

MOBILE SUIT

ZeonicScanlations

# 機動戦士ガンダムユニコーン

VOL.II PHOENIX HUNTING

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# MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM UNICORN VOL.II

## *Phoenix Hunting*



Character Design by Yasuhiko Yoshikazu    Mechanical Design by Hajime Katoki  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## THE WAR AFTER THE WAR

before game .....	005
after game .....	027

## PHOENIX HUNTING

1 .....	
2 .....	

# THE WAR AFTER THE WAR

## before game

Nestled three kilometers south of the highway, along a meandering state road, the residential area known as 'Lion's Gate' emerges. Four blocks further in, nestled amongst this Americana, was the home of Carlos Craig.

On a Saturday morning, the only movement was that of the occasional retired folk sauntering down the street; the area was largely devoid of the hustle of people or cars. Birdsong and the hum of a distant lawnmower punctuated the silence. The manicured lawns sparkled in varying shades of green, a testament to suburban orderliness. Yet, a muted impression hung over Carlos's house in this almost mute tableau.

The garden, cloaked in a blanket of overgrown grass untouched for nearly a month, wore its neglect openly; weeds sprawled unchecked, and newspapers left out in the open had succumbed to the elements, their structure halfway to becoming one with the earth. But what struck a poignant chord was the sight of a child's bicycle next to the entrance, dust-veiled, a silent announcer of the absence of its owner. As Rossio Metti exited the elec-car, he couldn't help but feel a dull ache in his chest. A tall man, towering a head above him, stepped out in pursuit.

As they reached the entrance, he moved to press the doorbell, only to have his hand intercepted by the tall man.

"I'll handle this," he said. His sharp gaze conveyed the expectation of their arrival. He reached into his suit, his hand moving as though drawing a hidden gun.

"If they wanted to shoot, we'd have been dead by now," Rossio countered with a sigh. "I came to talk. Trust me on this one, Commander Daguzza Mackle."

The officer from ECOAS – a special operations group sent as a bodyguard by HQ, backed off with a huff. The contrast was stark – a muscular field commander in his prime versus a man past fifty, his years spent behind a desk leaving him physically and emotionally softened. Looking at their reflections on the glass door, it seemed hard to believe they were both human. Rossio pressed the doorbell once again. After ten seconds of silence, he turned the fingerprint-recognition knob, and the unlocked door swung open effortlessly.

They had confirmed someone was home. After making eye contact with Daguzza, Rossio cautiously stepped into the house, Daguzza, with his hand

tucked into his suit, following him. "Entering," he reported into a microphone hidden in his sleeve cuff. His men, positioned stealthily around the house, tensed in readiness. He felt a silent, deadly tension in the air, though it registered only on the periphery of his consciousness.

The ghostly drone of a TV seeped from the living room, mingling with the faint, lingering aroma of a recent meal. Yet, it lacked any warmth of habitation. This coldness, akin to a long-abandoned house, perplexed him. A chill, sharper than desolation, bit into his skin – as if the house had ceased to be a home.

Six months ago, this place was different. A bright and caring lady welcomed him with open arms, her seven-year-old baseball-obsessed son eagerly greeting him at the door, ushering him into the living room. Now, their presence was confined to the images hanging on the walls. A single photograph captured the house's owner, his wife, and their son, all smiling, frozen in happier times.

He couldn't help but sigh. For a man in his mid-forties who had already faced the daunting threshold of starting anew, the magnitude of this loss seemed insurmountable.

Rossio averted his eyes from the photograph, calling out into the living room, "Carlos, it's Rossio. Are you here?"

No response.

Only the persistent noise of the television remained. Recognizing the show, Rossio held his aching chest and headed towards the living room.

As expected, cartoon characters frolicked on the TV screen. A toppled toy car lay nearby, and a child's shirt was draped over the sofa. A women's magazine lay untouched on the table, seemingly untouched since that day. In the living room, time seemed to stand still; the TV's glow cast ghostly shadows over the man sitting blankly on the couch, surrounded by relics of life once vibrant.

Rossio studied Carlos Craig's profile in silence.

"The timer was set, you see," the man said in a low mutter, "Every Saturday at this time, the television switches on by itself. Even if I'm watching something else, the channel changes. As if..."

As if their son was still alive. Carlos had swallowed the rest of his sentence, and turned towards Rossio. His complexion was better than expected, his beard neatly trimmed, and his short black hair shimmered in the sunlight streaming through the window. However, his eyes were dull, carrying a cautious wariness deep within, not even attempting to disguise his knowing guilt. Why had this man, who had been hiding from pursuers for the last few days, returned home? Before Rossio could contemplate, Carlos' gaze fell upon Daguz standing behind him, his cautious wariness exposed.

"He's Commander Daguz from the Federation Space Force," Rossio introduced, but Carlos' eyes didn't shift; he did not acknowledge the man's nod, instead commenting sarcastically, "I'm honored to be in the company of a Manhunter," before losing interest and returning his gaze to the television.







Sensing Daguzza's surprise, Rossio moved to sit in front of Carlos, apologizing, "I'm sorry. You didn't respond, so I let myself in. Do you know why I'm here?"

Studying Carlos' profile as he watched the cartoons, Rossio cautiously continued. Carlos remained silent.

"A veteran officer of the Central Intelligence Agency vanishes with classified information... It's no surprise the higher-ups are on edge. While you were missing, I was interrogated too. Apparently, the classified contact code you used was assigned to me."

You used my terminal while I was away. He added implicitly. He continued to watch the cartoon, unresponsive. A rabbit character bounding across the expanse of a space colony filled the screen as Rossio quietly resumed, "I think I understand your motive. Your family's fate was tragic. There are no words of consolation, and I won't tell you to forget. But this is suicide. No matter where or what you argue, it will be quashed before it goes public. At most, an underground magazine will pick it up, but that'll be the end of it. One day, your obituary will appear in a corner of a newspaper, and that will be the end."

As he spoke, his words seemed to dissipate like sand, incapable of finding hold. As a member of the Central Intelligence Agency under the Earth Federation Forces - controlling everything from strategic to public security intelligence, or as part of the military-industrial complex that influenced Earth Sphere's economy - Carlos knew this world's rules inside and out. These words would serve no purpose to a man who took action fully aware of the consequences.

Rossio persisted, clasping his hands together, "There's still time to turn back. Come with me. I've already stopped this matter at the director's level. If it drags on any longer, it may reach the ears of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Then, you would--"

"Do you remember, director? Manado and I handled the pirate incident in the Gulf of Mexico. The official story was that the remnants of Zeon attacked a cargo ship, but in reality, it was a cover-up for illicit dealings sanctioned by the authorities. Our job was to make that cover-up seamless, airtight. We fooled the local coast guard and destroyed the problematic evidence..."

Carlos paused, and for the first time, his gaze landed on Rossio.

"The Zeon remnants who attacked the navy base in Wilmington a month ago were using the weapons that were smuggled out during that operation," he continued, and Rossio had to look away, unable to bear it.

"The list of stolen items was in our records. There's no mistake. Five cartons of hand missiles for a Hygogg, seized goods from the former Principality. Those missiles we turned a blind eye to smuggling? Those are what turned Aroma and Kyle into mere chunks of flesh."

As Carlos's voice filled with anger, his wife and child smiled back at him from a photo on the shelf.

"Carlos, that's--" Rossio began but was cut off by Carlos.

"I get it. If this is how we do business, then they're doing business too. They may cause terror, but they don't indiscriminately cause deaths. It's forbidden to cause casualties among civilians. To ensure the military budget request passes, all they have to do is play out an appropriate 'threat.' It was pure coincidence, a complete accident, that Aroma and Kyle were at the base visiting my brother-in-law, a Navy officer. The sacrifices necessary to maintain the economy of the Earth Sphere, where 12 billion people live, must be accepted."

Without allowing a rebuttal, Carlos stood up. Ignoring the slightly tensed Daguza, he looked down and asked, "Isn't that right?" His eyes sparkled with a sad smile, and Rossio looked down, wordless.

"Every year, tens of thousands of people die in traffic accidents, but no one says we should get rid of cars or planes. It's the same principle."

"So you're determined to go through with this?"

Without answering, Carlos put on a jacket over his T-shirt and prepared to leave.

"Then I have to detain you," Rossio insisted, "You should understand. You and I, we're on the side that maintains order."

"Order, huh?"

Carlos stopped and turned around with a thin smile. "After all this, I did some digging. 'Accidents' are more common than I thought. Last year's little 'Char's Rebellion' caused tens of thousands of casualties, and many civilians died in the subsequent guerrilla warfare. There was a terrible accident at Sweetwater, too. A building where Neo Zeon executives were meeting was supposed to be blown up, but a school bus nearby was caught in the blast. Over thirty children died instantly. The media reported it as a meteorite collision, but rumors say it was the Federation's special forces, the Manhunters, known as ECOAS, who did it."

The last part was aimed at Daguza, who was blocking Carlos's way. Without changing his expression, Daguza met Carlos's gaze. Carlos, quickly averting his eyes, muttered, "I'm sick and tired of this," and put his hand in his pocket. "I'm aware this is self-serving. Please move your watchdog. I'll miss my flight."

"Carlos, you need to reconsider."

"You know what this is, don't you, Commander?"

Carlos brandished a thin, plate-like object from his pocket, thrusting it towards Daguza with a smirk and twisting his lips.

"If my finger leaves this button, the bomb under the floor goes off. This house, everything, gone in an instant."

Daguza, his expression hardened only slightly, didn't look at him. Realizing the trap he was in, Rossio's body moved on its own, and he stood up so quickly he nearly toppled the sofa.

Carlos's flight risk extended beyond North America, encompassing the entire Earth's transport system. To escape, he needed a trump card, and for that, he had returned to this house, intending to use his pursuers as

hostages. The deadman's switch transmitter he flaunted, activating the bomb if released, was particularly effective in such situations.

"As an ECOAS member, you should know how this works," Carlos continued, his gaze never leaving Daguz, his foot tapping lightly on the floor under which he claimed to have planted the bomb.

"I hate to inconvenience you, but I need you to stay here until I board my flight. If I notice I'm being followed..."

He held the small transmitter in front of him, thumb pressing on the button demonstratively. Slipping past Daguz, who remained completely still, Carlos began walking towards the front door.

"Feel free to help yourself to food or drink. It's not like I'm coming back to this house anyway," he said, moving through the doorway of the living room.

"Carlos, wait!" Rossio's voice roughened, "There must have been other ways. Why did you come back here?"

Caught off guard, Carlos stopped in his tracks.

"You knew I would come, didn't you?" he asked, his head tilting upwards as if seeking an answer from the sky. "Why, indeed?" he said, his voice echoing back from the distance.

"Maybe I wanted to have one last conversation. If you were in my shoes, you'd probably do the same."

He looked back over his shoulder, meeting Rossio's gaze. Without waiting for a response from Rossio, who was biting his lip in confusion and unable to deny his statement, Carlos disappeared through the door. The sound of the front door opening and closing echoed faintly. Stuck in place, unable to move a finger, Rossio heard the sound of their last hope being cut off.

"Conroy, did you hear that? Tail the target covertly and call in the bomb disposal squad. It might be more than we can handle."

Without hesitation, Daguz spoke into the microphone on his cuff.

"It's fine, Commander Daguz," Rossio replied, sinking into the sofa, "Don't pursue. Just leave him be."

"But we're trained in tailing and tracking. It's unlikely we'll be easily spotted—"

"It's not about that," Rossio said, cutting him off abruptly.

Sensing his unease, Daguz turned his questioning gaze onto him, softly asking, "Are you sure?"

Rossio only replied, "I'll take responsibility," without meeting his gaze.

"You were just following your superior's orders. It won't tarnish your record."

"If the order is to let Lieutenant Carlos go, I cannot comply. My duty would be to report you for overlooking a traitor."

A chill ran down Rossio's spine at the unexpected hostility, but he couldn't help a wry smile at the earnest words.

"A traitor myself, huh?" he muttered, barely lifting his head. Daguz, as immovable as a rock, didn't so much as let his eyebrow twitch.

"I don't have the nerve for that. I'm just a cog in the machine we call the Federation, just like you."

"Even a small cog can disrupt the entire mechanism."

"Going awry is a human privilege. Cogs don't go awry. They just wear down and stop moving."

There was no need to add "...just like me right now." Regardless, until the bomb squad arrived, neither he nor Daguzza could leave this house. Carlos must have installed sensors inside, set to detonate the bomb if they attempted escape. A professional's precaution. The bomb squad would have to proceed cautiously, assuming there even was a bomb. Would they finish their job before Carlos fled the state?

For now, two grown men were left to watch cartoons in a surreal, stagnant moment.

But complying with Carlos's demand not to pursue was a separate matter. Rossio stopped meeting Daguzza's unconvinced gaze and turned away from his own throbbing conscience, blankly watching the television screen. A rabbit in space was playing a game of chase with a Martian character.

Both characters were familiar from his childhood, existing long before his birth, enduring relics from the era of the Anno Domini calendar. The fact that humans had to draw each frame by hand was staggering, but the plot hadn't changed much since then. The rabbit always crafty, the Martian perpetually outwitted.

Despite billions of humans settling across the vast expanse of space, the mindset of humanity remains unaltered from the days of the Anno Domini. Since then, humanity has been incapable of sustaining society without war.

Even after relishing brief periods of peace lasting no more than half a century, our economies inevitably falter, prompting us to contrive justifications for resorting to war – that gigantic consumer event. Despite experiencing the One Year War merely fifteen years ago, a war that brought half the total population to the brink of death... No, precisely because of this experience, we have created a society that cannot exist without war. From a full-scale war between the Federation and Zeon, two major powers, to guerrilla wars touting ideologies and ethnicities. As human society's long-cherished dream of a unified government approaches its centennial, it's a bitter truth that there's been little advancement.

Even myself and Carlos, who have become cogs in this machine, and now participate in the staging of post-war warfare... Lost in such thoughts, Rossio let out another sigh. Daguzza, who had been observing him intently, averted his gaze and brought the microphone at his cuff closer to his mouth.

"Conroy, rescind the order. Cease tracking the target. Just rush in the bomb disposal unit."

With just those words, he collapsed his massive frame onto the sofa, murmuring, "Care to place a bet?" At this unexpected remark, Rossio turned his surprised gaze back towards Daguzza.

"The bomb doesn't exist. Lieutenant Carlos is bluffing."

"That's not a bet. I'm on the same page," Rossio replied, meeting Daguzza's piercing gaze. It was as though he was peering into the depths of Rossio's eyes. Daguzza turned his emotionless mask of a face towards the TV.

"One can never be too careful," he said in a hushed voice, indicating he had nothing more to discuss as he began watching the TV. Seeing a hint of humanity in Daguzza's enigmatic profile, Rossio chuckled to himself. So, this seemingly immovable man was also being worn down. Concealing his sudden surge of empathy, Rossio returned his attention to the TV.

The cat-and-mouse chase between the rabbit and the Martian continued. The outcome was foreseeable: the rabbit would escape, and the Martian would suffer. If the Martian ceased its pursuit, a different plotline could unfold, but the hapless Martian lacked such creativity. They only faithfully performed their assigned roles, advancing the set narrative.

Carlos, however, was different. In the brief pause when the machine's cogs stopped, he ascended into space, acting on the classified information he had stolen. Utilizing the tricks he honed over many years in the Intelligence Agency, he would carry out his version of atonement...

No, Rossio did not want to use the word atonement. He refused to believe Carlos's tragedy was retribution for silently sanctioning post-war warfare. He was merely one cog in the machine, following orders, with others more deserving of blame. Those who set the gears in motion, who constructed a post-war economy that could not function without war—yes, those seated on the lunar throne, looking down on both Earth and Space, even at this very moment.

Yet, such sophistry of the cogs is now surely irrelevant to Carlos. In terms of faithfully performing assigned roles, there's no difference between us and government prime ministers or corporate chairpersons. Those who cease to be gears must accept their actions in entirety and bear the responsibility of atonement. The man who ceased being a cog, what he now embraced, and where he was heading was beyond the comprehension of a temporarily idle cog like Rossio.

Instead, he continued watching the unamusing cartoon. The bomb planted by the rabbit blasted the Martian's saucer apart, expanding a spectacular flash of light across the stagnant living room.



"A luminescent phenomenon?"

"Yes. It's something that's been observed before, but since it's used in the entire driving inner-skeleton, it stands out considerably when it glows. I suppose it won't be as noticeable once we've applied the outer casing..."

The factory chief, his face a mask of genuine perplexity, raised his eyes to the looming humanoid machine. The "new material" was fraught with unknowns, but the issue of unexplained luminescence was too significant to overlook. Gripping the railing of the catwalk, Alberto Vist turned his attention to the iron behemoth before him.

Standing just shy of twenty meters tall at this stage without its outer casing, the humanoid machine had been assembled from the "new material."

The bare frame, known as a movable frame, bore an uncanny resemblance to a flayed human specimen. Dwarfed to the size of fists beside the giant structure, workers scurried around, unable to reach their knees without cranes or lifts.

Yet, this wasn't a concern at the Anaheim Electronics factory, based in the lunar city of Granada. They could leap several meters with a single bound, nimbly navigating the giant from head to toe. As Alberto watched their movements, he took another look around the roughly forty-meter square enclosed space.

In terrestrial terms, Granada was established in a crater located southwest of the Uranus mountain range on the far side of the moon. As well as boasting the second largest permanent city on the moon, it also holds the title of the largest industrial city in the Earth Sphere. The upper layers of the city dug deep into the lunar bedrock, consist of harbor facilities and factory districts, hosting hundreds of development facilities of this scale.

During the war, it was seized by the Principality of Zeon's military and used as a weapon production base, making its design ideal for keeping secrets. But its greatest advantage was the moon's one-sixth Earth gravity. The number of heavy machinery required would double on Earth, and in a colony's zero-gravity zone, care must be taken to secure materials, inevitably reducing work efficiency. Alberto thought that the construction of mobile suits was best suited for the moon. Neither too light nor too heavy, this moderate gravity provided an ideal working environment.

It suited him personally, too. His weight had increased recently, and when he had to travel to Earth or a colony for business talks, he would run out of breath, but he could manage it with medication. The lunar cityscape, constructed on the concept of up and down just like on Earth, comfortably fit his Earth-dweller origin, while the lighter gravity was much appreciated.

The physical lightness seemed to clear the mind as well, sparking a flurry of ideas. Melanie Hue Carbine, the leader of Anaheim Electronics, which was headquartered here, was a visionary. The lunar environment, a middle ground between Earth and space, was ideal for a major corporation driving the Earth Sphere's economy.

However, his father had once said that the thin gravity of the moon makes people lethargic. Remembering this, Alberto smirked to himself in amusement. Clearing his throat to break his reverie, he retorted to the factory manager, "Could it be due to overheating?"

"No, there seems to be no detection of thermal energy at all. It's just like during the Axis Shock. Some sort of unidentifiable luminous phenomenon. Would you like a detailed explanation?"

Without waiting for a response, he called out to someone on the opposite side of the catwalk, "Hey, Aaron!" An operator working on the giant's knee turned around and started moving toward them. Sensing this, Alberto interrupted, "No, that's fine," and resumed his previous activity.

"I'm here today to inspect the prototype at post 119. I hear the model number is now AMS-129?"



"Yes, and it even has a name. The 'Geara Zulu.'"

"Another one that reeks of Zeon..."

"Well, quite a few of the development staff are former Zeonic engineers. There are also requests from their finance department, but they are just having fun. The design of the head unit is just like a 'Zaku.'"

While catching up to Alberto's brisk pace, the manager spoke in a soft voice. Zeonic had been a major weapons manufacturer that wielded power in the former Principality of Zeon and was dismantled after the war, just like their homeland. It was absorbed into Anaheim along with its largest production base, Granada.

Technicians, once dreaming of Spacenoid independence and dedicating themselves to weapons development, now find themselves complicit in oppressing their former comrades under the Earth Federation's rule. It was a situation ripe for a left-leaning propaganda film, but the reality was more complex. The remnants of the former Principality's army founded Neo Zeon and continue to pose a threat to the Earth Federation, and Anaheim is supplying weapons to these Neo Zeon.

It wasn't particularly strange. There are countless past examples of a single financier or arms dealer supplying both sides of a conflict. The Earth Federation government, which espouses anti-Zeonism while unable to sustain its economy without war, is another example of this duplicity. The real problem is that Neo Zeon's power has been declining since last year's "Char's Rebellion" and no longer poses a credible threat to the Federation.

Following the disappearance of Supreme Leader Char - although Neo Zeon sympathizers insist he is merely missing since his shooting down was never confirmed - the organization has turned into a disordered mob. Recently, they have been merely repeating sporadic acts of terrorism and looting.

If it were a war between two armies, it would be permissible to do business with both sides, but it's quite inconvenient when one side ceases to be an army. Though supplying weapons to a revolutionary army and to terrorists might be identical actions, they convey vastly different impressions.

Despite backing from the Republic of Zeon's right-wing forces, now a satellite state of the Earth Federation yet still supporting Neo Zeon, traditional business models are no longer viable. It is necessary to watch the actions of the Federation and of the Republic of Zeon, which will soon reach the deadline for the return of its autonomy, and to steer carefully.

Walking, Alberto, deep in thought about his crucial role, shot a sideways glare at the factory manager who had just said, "But it should be fine, right?"

"On one hand, the 'UC Project' is starting, while we continue dealing with Neo Zeon. But..."

In a whisper lost amid the din of welders and grinding metal, the foreman went on, "rumors are swirling through the factory that the managing director responsible for trading with Neo Zeon during the recent war, Mr. Revlio, has been removed from his position. Everyone's speculating who'll be the next to take the fall."

This man, who knew no other life than commuting between home and factory, seemed to have a sense for the changing currents of the times. Naturally, reliance on outdated business models and factory gossip bred anxiety. However, Alberto had no intention of explaining the realities of the "new business" to a mere factory manager.

"No need to worry," Alberto responded, pausing briefly, "We can control the scale of the war to some extent by trading with both sides. Even the bigwigs in the Federation government acknowledge that."

"But, with the publicizing of the asteroid drop on Lhasa, the Earth Freezing Operation, and the increasingly severe public opinion on Neo Zeon, politicians can flip their stance depending on the way the wind blows."

"There are some wheels that cannot be greased. Consider these not the words of an executive at Anaheim Electronics but as a message from the relatives of the Vist Foundation."

The foreman's face visibly blanched - not metaphorically, but literally. The Vist Foundation was said to wield immense influence over the Earth Federation government by virtue of the forbidden "Box" it held. This once mythical rumor was now an urban legend, yet someone in a position like Alberto's at Anaheim Electronics would undoubtedly have the chance to confirm its veracity. The Foundation's power had played a pivotal role in adjusting the relations between the Federation government and Anaheim during Neo Zeon's rise and fall in recent years. Without the Foundation and the "Box," the ethics-free arms dealer sitting at the core of the military-industrial complex would not have been able to maintain its position. That said, this was not a discussion to have with a factory manager.

Seeing the foreman's fear, Alberto's lips twisted in a momentary, sadistic smile, "Well, we do need to let off steam sometimes. Laying off factory workers won't satisfy anyone. If push comes to shove, someone higher up will have to take the fall."

With an expression that suggested a mix of relief and mockery, the foreman nodded ambiguously. It was true that even with the Foundation's power, there were times when a sacrificial lamb had to be offered. Especially now, with the initiation of the UC Project and indications from a section of the Federation government of a conclusion to the anti-Zeon struggle, it was necessary to play whatever cards could be played in advance.

"From a technological development perspective, trading with Neo Zeon is beneficial," Alberto added, turning his eyes to the new mobile suit with its inner frame exposed.

"Even though we have absorbed most of the development team, there are still unfathomable depths to the technology of the old Principality. Particularly when it comes to the psycommu. This RX-0? It's here because of Neo Zeon's tech, isn't it?"

The factory manager, likewise looking up at the giant framework, muttered in a low voice, "Psycho-frame..." the name of the "new material," brought by Neo Zeon, that triggered the Axis Shock and was officially sealed for both manufacturing and research. Alberto, who felt an unpleasant

sensation himself, added, "Instead of worrying about frivolous matters, please focus on unraveling the mystery of its luminous phenomenon," and began to walk away.

"A mobile suit that glows brightly, revealing its location, is hardly useful as a weapon."

"But about that," the factory manager hurriedly caught up and spoke in a formal tone, "I have a favor to ask. The experimental unit with the psycho-frame, the 'Stein,' can we bring it back to the field for analysis?"

The question struck like an arrow at just the moment Alberto thought the conversation had ended. Alberto, suppressing his sudden shock, replied lowly, "I was under the impression that all necessary data has been collected?"

"We had planned for that, but to understand the luminous phenomenon, we need to re-examine various data sets. Since it's an experimental unit with no delivery schedule, it should be fine to just pull it out of storage, right?"

The factory manager said this with a completely innocent face. Unable to come up with a reason to refuse right away, Alberto stuttered, "Well, about that--"

Just then, another voice rang in his ears, "Mr. Alberto! There's a call for you from headquarters. It's on a secure line. Please, go ahead."

A female employee he had met in the admin building earlier was pointing to the communication panel on the nearest wall. Pushed by the momentum of the employee who quickly tapped the touch panel and handed him the headset with a tense expression, Alberto had no time to think and brought the headset to his ear. Looking at the display where neither the person on the other end nor their face was displayed, he uttered a bewildered greeting. "How's the factory tour, Alberto?"

A familiar female voice came back immediately, making him swallow hard.

"You had asthma as a child and couldn't stand the dirty air of the factory for five minutes. I wonder if you've gotten used to it now?"

"Aunt--Ms. Martha. What on earth is this about?"

Martha Vist Carbine, a direct descendant of the Vist Foundation, married into the family of the chairman of Anaheim Electronics. She was Alberto's paternal aunt, a prominent figure in the family, was the one on the other end of the line. The female employee who had retreated without making eye contact after her bow probably knew this was a direct line from a god not to be trifled with. Martha was known among the staff for her tyranny—keeping her husband under her thumb and meddling in company affairs. Even for Alberto, there was no sense of familial ease - indeed, in the sense of being scrutinized to the very corners of his body and mind, she was a more daunting adversary than his own mother. But Martha herself didn't seem to care.

"It's just a little trouble," she casually responded, and Alberto, all ears, waited for her next words.

"We just received a report from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Some renegade from the Intelligence Bureau is attempting to interfere with our transaction."

There are several deals in the works, but the one transaction that Martha currently refers to as "that one" is unique. The call came right after the factory manager mentioned the "Stein." In the middle of a bewilderingly unsettling chain of events, Martha's voice continues, "Can you hear me? The military is supposedly on his trail, but he's already in space."

The understanding of an imminent and dire situation slowly crept up from the depths, leaving them stunned.

"They only contact us when things are out of hand, typical of bureaucrats. I've gathered all the intel I could get, so it's up to you to handle it."

"Uh..."

"This deal is different from our usual route sales. As the fight against Zeonism is nearing its end, how can we maintain the business model of the military-industrial complex? It will be a litmus test for Anaheim Electronics. If you can handle this smoothly, your position as an executive will become rock-solid. Even Cardeas might reconsider his opinion of you."

Alberto knew Martha's ways – a cycle of drawing in, squeezing tight, lifting up, and then hitting where it hurt. Even the mention of his father, Cardeas Vist, the current chairman of the Vist Foundation and a figure acclaimed since the founder, weighed heavily. The relationship between the disappointing son and the father had been colder than with strangers for a long time. Despite leaving all interactions with Anaheim Electronics to his sister Martha, Cardeas would likely hear about this deal. Would he reconsider his opinion of him if things go smoothly? The moment he pondered this, Martha laughed bitterly, saying, "Unlikely," and Alberto's fingers twitched.

"He only cares about what he starts, even if it's a feat by his own flesh and blood."

There was no objection. Ashamed for even considering it for a moment, Alberto bit his lip and replied, "Right..."

"Anyway, we need to act swiftly. The deal involves a trump card sent from the Republic. Depending on the situation, it could get bloody."

"The infamous 'Captain'? I heard the infiltration is progressing well, but whether it will be fruitful is—"

"That's exactly why we can't predict what will happen. Those Federation bureaucrats won't easily admit to their own blunders. If it causes a stir, they'll demand a scapegoat from us."

"I understand..."

"Aren't you tired of whispers about your rise through nepotism? Strike while the iron is hot. I'm counting on you, Alberto."

The call was abruptly cut off. Alberto stared at the empty monitor, briefly imagining Martha's red, writhing lips before shaking off the image; he said to the factory manager, "An urgent matter has come up. The inspection is canceled," and shoved the headset back to him.

The factory manager, taken aback, received it with a dumbfounded "Huh?" Alberto asked, "I need a room with secure communication facilities. A private room where no one comes in. And two or three security personnel. Right now."



First, needed to review Martha's information and verify facts with his contacts. With time differences among Earth officials and military personnel, he had to time his calls carefully. He confirmed the time on his watch set to Greenwich Mean Time: 4:10 PM. He was prepared to be glued to the phone until late at night... He didn't even have the leisure to see the factory manager running off, replying, "Wait a moment."

At this critical juncture, some renegade from the Central Intelligence Agency was plotting to sabotage the deal. Was it an Agency plot disguised as an accident? As he mulled over faces that would benefit from stopping the deal, a cold gaze suddenly pierced his back. Alberto spun around in alarm.

Only the workers were moving around the bare frame of the mobile suit, and no one was looking at him. Even though he thought it was his imagination, the mocking coldness of the gaze still made his skin prickle. Alberto found himself staring at the only thing that could be said to be looking at him – the enormous eyes of the mobile suit.

Strictly speaking, it was not an eye. But there were no other words to describe the dual-eye sensor, an optical sensor placed in the head unit of the mobile suit in front of him. A pair of eyes embedded in a grotesque mass of machinery that had its internal structure exposed.

The unpowered, lifeless lenses seemed to gaze down at him, imposing and silent. He involuntarily stepped back, gazing up at the machine known as the RX-0.

Once completed, the machine, now adorned with a single-blade antenna on its forehead and referred to as the "Unicorn," Just as moments ago, the head unit, still with an indistinct visage, remained perched high above, several meters in the air. However, to him, it felt as if it had unmistakably looked at him and sneered, almost like a god or demon looking down upon the folly of humans.



The spectacle of imminent departure is something that remains unchanged whether a century or a millennium passes. Dockworkers shouted cargo reports amid the organized chaos of loading. On deck, the supply officer focused intently on cross-checking inventory. A line of disembarking crew forms along the gangway.

The grunts and whines of machinery lifting massive containers was ceaseless. To the ship, a colossal vessel, there's no distinction between people and cargo. Everything is arranged, checked, and loaded. Despite everyone seemingly on edge, there was an exciting spectacle at play. The tension and thrill of setting sail for the vast ocean remain unaltered, even if the destination lies within the eternal darkness of the void.

The key difference was that this port resided in zero gravity, the figures crossing the blackness propelled by suits and lines. The ship awaiting them was no ocean liner but a space cruiser equipped with a thermonuclear engine, clamped by a gigantic mechanical arm instead of dropping an anchor.



Most of the heavy machinery consists of Petit mobile suits, small spherical bodies with short limbs, continuously loading containers filled with supplies into the ship's hold. In no time, the loading of a full-scale twenty-meter humanoid machine, a true mobile suit, begins, and Dakota Winston observes this through his window with constrained anticipation.

The mobile suit deck of the Clop-class cruiser Unkai sat directly beneath the bridge structure, and these twenty-meter giants skillfully alight onto the catapult deck protruding from the bow, firing thrusters placed across their body for attitude control. The giant, compared to the Petit mobile suits whizzing around it looking the size of a basketball, is the RGM-89D Jegan, transitioning into the mainstay of the Federation Space Forces.

These units possess goggle-like optical sensors inherited from the Federation machines. While the predominant exterior paint scheme is expected to be pale green, the Jegan currently being loaded onto Unkai has its upper body painted in a light shade of red. The remainder of the suits are unified in a gray color close to white, giving an impression quite distinct from the conventional Jegan. Dakota had heard about the new model being deployed for this mission, having minor changes according to the task at hand. But red and white? Taste differs from person to person, but he could not imagine the colors appealing to someone past their forties.

"What a gaudy choice..." he cursed under his breath. "It looks just like the old GM. It brings back memories of when we were packed into Salamis and dumped at Solomon," he adds, then refocuses his attention. Sitting opposite him, Carlos Craig, as usual, didn't offer any response. He wore a flight jacket he picked up somewhere, one meant for a mobile suit pilot, while sipping coffee from a drink tube with stoic silence.

The cafeteria, adjacent to the zero-gravity space port in Heaven, one of the earliest space colonies in Side 1, offered a panoramic view of the Unkai and the Ra Dels—a ship of the same class that would join the fleet on this voyage—busy with pre-departure preparations. With neither ship's home port here, there are no families to bid farewell, mostly local suppliers and a few pilots like Dakota and Carlos, enjoying the privilege of a leisurely coffee before departure.

In this age where radio-based weaponry was rendered ineffective by the discovery of Minovsky particles, ship cannons were merely tools for close-quarter defense, and the defense of a ship mainly depended on its mobile suits. The fate of the ship could be decided by a pilot's skill or disposition, and thus, some privileges could be allowed. This was especially true for Dakota, who had been appointed the leader of the six-unit mobile suit team aboard the Unkai.

Indeed, there are people who shouldn't be benefitting from such privileges here too. Dakota, also sipping from a coffee tube, looked at Carlos again.

Though close in age and possibly mistaken for a pilot in stillness, his aura diverged sharply from that of a mobile suit pilot. He held a military rank, a Lieutenant, but his rank hardly mattered in the Intelligence Agency he was

affiliated with. It was impossible to imagine him as suited for espionage work, yet a pronounced solitude, unmarked by camaraderie, clung to him.

From the perspective of a pilot, who tends to have a strong individualistic spirit, an enigma, he radiated a solitude so piercing it chilled the air around him. Just like Dakota, whose personality had been formed in the cockpit of a mobile suit, Carlos must have cultivated this sense of loneliness in the field of espionage. Yet, Dakota found him compelling; despite their brief acquaintance, Carlos seemed to have forged a deep, unspoken connection. Dakota wondered if he'd already been caught in the web of Carlos' subtle stratagems.

"The Jegan D-type, the so-called early deployment model. Internally, it's not much different, just swapped out exteriors and improved options. I almost had my Stark Jegan updated too but asked the captain to keep it. If there's real combat, I prefer a machine I'm used to."

Dakota, observing the Jegans with casual interest, kept a keen eye on Carlos for any flicker of reaction. In the three days since their first encounter, he had confirmed much of Carlos's background and claims through military computers. There was hardly any room for doubt now, and that's why they were facing each other on the eve of departure. Still, he resisted swallowing Carlos' story whole. Shifting his gaze from the window, Carlos met Dakota's eyes, his voice low but firm, "There will be an attack. The target is *that*."

Carlos, securing his coffee tube to the table with a strip of velcro, returned his gaze outside. A massive container, dwarfing others and towed by two Jegans, was hauled into the Unkai's cargo bay. The rectangular container, twenty-something meters across and over ten meters thick, was larger than any other. It was just large enough to fit a mobile suit, and the sight of the two Jegans carrying it was akin to human pallbearers with a coffin.

There was another container of the same type, and they hadn't been informed what was inside either. This was common in transport missions and had never bothered Dakota before, but it was a different story when it was to be a "cargo" that was predestined to be stolen. He unconsciously leaned towards the window and stared at the enormous coffins being taken into the cargo bay.

Once the Unkai had finished loading the "cargo," it would soon leave Heaven with the Ra Dels as its escort. The destination was Granada on the moon, a journey of just under two days. It was a routine transport mission for the military, but in this particular case, the "cargo" would never reach its destination. It was supposed to be attacked and seized by remnants of Neo Zeon during transit.

No, if Carlos' story is to be believed, it wouldn't be an attack or a hijacking. The captain and the main crew of the ship were informed of Neo Zeon's attack, and a scenario was already in place to give them the "cargo" without retaliation. In other words, a transfer disguised as a robbery.

Anaheim Electronics, which could no longer openly engage in transactions with Neo Zeon after Char's Rebellion, seemed to have orchestrated this farce by involving corporate, government and financial players—either as an elaborate ploy or as a means to explore new distribution routes.

Many crew members, including Dakota himself as the leader of the mobile suit team, were left in the dark, unwittingly being utilized in the scheme. As Dakota processes this, torn between disbelief and suspicion, he murmurs, "Still hard to believe."

Carlos didn't move a muscle.

"Not just our ship. The Ra Dels, our escort, also has a D-type deployed. It makes sense to use a high-performance new model for transporting important supplies. Is that part of the camouflage operation too?"

Putting the tube, which he had peeled off from the velcro, in his mouth, Carlos replied with silence. Dakota leaned over the table and said, "Mobile suit pilots are hot-headed. If an enemy shows up, their bodies will react on their own, even if their superiors stop them. I don't think it's clever to unknowingly make them pawns in a rigged game. To allow the "cargo" to be stolen means allowing the enemy to invade the ship, right? Even if an unreasonable command comes down, there might be guys who would still shoot. After all, if such an unreasonable order is issued, they could sue the captain afterwards..."

"That's exactly why they're counting on you guys."

Carlos, with an unexpected glint in his eyes, looked back at him head-on. A different type of murderous intent from a pilot seemed to emanate from him, and Dakota involuntarily retracted his jaw.

"Just before the operation starts, a fleet-wide system check will be mandated, spurred by reports of a virus compromising the D-type's OS."

It was a story Dakota had never heard before. As he was about to ask, Carlos silenced him with a stern look and said, "That's when the attack will happen."

"While the OS of the mobile suits is being checked, you guys won't be able to sortie. The Unkai is immediately surrounded, and its engines damaged. The captain, forced to choose between sinking with the ship or handing over the 'cargo', reluctantly chooses the latter."

"Hold on. Regardless of whatever alert is issued, it's insane to check all onboard machines at once. They'd set up a rotation, keeping at least half ready for action."

"The exact nature of the potential malfunction is unknown. Checks need to be done promptly, and if the mobile suit squads of the Unkai and Ra Dels alternate checks, the theory is that half of the combat strength can be operational."

It wasn't inconceivable. If the two ships weren't too far apart and the coordination between the captains was solid, such a decision was plausible. Carlos clenched his fists on the table and continued quietly, "However, the Ra Dels mobile suit team will be pulled away from the main battlefield."

Before the Unkai, a small force will engage the Ra Dels. The mobile suit squad will pursue this unit, moving away from the fleet. Of course, they won't be authorized to engage. They'll receive orders not to provoke the enemy, merely shadowing them from outside the firing range. In the meantime, the Unkai..."

He unclenched his fist and spread his fingers in a gesture of resignation. Dakota looked back at Carlos' face in shock.

"Although they might be blamed for poor situational judgment, the captains won't be held criminally liable. It was just bad timing, neither of the captains issued orders that deviated from military regulations. Their promotions might be capped, but that doesn't matter. Once the matter is over, they have executive positions waiting for them at Anaheim's regional office."

The whole scenario was exasperating.

"I had a hunch that the senior officers on the ship have been acting suspiciously for a while now..." Dakota mumbled, turning his face to the window with nothing more to say. Through the harbor workers floating leisurely in zero gravity, he could see the familiar bridge structure of the Unkai. What kind of faces were the captains wearing now on their bridge duties? They wouldn't be talking about the upcoming farce since the conversations on the bridge were recorded. Perhaps they were basking in the chaos of departure preparations, grinning at their rosy futures. Or maybe, guilty of their complicity, they were avoiding eye contact with each other...

"Have you ever heard of the 'UC Project?'"

After a pause, seemingly to gauge Dakota's state of mind, Carlos spoke. Dakota gestured for him to continue.

"The military is prepping for it now. In line with the return of autonomy from the Republic of Zeon in 0100, the plan is to bolster the Earth Orbital Fleet, eradicate the Zeonism movement from the Earth Sphere, and regain the Universal Century as it should be. However, to promote this, there is an element that is indispensable."

"For the citizens of the Federation, the remnants of Zeon must continue to be a threat, right?"

"Precisely. Since Char's Rebellion, Neo Zeon has become a ragtag group, lacking the power to promote the UC Project. Armament expansion cannot be justified without the threat of an enemy."

"So, we save the enemy from trouble instead of taking advantage of their weakness..."

Mumbling to himself, Dakota's gaze traced the "cargo" being stored outside. Whether it had already been stowed in the ship's hold, he couldn't see the coffin-like container anywhere. Whatever was inside, it was something that would rekindle a dying Neo Zeon. Something to keep the enemy in the enemy's seat and maintain tension in the world. Despite aiming for the end of the struggle against Zeonism, they had inadvertently created a

society that could not exist without struggle. Balancing irreconcilable contradictions to sustain the economy and employment...

"With the eradication of Zeonism, the Earth Sphere will attain peace. However, the fleet built under the UC Project will continue to be maintained even after that. Building a big castle at the end so that no mouths go unfed even in peaceful times, feeding on the lives lost along the way..."

Carlos's voice, laced with raw emotion, carried a weight of authenticity impossible to feign. Beyond the lonely shadow bred by his job, there was something hollow in the man called Carlos, as if he'd lost something significant.

"I, too, lost many of my men in Char's Rebellion," he said, not looking for a response. With a distant look in his eyes, Dakota's gaze drifted toward the spaceport.

"Even then, Anaheim provided Neo Zeon with mobile suits. Depending on the circumstances, it could have been a war that might have overturned the world order. I thought it was a common thing for merchants to wag their tails to both camps... But now, the merchant controls the war."

"It's always been that way," Carlos added, fixing his eyes on Dakota to make sure. The recall alarm rang out, and the pilots of the Ra Dels squad left the bar in a clamor. Some familiar faces called out as they passed by, but Dakota kept his gaze locked with Carlos.

Why had this guy set his sights on him? He wanted to grab him by the collar and demand an answer, but he also felt that he didn't need to ask. The Delaz Conflict, the Gryps War, two Neo Zeon wars. In the long wars following the aftermath, he too had lost something. Even though his marriage had broken down and he spent his days drowning in alcohol during his days off, there was still an irredeemable loss. Perhaps Carlos felt the sense of a loss that could not be compensated for by anything, and thus felt compelled to approach him with this story.

"Delaying the system check to prep for launch might disrupt their plan?"

Dakota spoke, resigned to the fact that this would likely ruin his pension. A sense of relief barely distinguishable from resignation spread across his cheeks, and Carlos nodded, "Yes. We don't know how many units they will send out, but if the script changes, they should be thrown into confusion. If we take advantage of that gap, we can win."

"That's easy for you to say. I'm going against the chain of command of the ship. It's going to be hard enough just to keep my men calm."

"I'll make the call. You just need to focus on piloting."

Not understanding what he was being told, Dakota furrowed his brows. Carlos relaxed the corner of his mouth slightly and said nonchalantly, "Your Stark Jegan is a two-seater, isn't it?"

"Do you have experience?"

His slightly amused face was the response. So, he had to let an amateur sit in the gunner's seat and fight a battle. "Oh boy..." Dakota looked up at the sky.

"We're both navigating a minefield here."

"We're just acting as soldiers should. If the crews of the Unkai and Ra Dels stand with us, the staff headquarters won't be able to simply punish us. There is a way to fight."

"What about after that? Even if we succeed, I don't think the military will let you go easily."

The outcome of sabotaging the deal and making enemies out of both the military high command and Anaheim would result in nothing short of expulsion from the military. In some cases, it could even mean social annihilation and possibly the loss of life. However, there was no hint of bravado in Carlos's response when he said, "I have nothing left to lose."

That's right, there's nothing left to lose. Instead, they were taking action to regain something. Dakota gazed at Carlos's face, shrouded in emptiness, and dispelled his immediate hesitation. He checked the time on the wall's illuminated panel.

Beneath the date of 06/14/0094, the display read 10 a.m. There was one hour left until departure. First, he had to make sure everything was in place to smuggle Carlos aboard...



## after game

The time stamp next to the date, 06/15/0094, ticked seconds away in Greenwich Mean Time: 07:28:52, 53, 54...

"Stop it there," a voice commanded, halting the seconds' march, freezing the monitor's display.

In a dimly lit room, marked by the incessant blinking of numerous displays, a ghostly glow cast over the faces of men and women stationed at their posts. The image projected on the screen was the typical scene of a Clop-class cruiser's bridge. The text "<UNKAI-B2>" appeared beside the time display, indicating that this was the feed from the second surveillance camera installed on the bridge of the cruiser Unkai.

The image quality was grainy, but the expressions of each crew member were discernible, and even the scene of the captain's seat, which appeared farther back, could be glimpsed from here. The captain, holding the receiver after receiving an incoming call from the communication officer, had an unusual demeanor. With his hand at his mouthpiece and his shoulders hunched, he looked like a husband who had received a call from his mistress in front of his wife, a pitiful demeanor.

*"Though it's a case of reaping what one sows, it's disheartening that this is the last record to be transmitted to fleet headquarters. I can't show this to the families of the bereaved..."* thought Bright Noa, tearing his gaze away from the video he had watched multiple times.

"Remember this?" he turned around and asked. In a spartan private room, unmistakably a sickbay, a young man lay in bed, his eyes wide with fear.

"This is footage from right before the Unkai was attacked, six days ago. You were on duty on this bridge. You were right behind the captain when he received that transmission, listening in."

Hidden behind the captain's seat and unidentifiable, but according to the duty roster, this man – Petty Officer Macchio Fulci – had been on bridge duty since 7 AM as the captain's aide. Now, broken and burnt in multiple places, swathed in bandages, he lay in bed, his averted gaze not merely a sign of exhaustion.

"Maybe they've already managed to bribe him," Bright thought, barely holding back a click of his tongue. "The radio operator reported, 'Urgent

message from the Granada procurement headquarters,' and that's on record," he continued sternly.

"But the captain's response wasn't recorded. He was speaking softly, hand covering his mouth." Bright pointed to the small monitor he had brought into the sickbay, fixating his gaze on Macchio.

"Such conduct isn't becoming of a ship's commander. It must've been a very special message for him. Could it be related to the Neo Zeon attack that followed?"

Macchio wouldn't meet his gaze or say a word. Bright locked eyes with Kim Goyo, a lieutenant leaning against the wall in the corner of the room, and sighed. He pulled a chair up beside the bed and sat down.

"If only there were a record of the conversation, but the person on the other end was using the captain's confidential line from the get go. As you know, records from confidential lines are the first to be erased when a ship is lost, to prevent sensitive information from falling into enemy hands. In other words, you are the only one who can tell us *who* the captain was speaking to and *what* they were talking about at that moment."

Macchio's bandaged hands clenched, signaling tension.

"Only five, including you, survived from the Unkai's crew," Bright pressed on. "If you hadn't left the bridge, you probably wouldn't have survived either. Tell me, what was the captain saying? If we know that, we might uncover the truth behind this incident."

"I... I don't know anything," Macchio whispered, barely audible.

Bright leaned over the bed, peering into the eyes that refused to meet his.

"I left the bridge right after my duty ended, and then the alarm sounded. I don't remember much after battle stations were ordered. It seemed like the chain of command was in chaos, everyone was shouting at each other. 'Char'..."

The last muttered word prompted Lieutenant Kim to step away from the wall. Seeing the figure of the young female officer in her late twenties, Bright, caught her eye, silently asked if the recording was working and, seeing her nod, returned his gaze to Macchio.

"Someone was screaming about a red mobile suit, the return of Char. That's when the enemy's attack intensified. Someone mentioned that the ship took a direct hit, and enemy mobile suits invaded the mobile suit deck, but... I was in the secondary comms room; I barely knew what was happening outside. But I remember seeing a red Geara Doga and a purple one on the external monitors. Those two machines caused our forces to collapse. Comms with various sections were lost, and the damage reports... they sounded like screams."

Perhaps recalling that terror, Macchio embraced himself, his shoulders quivering minutely. The tension tugged at the IV tube, producing a scraping sound.

"I moved to the nearest escape pod when the abandon ship order was given. Just as five of us boarded, an explosion occurred, and we were auto-

ejected. I don't remember much after... But from the pod's monitor, I didn't see the red mobile suit. Instead, I saw a white mobile suit I'd never seen before beyond the explosion's smoke, and I thought it had sunk the Unkai. It was probably a new Neo Zeon model, but from where it appeared, I... I just don't know. There's so much I don't understand... the confusion in the chain of command, this 'ghost of Char.' We were all just following orders, yet nothing--"

"You seem to be misunderstanding my question," Bright interrupted. Macchio's eyes, widened slightly before finally meeting his. "I'm asking about *before* the battle. Who was the captain talking to?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. Too much happened, and my memory seems to have failed me..."

"Did someone tell you that, like the Intelligence Agency?"

Macchio remained silent in response, his eyes avoiding Bright's gaze.

*"Had he been given some kind of incentive or threat?"*

"Don't talk about what you saw or heard on the Unkai to anyone. If you do, your future is over. Typical scare tactics," Bright spat out contemptuously, glancing sideways at Macchio's pallid face as he kicked the chair away.

"The Agency is intentionally distorting the facts. Aboard the Unkai was an officer not part of the regular crew, Lieutenant Carlos Craig of the Intelligence Agency. According to *their* investigation, Lieutenant Carlos was a Neo Zeon collaborator and the mastermind behind this hijacking. They claim he disrupted the Unkai's command, led Neo Zeon inside, and after allowing the hijacking of cargo, sank the ship to destroy evidence."

Pacing deliberately around the bed, boots clacking, Macchio's eyes continued to dart away, seemingly lost in thought.

"But this contradicts our findings at Londo Bell. Our investigation shows Lieutenant Carlos was actually trying to *prevent* the Neo Zeon from hijacking the cargo. He had boarded the Unkai, knowing about the attack in advance. He and Lieutenant Dakota from their mobile suit squadron were piloting a prototype Stark Jegan and launched to counter the assault. It's a two-seater, allowing one to pilot while the other communicates with the wingmen."

Bright stopped, staring intently at Macchio's blanched face. His cheeks twitched faintly.

"*You* were in the comms room; *you* must know what was being said. In fact, we know too. A junk dealer's ship nearby accidentally intercepted the transmission. The audio is recorded, but the Agency is still unaware."

It wasn't a lie. If they hadn't fortuitously secured that recording first, Bright wouldn't have had a lead in this case. Macchio's eyes flickered momentarily before averting again. Standing at his bedside, Bright spoke as gently as he could, "I get that you're scared. It's not just because you were threatened. Are you afraid your testimony might tarnish the ship's honor? Sure, it's a hard truth for any crew to accept. But without revealing it, the anguish of those who died can't be assuaged."

Macchio's eyes frantically moved side to side.

"Tell me, who was the captain talking to?" Bright's voice grew firmer.

"We have a suspicion. It was a civilian. This man might have masterminded the incident. Your testimony can make a difference."

There was no need to explain what victory meant or how it would be achieved. Biting his lip, eyes tightly shut, Macchio hesitated before speaking, "I... really don't remember much. But the captain seemed panicked. He was talking about negotiations happening higher up, and there being a traitor on the ship..."

"A name. Did the captain mention a name?"

"Well..."

"Try to remember. I guarantee nothing will happen to you. Everything depends on you."

Seizing Macchio's bandaged shoulder, Bright pressed on, not letting his gaze flit about. Macchio's lips trembled, on the verge of speaking, when the sound of the door opening shattered the tense atmosphere.

"That's enough, Captain Bright," came the pompous voice, followed by Bright's exasperated sigh.

"We wouldn't want to agitate the patient too much. That'll have to do for today."

The speaker was a doctor from this military hospital. The monitor by the bed showed no abnormalities in the vital signs. He hadn't rushed in due to any change in the patient's condition, but more likely had been eavesdropping outside. Exchanging a look with Kim, Bright, confronting the corpulent doctor, said with barely concealed irritation, "He has a transfer request to Von Braun Hospital. He won't be here tomorrow. I want to continue the interrogation."

"That's not my concern. As a doctor, I cannot allow further questioning. That's all," the doctor stated arrogantly, adding, "Shall I call security?"

A scent stronger than disinfectant, perhaps of the same nasal medicine given to the patient, seemed to emanate from his white coat. Those who had warned the patient might have also warned the doctor. Realizing he was marked, Bright shrugged, signaling Kim with his eyes that it was time to leave.

"Whatever they told you, don't rely too much on the Intelligence Agency's promises. They're known to be habitual liars."

With that parting shot as his only retaliation, Bright left the sickbay. Macchio's face, as if eager to speak, was obscured by the doctor's bulky frame.

*"Can you hear me? This is Stark Jegan, SOO1 with the Unkai. Lieutenant Carlos of the Central Intelligence Agency is aboard. Mobile suit units of the Unkai and Ra Dels, engage immediately. This attack is a conspiracy orchestrated by certain military leaders and Anaheim. I repeat, this attack is a premeditated conspiracy. The commanding officers, including the captain, have no intention to fight. Do not follow the ship's chain of command. Act*

*on your own judgment. The success of the fleet's transport mission depends on your actions!"*

Bright replayed the voice that had now become familiar, vibrating through the terminal's speaker, echoing in the cramped, almost storage-like office. The transmission, accidentally intercepted by a junk dealer's ship, was of poor quality due to Minovsky particles, initially indecipherable. But after repeated corrections, it became just audible enough.

The display showed footage similarly processed, originally long-range images captured by the junk ship's external camera, now CG-enhanced to discern the positions of ships and mobile suits. Synced with the audio, it provided a rough overview of the battle situation.

However, after such extensive processing, it wouldn't be admissible as evidence, serving merely as reference material. After leaving the hospital, Bright had returned to the small office an hour later and stationed himself in front of the terminal, painstakingly comparing Macchio's testimony with the video footage. Minutes after detecting the approach of Neo Zeon machines, the Stark Jegan, aka Sierra One, launched from the Unkai's mobile suit deck, beginning its unexpected counter-attack and communication with wingmen.

The confusion and disarray of Neo Zeon soldiers were all captured in the intercepted transmission.

*"They're shooting at us! That special forces Jegan is serious!"*

*"All units, focus on that Jegan! Take it down!"*

*"This isn't what we were told! No enemy suits were supposed to head out-- Waah!"*

*"They got him! It's Tokumin's Gears Doga!"*

*"More enemy reinforcements! They've betrayed us!"*

*"Calm down! Just latch onto to the Unkai!"*

*"Where did the 'Captain' go?!"*

The beams from the mobile suits' beam rifles carved pink rays of light in the eternal darkness of space. Neo Zeon machines blasted apart, creating pinpricks of light on the display. Even through the flickering images, the situation became clear when matched with the audio.

The downed machine likely belonged to a soldier named Tokumin. It was a Gears Doga, the mainstay of Neo Zeon during the Second Neo Zeon War, commonly known as "Char's Rebellion".

Though typically dark green and carrying on the design legacy of the Zaku, not all were identical. One particularly active unit was flamboyantly purple, equipped with a large backpack and a massive long-range cannon. Others, perhaps minor modifications, bore the Zeon crest on their wrists, resembling sleeve decorations, but such details were probably lost on the frantic Federation pilots.

Following the earlier-launched Ra Dels squad, the Unkai's Jegans also joined the fray in response to calls for support, leading to a chaotic engagement involving both friend and foe. Fast-forwarding the footage, Bright returned to normal playback at the two-minute mark, scrutinizing every detail.

Seizing upon the cascade of messages, Captain Bright unraveled the conflicting narratives.

*"All mobile suit units, Lieutenant Carlos's statements are baseless. He's a traitor who conspired with the Unkai's captain and unlawfully commandeered the Stark Jegan. Return immediately under your squadron's command."*

*"Don't be deceived! The Neo Zeon attack is real. Think for yourselves!"*

*"I am the Unkai's mobile suit commander. Trust in Lieutenant Carlos. Scatter the Neo Zeon forces. They're disoriented because their rigged game has gone awry."*

The voices of Unkai's captain, Carlos, and Lieutenant Dakota intermingled in a chaotic symphony, amidst the crisscrossing intensity of mega particle beams. Bright fast-forwarded the footage again, stopping a minute later.

*"The military and Anaheim Electronics want continued tension. That's why they'd go so far as to hatch such a conspiracy with Neo Zeon. Yet, people are dying because of it."*

*"Captain, is what he's saying true?"*

*"I told you, it's nonsense! Stop the fighting now!"*

*"Don't give the 'cargo' to Neo Zeon. If they get their hands on it, the balance of power will be disrupted. Another war will break out!"*

*"If it's that valuable, we must seize it."*

A calm, cutting voice interrupted, bringing a palpable shift in the atmosphere of the battlefield. Bright immediately froze the frame, focusing on a glimmering point of a Neo Zeon machine, just barely captured within the frame.

Suddenly intruding into the chaotic fray was a red mobile suit. On the screen, it was merely a point labeled <UNKNOWN-9>, but a digitally enhanced still revealed its details – a red Geara Doga with sleeve decorations. Bright, attempting to match this image with the red point on the screen, set the still aside in frustration. Kim, placing coffee beside him, peered at the screen, saying, "It sounds similar, no matter how many times you hear it."

"The ghost of Char, a mysterious pilot called 'the Captain.' It's almost eerie how much the voices resemble each other."

"Have you heard the real Char Aznable's voice?"

"Of course. His declaration at Sweetwater was broadcast worldwide. Voice print analysis shows over a ninety percent match."

"Don't rely on it. There are many ways to manipulate a voice." Bright unconsciously touched his throat, feeling its smoothness, then reached for his coffee.

"However..." Kim quickly corrected her posture, adding, "A commander who fought Char directly would have a more accurate perception than any machine."

"Flattery much?"

"Not at all. I'm thrilled to be working with the commander of the White Base. If my brother knew, he'd be rushing to meet you." Her eyes sparkled like a young girl's.

Bright couldn't help but let out a sigh. Upon receiving word that an escape pod from the Unkai had been recovered, he made his way to the Baden colony at Side 2, where he had arrived three days prior. Using his title as Londo Bell commander as leverage, he requested cooperation from the local investigative team stationed there. As a result, they begrudgingly provided him with his office and Lieutenant Kim.

Though called an investigative team, their primary duties consisted of investigating training accidents and internal misconduct, things like cheating on promotion exams, thefts from barracks, etc. Their nature and capabilities differed greatly from those in the Central Intelligence Agency, which reported directly to the Joint Staff headquarters.

Lt. Kim in particular was a newcomer freshly transferred from another section. The base commander's intentions were transparent in assigning someone unrelated to the case in order to avoid involvement. However, Kim didn't seem conscious of her own disposability. Whether she realized she was a square peg in a round hole or not, he appreciated her willingness to take the initiative.

She diligently read through investigation materials, categorizing crew interviews, and even pushed her superiors for better cooperation.

Whether driven by rebellion against the base commanders' complacency or pure justice, Bright found it uncomfortable to be idolized as 'that Commander Bright.'

He muttered, "If only that doctor knew of this reputation."

Recalling the earlier incident at the hospital, Kim's face tensed as she asked, "Was it the Intelligence Agency's interference at the hospital?"

*Yes, they worm their way in everywhere.*

"It's no surprise," Bright responded casually, sipping his bitter coffee. "Until its reassignment earlier this year, the Ra Dels belonged to Londo Bell. I had the right to know about the deaths of my former subordinates, so I used that as an excuse to intervene in this investigation. The Intelligence Agency and military high command are terrified. These recordings suggest the incident was indeed a military-civilian conspiracy."

He gestured to the frozen display and loosened his uniform collar. Kim nodded, her face still tense.

"Initially, when the Neo Zeon attack began, the Unkai's captain didn't order the mobile suits to sortie. The reason given was that a fleet command directive for system checks was underway, but this was untrue. At the time of the attack, the Unkai's mobile suits were ready for deployment. It was Lieutenant Dakota's orders that delayed the start of the system checks," Bright explained, his gaze fixed on the images displayed on the screen.

"Yet, despite this, the Unkai's captain didn't send out their mobile suits... This testimony alone from the surviving crew proves at least the existence of a conspiracy. The problem is..."

"Lieutenant Carlos. The Intelligence Agency's claim that he, a stowaway, disrupted the ship's command and hindered the captain's orders, can't be refuted with the crew's testimony alone."

"Regarding Lieutenant Carlos, there was a notice at our colony's customs. 'Apprehend on sight.' Issued by the military police, but obviously covered by the CIA. This was four days before the incident."

Kim flipped through a file, presenting a printout. "The agency had been tracking Carlos for a while. To prevent him from interfering with their deals. Could this be used to expose their deception?"

"It's complicated. Carlos is labeled as a Neo Zeon insider. They'll say the notice was for that reason, leaving us without counterevidence."

"Then, we might have to go public with these intercepted records..." Kim's eyes hardened, looking at the display. Returning to the unprocessed originals, the video and audio records could serve as compelling evidence.

"That's our last resort," Bright responded.

"We must tread carefully. If the intelligence bureau learns we have this recording, they won't hesitate to eliminate it, and us. A direct confrontation with them is challenging. We're currently underestimated, which is to our advantage," Bright explained.

Kim, about to interject, was cut off by Bright as he stood, "Even if we release this recording, I doubt it would be picked up by an investigative committee. We are up against entities as powerful as nations. Legal battles, in this case, would be a waste of time."

"What should we do, then?"

"We negotiate," Bright continued, locking eyes with Kim. "This conspiracy involves high-ranking individuals from both the military and Anaheim Electronics. If we gather evidence of their involvement, we can use it as leverage to meet our demands."

Bright tapped the display, resuming the frozen footage. The chaos following the appearance of the red Gears Doga played out.

*"It's fast!"*

*"It's a red mobile suit! Watch out for the red mobile suit! He's--  
WAAAAH!"*

*"Calm down, that can't be Char. He's dead! He burned up with Axis!"*

The red Gears Doga, marked as <UNKNOWN-9>, skillfully wove through the beam fire, merging with the Unkai's position. This moment matched Macchio's account of an enemy machine breaching the ship. Covered by allied forces, including a certain purple suit, the red Gears Doga headed straight for the Unkai and slipped into its mobile suit deck.

"Whether it's Char's ghost or not, at this point, they abandoned their mobile suit," Bright added, showing Kim the still of the red Gears Doga with sleeve decorations.

"A red Gears Doga, adorned with sleeves. Typical Zeon aesthetics."

"Agreed, but a return to roots can boost morale. These mobile suits with sleeves could symbolize the rebirth of Neo Zeon. If some second coming of



Char is behind this, they'll be a formidable enemy. But the real problem starts here."

Bright fast-forwarded the footage for about two minutes before resuming playback. A new light emitted from the Unkai rapidly left the frame, too fast for the zoomed-out camera to track. A flash of explosion, followed by panicked voices.

*"The 'cargo', the Sinanju, was stolen! Shoot it down! It's a psycho-frame experimental unit, we can't let them have it!"*

In the Stark Jegan's cockpit, Carlos's desperate shouts mingled with the chaotic radio chatter. Bright searched through papers, presenting a still of the new light – the Sinanju.

"The Sinanju. Development code Stein 01. This is the 'cargo' the Unkai was transporting, the mobile suit the Federation intended to hand over to Neo Zeon. I'm almost certain Char's ghost switched to this machine."

The Sinanju, mostly white with hints of light grey, combined the linear design typical of Federation suits with the curvaceous lines of Zeon. Its large thruster unit, shaped with gentle curves, gave it an almost angelic appearance. According to those familiar with mobile suits, its design echoed Char's final suit, the MSN-04 Sazabi, known for being a pioneer in psycho-frame technology. Whether this was intentional by the developers remained unclear. The undeniable fact was that a suit resembling Char's last was now in the hands of Char's "ghost."

*"It's too fast!"*

*"We can't keep up!"*

*"It's impossible to continue, retreat!"*

*"Not yet, he's not accustomed to the suit, we can still fight!"*

*"Watch out, it's coming!"*

Amid the screams of friend and foe, flashes of explosions lit up the scene. "They're being overwhelmed..." Kim muttered, to which Bright agreed, turning away from the sight of the Sinanju dominating the battlefield.

"Indeed. Words fail me... With the appearance of the Sinanju, the mobile suits of both the Unkai and Ra Dels squads were decimated in minutes. Carlos and Lieutenant Dakota in the Stark Jegan as well..." Bright continued, watching the last burst of light fade away before returning his gaze to the display.

The dots representing Federation mobile suits were gone, leaving only the slowly regrouping Neo Zeon machines on the screen. The crippled Unkai and Ra Dels, stripped of all their mobile suits, seemed to be trying to retreat from the battlefield.

"The battle is over. The 'Sleeves' got the 'cargo' as planned, despite Carlos's unexpected interference. They should have just returned, but then another irregularity occurred," Bright said, observing the Sinanju's light point veering unexpectedly towards the Unkai.

As the Neo Zeon units reorganized themselves, the dot representing the Sinanju abruptly changed direction and headed straight for the Unkai. Given its massive size, it took some time for the Unkai, a cruiser, to accelerate.



However, the Sinanju's speed was extraordinary. Zigzagging through space, its dot rapidly closed in on the ship.

"*What's happening? An enemy unit is turning back!*" came the panicked voices from Unkai.

"*Prepare anti-air defenses! Open a line to Granada!*"

The Unkai's light flickered with the light of anti-air fire, but in the sea of Minovsky particles where radar was useless, it was a futile effort.

"*It hit our engines!*"

"*Take it down! Just one mobile suit!*"

The captain's scream and the Unkai's massive explosion happened almost simultaneously. The explosion swelled briefly, then dissipated, its remnants and cold gases drifting in the vacuum of space. The Sinanju's light point weaved through the debris, heading straight for the Ra Dels.

"Incredible..." Kim whispered.

"When they could have just gone back, they went out of their way to sink two Clop-class ships. It doesn't make sense," Bright mused.

The final moments of the Ra Dels were undeniable. Bright paused the video and rubbed his eyes.

"It could be a show of force," Kim suggested. "As you said, if they wanted to impress upon others the rise of a new Neo Zeon..."

"But this attack was supposed to be a *fixed* match. Without Carlos's intervention, the Sinanju would have been handed over without bloodshed. Yet, they went to extremes, sinking two ships and costing four hundred lives. That was clearly overkill, so it's no longer just a pirate incident. The conspirators were shaken. The confusion allowed me to intervene in the investigation."

Bright sat down again, sipping his now cold coffee.

"However, on the other hand, the plotters might be thanking Char's ghost."

"The crew of both ships heard Carlos's call to arms. Open channels are the norm during combat. Even amidst all the chaos, they must have heard what he was trying to say," Kim pondered.

"*This attack was a carefully orchestrated conspiracy. Fight at your discretion...*" Carlos's voice echoed in Bright's mind.

Kim's brow furrowed as she muttered, "They were silenced..." and the wrinkles on her forehead deepened.

"And it was the best way to silence them," Bright said coldly. "Sinking the ships eliminated the need to threaten or watch over four hundred people. The survival of Macchio and a few others was unplanned, but manageable."

"So, did Char's ghost do them a favor? To prevent the truth from being exposed?"

"That's the key to unraveling this mystery," Bright said. "But it still doesn't explain why they sank both ships. It's an illogical chain of events. The repeated unexpected turns in a situation that can go any direction make me think that there's more to this."

"What is it, then?"

"This," Bright said, rewinding the footage to before the Unkai was attacked. The Sinanju's light point was stationary, slightly away from the Neo Zeon units that were reorganizing.

"Right before the Sinanju turned back toward the Unkai, it slowed down and appeared to be in freefall. In the middle of battle, especially in a situation where you can't predict what might happen next, nobody would be foolish enough to stop moving. Certainly not Char."

Bright leaned closer to the display, his eyes focused. Kim also studied the screen intently.

"It's a laser communication. It requires a fixed position to align with the sender's beam."

Kim gasped, realizing what Bright meant. "So, we can calculate the source of that communication?"

"I've already checked. It came from the moon. The trajectory aligns perfectly with a communication satellite in lunar orbit."

The implications were clear. Luna. Home to Anaheim Electronics.

"The Moon..." Kim murmured.

"Probably one of the masterminds behind this conspiracy," Bright concluded. "Right after receiving that communication, the Sinanju turned and attacked the Unkai."

"Was it a request to silence witnesses?"

"It's a plausible theory. Plus, if we expand on this reasoning, we can consider that the same person may have communicated with the captain of the Unkai just before the attack. The communication originated from Granada."

Bright stopped the footage and brought up a new image – a man's photo from an old issue of the Anaheim Journal. Both he and Kim sighed, a mix of weariness and realization.

"Alberto Vist. A senior executive at Anaheim Electronics and the son of the chairman of the Vist Foundation... When you connect multiple pieces of information, you arrive at this face. We could corner him if we had Macchio's testimony, but that seems unlikely now..."

"It's difficult the way things are going. Even if we mention Vist's name, it might be seen as leading the witness," Kim added.

"He's not someone we can simply request a reference interview with. Backed by the Vist Foundation, both the military and Anaheim will do everything to protect him. Without conclusive evidence, we can't even get close."

They were at an impasse.

The fatigue of the past few days weighed heavily on Bright, who sighed deeply. Even the authority of Londo Bell's commander who had thwarted Char's Rebellion seemed insufficient against the power seated on the Moon.

Every lead they found ended in a dead end, likely the ploy of the military-industrial complex, the largest collusion organization in the Earth Sphere formed by the military, government, and Anaheim Electronics. Even though they faced a formidable opponent that they couldn't match on their own, if

they could grab whoever was at the top by the throat, there was still a way to fight. If they could prove Alberto Vist's involvement in the incident, he would become their hostage. They could use his prosecution as leverage to push their demands through.

"What kind of deal do you plan to make with them?"

Kim's question caught Bright off guard, causing him to almost choke on his coffee.

"Even if we can't subject them to legal recourse, there are deals to be made... Do you have some sort of plan in mind? Are you intending to make someone take the fall?"

"Does that concern you?"

"Well, if one is as dedicated to the investigation as you are..."

Kim continued to probe with an inquisitive gaze, though she appeared apologetic. Indeed, a woman's intuition is a fearsome thing, but Bright couldn't let her discern his true intentions. Cursing himself for carelessly mentioning a deal, he was about to fabricate a response when the room's phone started ringing shrilly.

Kim turned away to answer. Relieved, Bright was about to finish his coffee when he heard her sharp voice, "Are you sure? Understood. I'll arrange for the transfer immediately. The base isn't safe. I'll inform you of the meeting point later, but bring them to Baden."

After rattling off instructions, she hung up and turned around, "We might have just found a breakthrough," she announced, her face taut with tension. Bright found himself standing up without realizing it.

"It's another feather in the cap for the junk dealers. A Sleeves pilot from the Unkai attack has been recovered. He was shot down during the assault."

"Is he alive?"

"Yes, barely. Found drifting in his escape pod, weak but stubbornly silent."

Kim's words, laced with barely contained excitement, curled into a sly grin.

The Neo Zeon pilots knew that this assault was a feint from the start. If they could obtain testimony, the conspiracy of a rigged battle would be completely proven.

"He will arrive here by tomorrow evening," she continued.

Bright nodded and replied, "Good. Make sure no one gets wind of this," unable to stop his own mouth from easing into a smile. Reminding himself that overconfidence breeds carelessness, he tightened his expression, adding a firm command fitting of a battle unit commander to Kim.

Standing up, he added, "I'll interrogate him myself."

The space colony Baden, a place seemingly intended only for those who reside within. It's a cylinder over six kilometers in diameter and more than thirty kilometers long. Its inner walls are crowded with small office buildings, houses, schools, and hospitals, all illuminated by sunlight filtering through giant windows known as "rivers." The only leisure facilities are amusement parks, with no unique tourist attractions specific to the colony. Among the

hundreds of colonies floating between the moon and Earth, it is just another one. In Earth terms, it might be aptly described as a declining provincial city.

The hotel arranged by Kim was a budget business hotel on the outskirts of the red-light district. Likely built during the early days of the colony's construction, the aged building rarely hosted travelers from afar, instead serving as a den for locals engaged in dubious activities like prostitution and illegal drugs.

"A place where a little screaming won't prompt calls to the police," Kim explained her choice, careful to avoid the Intelligence Agency's surveillance as she and Bright left the base separately. She seemed to have quickly learned the ways of the industry in just a few days. At times like this, he couldn't help but admire a woman's adaptability. Hopefully, she won't find the routine work of the investigative team too dull.

The recovery of a Neo Zeon survivor following the interception of communications at the scene was a feat achieved by a subcontractor under the Buffo Corporation, a major player in the junk dealer industry. Seeking the scraps generated by war, they constantly roamed space, easily swayed by a bit of money and military connections.

Their business of trading the remnants of military weaponry, originally military assets, inevitably created a symbiotic relationship with the military, normalizing a structure of corruption and overlooked misconduct. Their failure to report as legally required when they recovered the Neo Zeon soldier, instead informing Kim's team through a subordinate, was likely thanks to Bright not haggling over the price during their last information purchase. Skimming off secret funds and arranging overlook notices isn't easy, but deceiving the eyes of the Central Intelligence Agency requires its share of effort.

Meeting up with Kim, now dressed in civilian clothes, they arrived at the back entrance of the hotel as the sunlight streaming through the "river" began to shift into the colors of dusk. The artificially induced breeze was tepid, filling the alley littered with garbage bins and scraps of paper with the stench of urine.

Shortly, a sedan-type elec-car appeared from the end of the alley, blinking its headlights twice as a signal. Everything was orchestrated by Kim. Bright waited for the car to approach, half impressed, half amused at being part of an amateur spy play. He was left speechless upon seeing the face of the man who stepped out of the driver's seat.

"Good to see you again, Captain," the tall man greeted with a stoic face and a crisp salute. Meeting the unwavering gaze of someone who knew everything, Bright muttered under his breath, "I've been caught..." and sighed in resignation instead of returning the salute.

Kim, who noticed that there was no one else in the elec-car, interjected with a bewildered voice, "What's going on? Where's Ensign Senluo? Who are you?"

The man didn't answer, maintaining his gaze on Bright. Pressed by Kim's persistent questions, Bright finally broke the silence.

"Lieutenant Kim," he interrupted firmly, "Leave us. I'll contact you later."

"But..."

"Please trust me. I'll explain later. Don't worry about Senluo, he's safe."

Saying this, he locked eyes with the tall man, as if confirming, "He is, right?" The man nodded with his eyes, and Bright looked back at Kim, who seemed to have sensed something unusual.

After she hesitated for a moment, her jaw tightened, and she said, "I understand then," before turning on her heel. She started walking away, but as she disappeared into the alleyway, she couldn't help casting worried glances back at them.

Once she was out of sight, Bright let out a deep sigh, releasing the tension he had been holding in his chest for the past few days. He looked at the man's face again. The man remained as he was, standing silently in his suit.

"You play a tough game, Commander Daguzza Mackle"

"As do you, masquerading as such a famous figure," Daguzza replied with his usual stoic expression. Bright Noa, also known as Rossio Mecchi, chuckled as he remembered the time they had spent at Carlos's place about half a month ago.

"People's memories are fuzzy," he replied while removing the tape stuck to his throat. Embedded inside was a voice modulation chip that stimulated the vocal cords with electrical impulses, allowing him to change his voice at will. It wasn't something you could buy off the shelf, but it wasn't particularly rare in the agency. There were plenty of methods to manipulate one's voice.

"He's not a celebrity on TV every day, and people don't remember faces that easily. It helped that Bright is known to dislike the media," he added.

Of course, if he had met Kim's brother, an ardent fan, he would have been exposed. As he removed the chip, his natural voice returned, and while clearing his throat, he said with a lingering discomfort in his throat, "So, who's the real Captain Bright?"

"I've never met him. You should know, but right now, he's on the repaired Ra Cailum undergoing a shakedown cruise. I'm pretty sure he'd be quite surprised to learn a man over ten years his senior is using his name in such a remote colony."

It had only been five days since he had bribed a junk dealer who came to sell intercepted communication records to the Intelligence Agency, intending to monopolize them for personal use. The preparation, while hastily assembled and largely left to chance, had unwittingly caught the eye of Daguzza.

Given the limited investigative authority granted to ECOAS, it was perhaps inevitable that their separate probe would lead them to the same junk dealer. Despite the threat wielded in the name of the Intelligence Agency, facing a direct inquiry from this man would shatter any resolve to silence. Hidden surveillance records, Londo Bell's commander's sudden intrusion into the investigation, and Lieutenant Carlos's erstwhile superior officer vanishing on leave—all these elements provided enough fodder for

Daguza's suspicions to take root. Ensign Senluo, detained and coerced into placing a deceptive call, must have been utterly bewildered.

Yet, for Rossio, this marked the end.

Looking up at the colony's artificial sky, he was torn between frustration at being so close and relief that his predicament, already dire, was winding down. The lights from the residences on the opposite wall twinkled like stars seen from Earth—a sight he deemed beautiful, perhaps for the last time. The threat of dismissal, court-martial, or worse, incarceration in a prison somewhere loomed, not to mention the possibility of an untimely "heart attack."

Although alone, the presence of ECOAS operatives, undetectable yet surely nearby, underscored his inevitable capture. He had no illusions about escaping from Daguzo, who stood as implacable as ever before him.

"Standing here is hardly proper," Rossio muttered, starting towards the back door of the hotel.

"A room has been arranged for questioning. Shall we discuss this inside?" Daguzo proposed, the notion of being the interrogated rather than the interrogator catching Rossio off guard. He added a grim joke to himself, standing before the door.

"Why is this happening?"

Daguzo's voice struck him as he reached for the rusted doorknob.

"Why do all this?"

His face, set in the dimming twilight, seemed to insist on hearing an answer before moving. Sure, he had a personal connection to this case from the beginning.

Rossio turned, shrugging, "Without the title of Londo Bell's commander, I couldn't have interfered with the investigation. I also needed to pull some strings with Captain Bright's connections. Even Assemblyman John Bauer was fooled with a simple phone call."

Rossio went on, letting the tape with the implanted chip flutter in his fingers, "Seems he wasn't as close to Captain Bright as the rumors suggested. Quite typical of the captain, though. He's a man of simple integrity."

Mimicking the tone from past interviews, Rossio knew deep down that true intimacy couldn't be feigned with someone as earnest and straightforward as Bright, a man devoid of ambition or guile. Perhaps in Bright, Rossio saw a reflection of himself, which might explain his success in impersonation. And now, Daguzo too...

As he was about to open the door, Daguzo's repeated demand halted him again.

"You once said gears don't misalign; they merely wear down and stop moving."

Without turning, Rossio listened as Daguzo pressed on, "Yet, now you act of your own volition. Like Lieutenant Carlos, have you ceased to be a mere cog?"

"And if I said yes, what then?" Rossio challenged.



"I would detain you and hand you over to the appropriate authorities. You're aware this isn't something that can be resolved by resignation alone."

The tension in the air was palpable, almost as if Daguza might draw his gun at any moment. Rossio, realizing the gravity of their stand-off, couldn't help but scan their bleak surroundings.

Old newspapers, soaked by artificial rain, clung to the ground, emitting a fetid odor—a literal dead-end. Too dismal a place to die. Yet, as this thought crossed his mind, a defiant apathy crept up on him, and a sigh escaped his lips.

"As I said before, I don't have the guts for that," Rossio replied, glancing over his shoulder at Daguza, who remained motionless, his gaze fixed amidst the lukewarm breeze.

"But, I've been thinking. If I had stopped Captain Carlos back then, none of this would have happened. The sinking of two Federation ships and the loss of four hundred lives could have been prevented. It's hard to admit, but I share in the blame for their deaths."

A distant patrol car's siren wailed, subtly disturbing the descending night. Facing the grimy iron door, Rossio continued, "But the military and the Intelligence Agency won't see it that way. They'll just chalk this up to a mere hijacking incident by Neo Zeon. I wanted to take responsibility. It's not about making things public or turning the government upside down. I just needed some crafty maneuvers to take responsibility for my own actions. I'm still a cog, after all. Just trying to pay off the debt of the moment I stopped moving."

"How do you think you can take responsibility? The dead won't return and you can't change how the world works. Isn't everything you're doing just to appease your own conscience?"

His voice was tinged with uncharacteristic emotion and it struck Rossio. He turned to face him, feeling unexpectedly exposed. It seemed uncharacteristic of him, yet it confirmed that he, too, was worn down, and Rossio understood why he had come to arrest him personally.

It wasn't someone else's problem for him. The school bus bombing incident at Sweetwater that Carlos had mentioned — Daguza had been in command of that operation, though it wasn't clear if Carlos knew.

"You've admitted it before. We are meant to maintain order, parts of a vast mechanism called the Federation, just cogs. Our duty isn't to conflate personal accountability with our roles. We follow collective orders, fulfill our assigned functions."

"So, cogs desire nothing? Thus, they bear no responsibility?" Rossio countered.

"I wouldn't say that. Cogs have the duty to keep turning until they can no more. Only then can the sins and sacrifices accompanying our duties be redeemed. That's what I believe."

Rossio was struck by the conviction in Daguza's eyes. Some can endure, some break, and some numb themselves to it all. "You're strong..." he murmured, facing Daguza, the epitome of the latter.

"Those are the words of someone in complete control of his mind and body. Typical of an ECOAS commander... But everything has its limits."

Rossio didn't want his words to come off as sarcastic. Carefully, he added, "Mental and physical decline can be compensated with cunning, but time is beyond our control. There's a limit to the time given to humans. Especially in your line of work, Daguza. You have, at best, five more years in the field. What follows is desk work—a demon in its own right, accelerating the passage of time until one day, you find an aged reflection in the mirror, a cog about to fulfill its role, a fool who never used the time given to him by his own will. That's fine too. Many people end their lives that way. Even if they're cogs easily replaced, if they've served a purpose, that's all they could ask for. But Commander Daguza, both of us lived through the One Year War. What did you feel at the war's end? The expectation that, after a nightmare war where every other person died, humanity could start over from here. Standing on the front lines, driven by an immense sense of mission to create a world without war, where lives aren't senselessly taken... haven't you ever felt your blood boil with such a thought?"

Daguza looked away and remained silent. Rossio gazed at the twinkling artificial stars of the colony's sky.

"I'll confess, my favorite readings back then were the essays of Ricardo Marcenias. I worked frantically during the turbulent post-war period, taking the words of the founding father of the Earth Federation, the first prime minister, as my motto. I knew the system that is the Federation wasn't perfect. The world is always imperfect. And it was our mission to bring it closer to perfection... Yet, look at where we are."

Wars that don't end even after they've ended. He himself had become part of the side staging post-war wars. Accustomed to calling it reality, accustomed to the pain of betrayed ideals, eventually numbing even to the pain. A real cog, a part of the world, having forgotten to influence it.

"In the end, I couldn't do anything," he said, clenching his fists.

"I never even tried. Just a cog, endlessly turning, leading to a world even less livable than before. Carlos and I, and many other gears, did what we thought was best, and this is the outcome."

There's no power in a cog to change the world, nor time to start anew. "Some part of me wanted to take responsibility, for the life I've lived as a cog, for Carlos's life betrayed by the system he served. At the very least, as a human being... no, as a cog with pride and dignity—"

Rossio cut himself off, realizing there was no point in hiding his thoughts now, though not eager to lay them bare. Expecting Daguza to prompt him to continue, he found the commander silent, still standing rigidly.

"Perhaps these are just the ramblings of an old fool, nothing worth delving into further." Rossio sighed.

"Take me wherever you must. If you get the chance, apologize to Lieutenant Kim for me," Rossio said, bypassing a silent Daguza towards the passenger side of the elec-car.

His belongings were left at the base, but he only had some uncomfortable military uniforms back at the agency, which would probably be confiscated as evidence anyway. Deciding to leave the aftermath to them, Rossio was about to open the passenger door when he heard Daguzo call out, "Captain Rossio. The story about the junk dealer recovering a Neo Zeon soldier was a ruse to lure you out."

Expressionless, Daguzo approached. Rossio frowned at the obvious revelation, but Daguzo continued without concern, "But they did recover something else. The wreckage of a Federation mobile suit destroyed in that battle. Gundarium alloy fetches quite a high price. ECOAS caught wind of them trying to hide it and resell it to the military, so we seized it for ourselves. The suit was badly damaged, but we managed to recover the flight recorder."

Stopping right in front of him, Daguzo pulled out a microdisk from his pocket and handed it over. Confused, Rossio looked up at Daguzo's face.

"As you know, mobile suit recorders transfer data to the nearest ally when destruction is imminent. This recorder likely contains the battle data of all involved units, including Sierra One... Lieutenant Carlos's Stark Jegan, presumably."

Rossio could feel his own complexion change upon hearing this. Daguzo, without hesitation, forced the disk into Rossio's hand and moved around to the driver's side of the car.

"The records show that Sierra One, just before being shot down, was engaged with 'the cargo'... Stein 01. There might be untransmitted data that could prove useful."

As Rossio looked down at the disk and then back up, Daguzo had already opened the driver's side door. Could it be that he came just to hand over this disk? Watching the man's movements as he got into the car to leave, Rossio impulsively asked, "Did you listen to what's on this?"

"No," Daguzo replied with unchanged expression, "I'm not authorized."

His tone suggested a firm boundary, a cog that doesn't break rules or indulge curiosity, faltering only when worn down.

"You..." Rossio started, but lost his words as Daguzo looked away, saying, "I have a responsibility in this too. I let Lieutenant Carlos go. A bit of trickery is necessary to settle the score."

With those words and a fleeting glance, Daguzo quickly got into the car. There was no smile, no casual farewell, but a mutual recognition that warmed Rossio despite the cold. The man had indeed come to hand over the disk, to see if Rossio was the right person to entrust with his responsibility, to pay back a debt—not just for overlooking Carlos, but perhaps a larger one.

Feeling the sudden weight of the disk, Rossio stepped back from the running car. Without turning back, he looked through the window at Daguzo's profile and shouted into the car, "You're not worn down at all! Just remember to oil yourself occasionally. You'll last another decade or so."

Was there a slight softening at the corner of Daguza's mouth, or was it just Rossio's imagination? Before he could confirm, the car sped off, scattering litter in the alley.

Rossio held onto the fleeting glimpse of a smile he thought he saw, watching the taillights fade into the distance.

The room was starkly impersonal.

Though a glance revealed that the furnishings were all first-rate, they seemed chosen straight out of a catalog, betraying no hint of the user's personality. The only object that stood out was a statue in the corner, an odd figure with a human body and an elephant's head, presumably an image of an Indian deity. Likely a gift from Melanie Hue Carbine, the semi-retired powerhouse of Anaheim Electronics, known for his collection of Eastern art.

The gift alone hinted at the occupant's significant standing within the company—a scion of the Vist Foundation, rumored to have greatly contributed to Anaheim's prosperity. Alongside the president's wife, his role symbolized the intertwining of the corporation and the Foundation, perceived internally perhaps as a dynastic heir dispatched from the main bank.

His title was just one among many executives, but his authority was undeniably akin to that of an acting president, evidenced by his leading role in the clandestine military-civilian conferences.

This was not mere speculation but an undeniable fact beyond reproach. The question remained whether the room's occupant had incited a massacre of over four hundred people.

Seated on the sofa across from the executive desk in the vast office, Rossio waited for his meeting with Alberto Vist, the room's owner, in what would be his first and last direct interrogation.

There was no longer any need to impersonate Bright Noa. Five days since parting with Daguza, the situation surrounding the incident had shifted dramatically. In addition to the evidence Rossio had gathered—officially under Commander Bright's name—alongside the flight recorder data provided by Daguza, had spurred the conspirators towards a sense of crisis, fearing the unraveling of their hastily drawn curtain.

With the amassed evidence pointing towards a compromise in their current plan, the Central Intelligence Agency, complicit in the cover-up, sought to negotiate a resolution with Anaheim, thus permitting Rossio, representing the agency, to travel to Granada on the Moon.

It looked like a top-level meeting, but it wasn't.

The perpetrators and the cover-up agents, each responsible for their own fields, were to negotiate the terms. The real tops were probably still sleeping soundly, oblivious. Immersed in the unfamiliar light gravity, Rossio reminded himself that this was the crucial moment. He had to make them swallow his demands in the next few minutes. After being shown into the office by a secretary and left alone with a coffee set for over ten minutes, he surveyed

the room, devoid of any family photos, and took another deep breath. Then, the door opened brusquely, and the room's master appeared.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's hear what you have to say."

His brisk entrance and rapid approach, barely allowing for eye contact, prompted Rossio to stand, only to be dismissed by Alberto.

"We can skip the formalities. We're both busy men. I've heard most of it from the director, so please."

Settling his corpulent frame onto the sofa, Alberto cast a quick, arrogant glance over Rossio, his uneasy eyes betraying a defensive posture.

Confirming rumors of Alberto's inherent timidity, Rossio decided on a direct approach, retrieving a pocket-sized recorder from his bag and placing it on the table.

"First, please listen to this," he said, ignoring Alberto's attempt to interject.

"It's the flight recorder from a Federation mobile suit shot down in the incident. I've extracted only the necessary parts. The monitors in the room are off, right?" he asked, knowing there were cameras disguised as decorative pillars in each corner of the ceiling. After Alberto reluctantly nodded, Rossio smiled politely and pressed the play button on the recorder.

The room filled with the rumbling of a generator, interspersed with the heavy breathing of people. The occasional metallic clangs, likely from the maneuvering verniers, hinted at the chaos within the mobile suit's cockpit, shielded by layers of armor, such sounds were constantly heard.

*"This is from Sierra One, piloted by Lieutenant Carlos. At this moment, the machine was severely damaged by Stein 01's attack. Lieutenant Dakota, who was with him, is dead, and Lieutenant Carlos was likely severely injured. What follows is a communication exchange with Stein 01's pilot."*

As the recording played, Alberto's complexion visibly paled. Rossio, watching carefully, caught the change.

Carlos's voice, filled with agony, questioned, *"Who are you...?"* The reply, unnervingly calm, contrasted sharply with the tension of battle, *"No different from anyone else. Just another actor playing his role."*

*"Role?"*

*"Yes. Every person has a role to play. Reject it, and you end up like you are now."*

*"So, we're to accept this staged conflict between the Federation and Neo Zeon, maintaining employment and the economy... To hell with that."*

*"Then, you must pay the price."*

A discordant sound rang out, abruptly cutting off the audio. Stein 01's pilot—Char's ghost—had probably sliced Sierra One with a beam saber.

Startled by the sound, Alberto jolted, fixated on the recorder with a face glistening with sweat.

"After this, Stein 01, or the Sinanju, rejoined its allies, only to inexplicably turn back and attack the ships Unkai and Ra Dels," Rossio explained without breaking his gaze as he stopped the recorder.

"Curiously, just before reversing course, the Sinanju halted, adopting a trajectory that suggests it was receiving long-range communications..."

Alberto's grip tightened on the sofa's armrest, his face setting into an expression not of tension, but of sheer terror. While suspicious of this reaction, Rossio steeled himself and stared directly at Alberto.

"Now, Mr. Alberto," he said in a low voice that filled the room, compelling Alberto's gaze away from the recorder and back to him, "let's cut to the chase. Were you the one who directed the pilot of Sinanju to sink the Unkai and Ra Dels?"

Rossio asked, the weight of his question filling the silence that followed. Alberto blinked back to awareness, confusion written across his face.

"What are you talking about?" he muttered, seeking clarity.

"Please answer the question," Rossio, unphased, pressed on, "Did you send the orders from Granada via laser communication to the Sinanju's pilot? Before the attack commenced, you communicated with the Unkai, warning its captain of potential disruptions based on intelligence reports, didn't you? If you were overseeing the battle from the start, sending a directive to the Sinanju was within your means."

"What is this!? I was told we'd discuss damage control—" Alberto protested, but was cut off by Rossio's steady voice.

"Indeed, we are. Everyone's scrambling since a supposedly bloodless transaction turned into this mess. But to maintain secrecy, killing the entire crew of two ships was excessive."

"I-I don't know anything about it! It's unrelated to me!" Alberto protested, almost childishly flustered.

Despite his surprise, Rossio sensed something was off, but knowing this was his only chance, he continued, "Then just say so. But keep in mind, it can be verified by checking the records. The Intelligence Agency has the best facilities in the Earth Sphere for data salvage."

"That's absurd... If my company refuses to cooperate, that's the end of it. Who are you, anyway? Does the head of the Agency know about this? What about the Joint Chiefs of Staff?" Alberto was losing his composure.

Please, calm down, Mr. Alberto."

"This is most unpleasant! Leave now. If you won't, I'll call the head of the Agency—"

As Alberto stood to approach the desk, Rossio inhaled sharply and commanded, "Sit down!" Frozen as if electrocuted, Alberto slowly turned back, fear evident in his eyes. Clearly, he was easily intimidated by direct confrontation.

Indicating the sofa, Rossio softened his voice, "Let's talk calmly. I'm not here to accuse you, just to ask for a little assistance."

Alberto settled back into the sofa with a puzzled frown and listened as Rossio leaned forward on the table.

"This is about Lieutenant Carlos. You're aware of why he did what he did. The morality of it isn't my concern. He acted alone, paying with his life. His objective to halt the transaction failed, but that's on him. My concern as his superior is his current situation. Right now, Lieutenant Carlos has been branded as a Neo Zeon collaborator, even blamed for the sinking of both

ships. With the media's focus on the losses, framing him as the scapegoat is convenient for everyone. An investigative committee will soon publicize this narrative, but it's not the truth."

Emphasizing his last word with anger, Rossio noticed Alberto swallowing nervously.

"Yes, his intervention caused the battle, and he's partly responsible for the loss of lives. But he atoned for his actions with his life. Further tarnishing his name posthumously is not only cruel but against the rules."

"Rules?"

"The fundamental rules that govern life, ones that should be held above laws and codes. Carlos's fate shouldn't solely rest on him. This incident affected the victims and their families as well. It's miserable to have a loved one taken unjustly, then to misdirect their vengeance. Even if we can't disclose the whole truth, a more accurate statement ought to be made. I'm not suggesting you're the culprit. I seek only the restoration of Carlos's honor. If we can do that, you'll never see me again, sealing away the evidence I've gathered. Please consider it."

Rossio bowed his head. He knew it was foolish and just a way to soothe his own conscience. Yet, upon hearing of Carlos's demise and how it would be manipulated, he found no alternative but to act. This decision was reinforced by the intercepted communications, driving him to turn his back on the Intelligence Agency and undertake a solitary investigation in disguise.

A cog shouldn't rebel against the machine it's a part of. Yet, if so, let it be for the dignity of a unique cog, to affirm the worth of a life spent in service, if only for that... Rossio remained bowed, waiting for Alberto's response.

After a lengthy silence, Alberto mused, "Lucky Lieutenant Carlos, to have a superior who cares even in death. I wonder if anyone will think of me that way..."

His distant tone matched his gaze. Remembering reports of Alberto's strained relationship with his father, Rossio realized he had struck an unexpected nerve. But Alberto's next words cut the conversation short, "I appreciate the effort, but the answer is no," he stated firmly, rising to leave.

Rossio's gamble hadn't paid off.

"Why are you so fixated on clearing a dead man's name, risking your reputation, even your life for it?"

"Cogs, too, have their dignity," Rossio declared, meeting Alberto's retreat with a resolve to press on, suggesting they both played roles they hadn't chosen but must fulfill.

Alberto's decision, however, remained unchanged, leaving Rossio to confront the limits of his influence and the complexities of honor, duty, and the unseen rules that govern their lives.

"Handling the incident was decided after reconciling the interests of all parties involved. It's not something I can change on my own, and I don't have the reasons for it either."

"But if we proceed as planned, there's a risk that your involvement in the sinking of the two ships will be exposed. Wouldn't that be reason enough?" Rossio countered.

"That's your speculation. Among the evidence presented, there's nothing that definitively proves my involvement. And, I seriously doubt you can gather any more evidence. After all, that was Full Frontal's--" Alberto caught himself mid-sentence, seemingly shocked by his own words.

Full Frontal.

The name had an eerie ring to it, and it sent shivers down Rossio's spine. He stared at Alberto's back, who had frozen in the middle of the room, casting quick glances here and there before starting to walk away abruptly.

"Regardless, I can't be of any help," he repeated, taking his place behind his desk, "While your story is moving, sentimentality has no place in the business world. Let's pretend this conversation never happened. Consider it a small token of my respect for your effort. Now, please leave."

"Wouldn't you reconsider?" Rossio persisted.

"If you insist, I could call the head of the Agency to arrange your pick-up."

Settling back behind his desk, Alberto spoke with finality, pointing ostentatiously to the phone as if to emphasize his complete disengagement. Well, it can't be helped. Rossio hadn't expected an easy victory, but this was within his anticipations.

He sighed, "What a pity," and stood up.

Even a high-ranking official, born into privilege, wouldn't easily fall for such tactics. The real push was yet to come. Approaching the desk with a resigned demeanor, Rossio reached into his pocket as if to retrieve a business card but instead grasped a slim, flat device. "Do you know what this is?" he asked, presenting it to Alberto.

Alberto furrowed his brows with a puzzled look as he leaned in slightly to get a better look at the black object.

"A little something Carlos left behind," Rossio revealed, pressing a button on the device. A faint electronic sound signaled its activation.

"This was discovered when we went to apprehend him for taking classified documents. Anticipating our arrival, he had rigged his home with explosives. Myself and a special forces commander were trapped inside for a whole day while the bomb squad worked on the device... A truly harrowing experience."

Alberto's cheek twitched slightly as he looked puzzled.

"Don't tell me, that's..."

Rossio, looking down at the transmitter in his hand, continued, "It was left in a locker at the airport, deemed unnecessary after buying time for his trip out into space. Along with the dismantled bomb, it's been in Intelligence custody. No ill intent; it was just a matter of deciding who'd dispose of it, military or us. However, under agency control, I could take it out with just my signature. You get where I'm going here?"

Stepping closer, Alberto retreated, alarmed. Rossio grinned, "Guess where I planted it? Right beneath you, under this room's floor."



Just like Carlos did, he tapped the floor with his shoe.

"Lies!" Alberto exclaimed, his back against the wall.

"Our security is top-notch. You couldn't have brought in a bomb!"

"Sure, and I was checked before entering today," Rossio moved closer, adding, "But actually, I paid a visit here yesterday, too."

"Y-you what?"

"Well, not here exactly but the office below. Senior Director Sergio Bologna's office. They say Lunarians are health nuts, so I took advantage of his gym routine to plant something in the ceiling. He didn't return for a good two hours. You allow gym visits during working hours. I gotta say, the employee benefits at Anaheim Electronics are quite impressive. I wish our department would learn from that."

Not a bluff, Alberto realized, his face draining of color as he lunged for the desk's alarm button. Rossio caught his wrist, pulling him off balance. Even with a body weighing over a hundred kilograms, under the moon's gravity, Alberto was as helpless as a child.

Bracing his feet on the floor and twisting his waist, Rossio dragged Alberto across the desk and down to the floor. Swiftly, he twisted Alberto's wrist, pinning him face-down and pressing his knee into Alberto's back, immobilizing him with his full weight.

"Let's not be rash. You haven't been to the gym, have you? Your body's gone slack in this low gravity," Rossio chided.

"You're insane!" Alberto gasped.

"I won't deny that. It's insane to give someone like me this job and expect them to *stay* sane. Now, spit it out. Did you give the orders for the Unkai and Ra Dels to be sunk?"

"You... You're a murderer!" Alberto's shout echoed, but without the room's monitors, it wouldn't reach outside. Rossio, momentarily taken aback by the blunt accusation, felt something snap.

"I'm done fucking around!"

Yanking Alberto's hair, he slammed him to the thick carpeted floor, not enough to cause serious harm but not intentionally gentle either. Either way, he didn't really plan for this.

"How many do you think have died? How many people have we killed in these post-war wars we've been orchestrating? A couple more bodies onto the pile won't matter. Shall we end it here? Your disappearance might even pause the pointless transactions for a bit."

He pulled Alberto's head up by the hair, shoving the transmitter into his face. Alberto remained silent, swallowing his breath.

"Then again, you're just a cog in the machine. Someone else will start the same thing soon enough. It's all so futile. I'm getting so tired of chasing the truth. It might be refreshing to wipe the slate clean right here," he said, contemplating.

He pulled the transmitter closer to him, thinking that it might not be a bad idea. The simplicity of the act appealed to him; releasing his thumb would free them from this mess. Rossio gazed up at the ceiling of what appeared to

be wooden-paneling, lost in thought. Beyond the rooftop of the building and through the thick lunar bedrock, there was surely the vast vacuum of space. Would that be where he went after he died? Carlos, the crew of Unkai, and countless souls floating in the eternal darkness. There, they wouldn't need spacesuits, and they could bounce around freely like that cartoon rabbit...

As Alberto struggled desperately, Rossio pressed the device against his thick flushed cheek again, speaking in a soothing voice, like comforting a child, "There, there, it'll be okay. It'll be quick, over in an instant."

As he spoke, Rossio realized the truth of his words. He closed his eyes and began to ease his thumb off the button.

"Wait, please!" Alberto's scream erupted next to him, and Rossio felt the sensation in his fingertip vanish...

*"Sinanju pilot, can you hear me?"*

From the depths of static, a familiar gong-like sound emerges, surely reaching the ears of the intended recipient, yet no response comes. Only a sinister presence seems to stir in the silence, a creature with sharp fangs holding its breath, its unsettling movements felt rather than heard.

*"I'm transmitting via laser communication from Granada. No one else can listen in. Maintain your course and respond. I am Alberto from Anaheim Electronics."*

*"I'm aware, Alberto Vist of the Vist Foundation. Things did not go as planned."*

*"Yes, I admit there was a mishap. You managed well, but the aftermath is a mess. Blood was not supposed to be spilled... How many did you kill?"*

More silence followed. The brusqueness of the query might incite anger—or perhaps, the other is genuinely counting the downed enemy units, revealing a fundamentally incompatible sensibility. Indeed, including the kills made in the red Geara Doga, this man has downed more enemy units than any other Neo Zeon pilot. The source of this incompatible sensation might be the numbness of one who has just left the battlefield, accustomed to slaughter.

*"There is no doubt in my mind, Minister Monaghan Baharov of the Republic did well to nurture such talent... Is this where I should say 'Impressive performance, Captain Full Frontal?'"*

*"I'm honored by your praise, but it's inappropriate at this moment, Alberto Vist."*

*"What...?"*

*"The role expected of me now differs. Let me show you."*

The above is a transcript of the conversation that took place between Alberto and the pilot of the Sinanju, the ghost of Char known as Full Frontal, immediately after the battle. After a somewhat rough negotiation in the office, Alberto confessed the circumstances that led to the sinking of the

Unkai and the Ra Dels and submitted this communication record as evidence to Rossio. He had kept the record on hand without deleting it, even though it could have serious consequences if it were leaked. However, the reason for this decision would become evident when one heard the contents of the record.

Alberto hadn't ordered the sinking of the two ships. It was an action taken entirely by Full Frontal himself, and there was little Alberto could do to stop it, to be closer to the truth. Keeping the communication record was a precautionary measure, in case he was suspected of giving such orders, a move that, in hindsight, proved to be effective. This record compelled Rossio to believe Alberto's account.

*"The role expected of me now differs. Let me show you"*—with these words, Full Frontal declared his intent and then repositioned to attack the retreating Unkai and Ra Dels. With just one mobile suit, he achieved a victory befitting the name of Char's ghost by sinking both cruisers. What follows is another communication between Alberto and Full Frontal, held shortly after the two ships were sunk.

*"What is your intention?"*

*"I merely assisted with what you call the cleanup. Now, all witnesses are gone. Only the fact remains that Neo Zeon captured a Federation experimental mobile suit and sank the transport fleet. The fact that a single mobile suit sank two Clop-class ships."*

*"Who... are you?"*

*"Full Frontal. As the name suggests, I hide nothing. I am but a player, performing the role people wish to see... nothing more."*

*"The Red Comet..."*

*"That too, is acceptable. The Red Comet, the second coming of Char Aznable... It has a nice ring to it."*

"Listen to it and you'll understand. Nothing about it is normal. I heard about the hard-liners in the Republic of Zeon, sympathizing with Neo Zeon, sneaking an ace up their sleeve into the organization. Someone called 'the Captain.' Frankly, I didn't expect it to work. I thought they were just sending in some Cyber-Newtype to mimic Char, to spread rumors that he was still alive. But this, this is something else. It's as if something has possessed him. Like the ghost of Char, or some other malevolent presence..."

Alberto spoke with a face so haggard, it was hard to believe he wasn't acting scared. His exaggerated reaction upon hearing the flight recorder, as Rossio presented it, seemed stirred by memories awakened by Frontal's voice. Even after sinking two cruisers, the spectral calm in Char's voice—now Frontal's—was enough to understand why Alberto felt fear.

At the heart of this incident lies a special new material known as the psycho-frame. It reacts to the pilot's brainwaves—thought waves, or

sensibility waves—was integrated into a chip embedded in metal particles, making the psycho-frame itself a metal responsive to human will. Naturally, the maneuverability of mobile suits using this was dramatically improved. However, following its deployment in Char's Rebellion, the Federation had officially discontinued research and development due to unforeseen properties and the potential for uncontrollable effects.

Yet, behind official announcements, the military and Anaheim Electronics did just the opposite, continuing its research and development and constructing a prototype mobile suit codenamed Stein 01, aka Sinanju.

This incident was orchestrated to transfer Sinanju, equipped with a psycho-frame, to Neo Zeon. The technology, initially brought by Neo Zeon, was developed by Anaheim Electronics as Neo Zeon lacked the facilities. After the failure of Char's Rebellion, Anaheim had no obligation to appease Neo Zeon, nor any reason to hand over psycho-frame technology. For the Earth Federation, releasing a material with unknown properties was extremely risky, even in the context of staging post-war conflicts.

Nonetheless, they executed the plan to transfer the Sinanju under the guise of a theft, compelled by circumstances known only to them.

The UC Project aimed to eradicate Zeonism by the start of U.C. 0100, reclaiming the intended path for the Universal Century. Central to this ambitious plan was the enemy's potent arsenal, particularly high-performance psycommu-based Newtype weapons. Newtypes, the ideological cornerstone of Zeonism, represent the evolution of humanity in space - a new breed of humans. Yet, their very existence remains academically unproven. In this, the Federation's strategy to extinguish Zeonism by eliminating these so-called Newtype pilots reeked of a fanaticism akin to Zeonism itself. Perhaps Full Frontal was dispatched in this very vein of madness.

Char Aznable, a rumored Newtype and son of Zeon Zum Deikun, the father of Zeonism. Whether as a reincarnation or a ghost, Full Frontal's emergence embodied the resurrection of the Newtype myth, serving as a perfect sacrifice to bury it. Even if created by the right-wing forces of the Republic of Zeon, Frontal was acknowledged by the Federation as part of the UC Project, unleashed upon the world in the guise of the Sinanju.

But there's something more to Full Frontal, something beyond this. His actions in the recent incident, the terror Alberto felt upon speaking with him - these hint at a deeper narrative. Behind the grand design of reclaiming the rightful Universal Century, he has already begun walking a different path.

The question remained: when and by whom would the debt be paid next?

Under a sky clear and boundless, a pale column of grey stretched straight upwards—a shuttle's exhaust smoke, breaking free from Earth's gravity, climbing higher and higher. Launched from a linear rail resembling the tracks of a colossal rollercoaster, the shuttle's ascent was a magnificent, if not audacious, fart towards space.

The sound was tremendous, a roar as if heaven and earth themselves were trembling, reaching even the departure terminal several kilometers away, making the windows that framed the linear rail quiver violently. It was Wednesday, August 10th, in the midst of summer vacation, and the spaceport in old Hong Kong city saw a heavy flow of traffic.

Among the few civilian spaceports located near the equator, this one, with the added allure of New Hong Kong tourism, drew crowds. Rossio was no exception; coaxed by his wife, they spent a night here, and he had been dragged around the city for a day of sightseeing and shopping.

Opting for Kennedy Spaceport in North America would have meant a quicker journey to space, sparing both time and money.

"Yeah, Morgarten, the one that got a gaping hole punched in it during the Gryps War. That's the repair project I'm involved in, albeit in an administrative role. My old lady's back's been acting up, and she's grown weary of Earth's gravity. Surprisingly, she came along without much fuss."

Considering it as compensation, the Hong Kong tourism might not have been so cheap after all, Rossio muttered inwardly as he spoke into the public telephone receiver.

This was the first time he had a conversation with the man on the other end of the line since the incident was resolved. He had thought there wasn't much need to reach out, expecting news of his retirement to reach the man through the grapevine. Yet, now, about to leave Earth in less than an hour, he found himself craving to hear the man's voice.

In truth, besides Rossio himself, this man was the only one fully acquainted with his motives and actions during the incident. Reflecting on the days that had become a turning point in his life, it seemed rather bland that this man's face was all he could recall, but without him, the current moment wouldn't exist.

If that was the case, he wanted the man to know what lay ahead for him. He wants to hear his reassurance, to hear him say it's okay. In his current state, split between anxiety and anticipation for his new life in space, such feelings seemed to take hold.

"Sorry for not getting in touch, after all the help you've given me. Changing jobs and homes at my age means there's a whole mess of things to sort out."

As the shuttle's roar faded into the distance, Rossio, with a somber expression, continued speaking into the handset. In reality, while he had left the mundane tasks of moving and home-buying to his wife, Rossio had been preoccupied with cleaning up the mess he had created. The man on the phone would have seen through this, of course.

Threatening a high-ranking official at Anaheim Electronics and picking fights with the military-industrial complex was no small feat, even for a seasoned intelligence officer. Perhaps the man on the line was in on it too, but the response came without malice, a certain briskness in his tone.

"I've gathered that you've been quite active, judging from the newspapers."

On the other end of the communication satellite relay, Daguz Mackle, likely buried under his own paperwork in a corner of Luna II orbiting the moon, said. Rossio, feeling a mix of pride and humility, unconsciously touched the inside pocket of his jacket where a clipping from an article published a month prior was still folded.

The headline screamed, "The Second Coming of Char?" below which detailed the attack on two Federation ships. In a corner of the page, overshadowed by the press conference of the investigative committee, was a small headline, "Intelligence Officer Fought Valiantly but in Vain," detailing Carlos Craig's last stand against the attackers.

The turning point of the incident hinged on the recorded conversation between Alberto and Full Frontal, playing right into Rossio's plan, though the plotters likely remained unaware of their manipulation. They believed the intercepted communications were a fluke, anonymously tipped to the Intelligence Agency.

Protecting Alberto's reputation, as well as his own skin, required such fabrications, with efforts to trace the leak still ostensibly underway in the bureau, though progress was predictably stagnant. With potential leaks from the Neo Zeon side considered, the investigation was bound to fizzle out unless Alberto decided to embarrass himself further.

The news only held the public's attention for a few days, now largely forgotten, but for Rossio, it was a significant achievement, capping off over thirty years in law enforcement. "Looks like I won the bet," he remarked with a wry smile, to which Daguz, across the 300,000-kilometer gulf, replied solemnly, "That bet should never have taken place."

"There was a fool who bet on the side with the bomb. Both of us won. That's good enough, isn't it?"

The tale of a bomb planted beneath Alberto's office was a complete fabrication; no explosives were found at Carlos' residence. Though a gamble, in the end, it could be said that what Carlos left behind led to this outcome—a satisfying resolution, though Daguz's response was subdued.

"Did we though?"

"With the recent reports, Neo Zeon's resurgence has been significantly highlighted. By retracting the insider deception, focusing the announcement on the assailants was inevitable... Perhaps those staging the post-war conflicts benefited the most."

His perspective was sound. Although it wasn't widely discussed in public, there was already a growing sentiment to reassess the downsizing trend in military power and confront the Neo Zeon threat. In changing the scenario to shift the blame to Carlos, the masterminds behind the incident also highlighted the resurgence of Neo Zeon.

The UC Project still seemed to be steadily progressing.

Thinking he had acted of his own volition, Rossio now realized he had been swept up in the greater current. Reflecting on his role as merely a cog, he felt a renewed sense of self-reproach, "If that's the case, the true victor lies elsewhere," he said into the handset.



"The second coming of the Red Comet, Full Frontal. The ghost of Char that sank two ships with a single machine... He's the one who truly benefited from this incident, making a spectacular debut. I hate to admit it, but I might have inadvertently supported his ascent..."

If Carlos had not been framed as the informant, the spectacle of Char's ghost wouldn't have been as highlighted. Into the arrogance of those who boast of controlling wars, a monstrous aberration had slipped through, meticulously exploiting the Federation's systemic fatigue. At this moment, it might be sharpening its fangs.

"What to do now..." Rossio pondered, realizing he no longer had the right to contemplate such matters. "I'm sorry," he repeated, unable to stop himself, "Leaving you to deal with the aftermath, making it seem like I'm running away."

"Don't worry. Whatever happens, I'll just fulfill my role," came the unburdened, matter-of-fact reply, comforting yet guilt-inducing for Rossio. "Gears don't hope for anything. But it's not just that..." he mused to himself, looking out the window. As Daguza began to respond, another shuttle launch drowned out his words.

Leaving behind a trail of vapor like a waterfall, the shuttle climbed the blue sky from the linear rail. Rossio, caught for a moment by a foreboding sense of doom as he watched the towering column of smoke, then gathered his shoulder bag and, with a heart torn between hope and despair, hung up the phone without waiting for Daguza's reply.