had before it was lost forever. She had laughed and told him it was very like him to give an answer like that.

That, then, had been Char Aznable as seen through the eyes of Danton. And others would have seen their own different versions of the man. Amuro Ray, Lahla Sune, the Zabi family, Kamille Bidan, Nanai Miguel, Quess Paraya... All would have sought different things from Char, just as Char himself would have looked for different things in each one.

Char, as Arlette saw him, would have been different to Char as seen by Danton. And equally, Arlette's own perception of herself would be different from how Danton perceived her. Even if a person can catch glimpses into the hearts of others, it is ultimately down to each individual how they see and interpret those glimpses.

That was probably why people worked so hard to understand one another. And perhaps as humanity progressed and the basic form of the species became something closer to the so-called Newtypes, people would learn to understand one another on a deeper level. Though, of course, Arlette knew that that would not be any time soon.

No single person could have fully understood Char's true feelings. But perhaps that was fine. At that moment, she had once more been able to make contact with his heart and mind and had been able to say a proper farewell. And that alone was reward enough for returning to the Axis. So...

Stretching her body tall, Arlette took the pendant from around her neck and hurled it forcefully towards the lake below her. It shone as it spun downwards, drawing a wide arc as it flew towards the clear surface of the lake. In a matter of seconds, it landed in the lake with a small splash, slowly sinking to the bottom. And eventually, Arlette could no longer see it at all.

"See you around."

Smiling, she turned away from the lake. It was about time for her to head back. Danton would probably be standing at the counter about now, his already sour expression twisted into more of a grimace than ever. If she left him alone there, he'd scare off all the customers.

Arlette ran towards the elec-car, the hem of her white dress fluttering.

**—TWILIGHT AXIS END—**

## Afterword

The anime "Mobile Suit Gundam" began airing in April 1979.

In my hometown, a rural town, we didn't have access to the network stations, so we had to wait several years for the broadcast.

I was but a primary school student then. While I eagerly awaited each week's new episode, it wasn't until several years later, during a rerun, that I truly understood the story.

Fast forward three decades. Now, I find myself involved in the Gundam universe as an author.

I was informed about the outline of this project two years ago.

Upon receiving the invitation, I went to Sunrise's headquarters in Kamiigusa, where I saw familiar faces. It was the duo from Ark Performance, whom I had the pleasure to work with on the anime "Arpeggio of Blue Steel - Ars Nova."

As a screenwriter for "Arpeggio," I had to apply various adjustments to the story to condense the extensive original work into a twelve-episode TV series.

So, I made some unreasonable proposals, but the two of them warmly accepted them and suggested several fascinating ideas of their own.

Thanks to them, the anime received high acclaim, and it remains a project close to my heart.

Now, this unexpected reunion with Ark. Each of us had been approached separately for this project, so when we entered the conference room, we looked at each other in surprise. Looking back, it's a strange connection, isn't it?

As I read the plot I was given, I felt excitement and tremendous pressure at the same time.

After all, the stage is set after "Mobile Suit Gundam: Char's Counterattack" at Axis, and it depicts the footsteps of Char Aznable leading up to that point.

Diving into a realm untouched for nearly thirty years since "Char's Counterattack" and one never officially portrayed in visual media - that's a daunting prospect.

Being innately faint-hearted, I embarked on the writing process with a churning stomach.

What saved me were the affable characters, Arlette, Danton, Mehmet, and the Fermo brothers.

Despite each of them bearing a painful past and the story unfolding within the confines of a devastated space fortress, it could easily turn too somber. But Ark's exceptional character settings prevent that from happening.

Furthermore, the anime version of "Red Remains," which was progressing in parallel with the serialization, truly helped me.

Watching Arlette and the Mobile Suits move so vividly within the visuals was a significant source of inspiration.

And, of course, receiving messages of support and feedback from all of you readers gave me energy time and again. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude. Thank you very much!

Supported by many people, I managed to reach the final episode somehow, and now it has come together as an e-book.

Despite the limitations of a ten-chapter frame, there were many things I could not fully depict.

In particular, elements related to Haman, the Ronah family, Mastima, and the Birnam were only superficially touched upon for fear of straying too far from the main plot.

I secretly hope to address those aspects on another occasion...

My heartfelt thanks go out to everyone involved in this work.

And I will temporarily put down my pen, dreaming of the day when I can once again engage with all of you readers.

Kojiro Nakamura  
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