

MOBILE SUIT  
**GUNDAM**  
**0080**  
"WAR IN THE POCKET"



TRANSLATION BY **ZEONIC|SCANLATIONS**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Prologue</b>	0079 Winter .....	005
<b>I</b>	How Many Miles to the Battlefield? .....	012
<b>II</b>	Over the River and Through the Woods.....	032
<b>III</b>	War in the Pocket .....	059
<b>Epilogue</b>	0080 Spring .....	090
<b>Afterword</b>	1989 Autumn.....	094

# Prologue

## 0079 Winter

A burst of static seared Andy's eyes like a sandstorm before the monitor flooded with an eerily cold, blue-tinged white. It was a color that seemed to reject all warmth, as if winter itself had crystallized on the screen.

"Tch," Andy clicked his tongue in irritation. "Launching some half-baked camera to throw us off..."

The low rumble of engines reverberated through the discharge hatch of the Zeon Navy's Jukon-class submarine, U-99, its ballast tanks already emptied. Nestled in the cockpit of his mobile suit, the modified Z'Gok, impatience gnawed at him like a hungry beast.

True, their special ops unit might have been a thorn in the submarine crew's side. They'd pushed relentlessly to pursue the Federation's "green ass head," earning more than a few barbed comments from the captain. But was this any way to treat comrades about to venture into enemy territory?

As if responding to Andy's frustrated exhale, the monitor's saturation suddenly dropped, and a crisp horizon materialized in the center of the screen. The camera operator must have adjusted the iris.

Stretching above them was a world of ice, the Arctic, a colorless expanse that devoured all scenery, bleaching every hue into stark monochrome. The earlier white screen hadn't been a malfunction after all.

"Is that it on the left edge of the screen?" the captain's voice crackled through the cockpit speakers. But it wasn't Andy's place to answer.

"Can't say for sure. Zoom in for us," a deep, composed voice replied. It belonged to Lieutenant Steiner, leader of the Cyclops special ops unit to which Andy was assigned.

Hearing that steady tone, Andy exhaled, realizing with a wry smile how rushed he'd become. Since joining the Cyclops, he'd survived countless hellish situations alongside Steiner and his two comrades. He'd earned his stripes as a "war dog," with no small measure of pride and confidence. It was almost comical how his heart raced like a child playing war games, even if their target, this "green ass head," was unlike anything they'd faced before.

At the commander's command, the screen zoomed in. The jittery image revealed the hazy outlines of what appeared to be buildings. No doubt the Federation's polar base where their target had been transported.

"Target confirmed. Captain, thank you for your understanding thus far," Steiner acknowledged.

The captain's muffled chuckle filtered through the speakers.

"Understood, Lieutenant. And to the Cyclops team, I may have been harsh, but I've seen in you the pride of Zeon soldiers, a quality becoming all too rare. Godspeed on your mission!"

A palpable tension gripped the entire submarine. The operator's voice rang out, taut with anticipation:

"Five nautical miles to target point. Sea surface obscured by fog. Temperature at minus twelve degrees Celsius. Cyclops team, are you ready for launch?"

"Hatch Two, Misha here. About time we got some action!"

"Hatch Four, Garcia. Been itching to get moving!"

Andy bit back a grin at his comrades' lackadaisical responses, tinged with the unmistakable pride of seasoned warriors. These were the men he'd stared death in the face with, time and again. His own nerves had settled, the earlier jitters fading away.

"Hatch Three, Andy. Let's wrap this up quick and jet off to some tropical island, yeah?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Andy," Steiner's crisp voice cut in. "Cyclops team, launch preparations complete!"

"Excellent. All hatches, open! Cyclops team, launch!"

A sensation like a fetus floating in amniotic fluid enveloped Andy's body as the submarine's hatches yawned open. His mobile suit, the modified Z'Gok, rotated in tandem with the movement.

The submarine, U-99, deep beneath the ice-capped sea, slowly exposed its belly, disgorging four enormous, ungainly metal infants from its womb.

A dull thud reverberated through the cockpit as the umbilical, the anchor connecting them to the ship, detached. In the next instant, Andy's mobile suit became a free-floating entity, beginning its gradual descent into the ocean's depths.

He activated the head-mounted lights, illuminating the murky, blue-tinged darkness around him. Andy manipulated the controls, igniting the suit's jets. It was like a metallic newborn's first cry. The sinking machine gradually righted itself and began to inch forward.

On a side monitor, Andy glimpsed the massive, alien silhouette of Garcia's mobile suit, similarly advancing through the underwater gloom.

Mobile suits, these were colossal "robots" designed to mimic human movements, standing twenty meters tall and weighing sixty tons. They were unparalleled close-combat weapons, boasting extraordinary maneuverability.

Most were built in a humanoid configuration for versatility, head, torso, abdomen, arms, and legs, mimicking the five parts of the human body. The pilot, seated in a cockpit typically nestled in the abdominal area, could maneuver this titanic war machine with surprising agility.

Some mobile suits were designed with specific combat scenarios in mind. Take the Z'Gok used by Andy and his Zeon comrades. Created for amphibious warfare, its head was sunken into the torso, eliminating the neck, while the arms and legs were short and thick. This squat build reduced water resistance during submersion.

However, this design compromised its effectiveness on land. The modified Z'Gok that Andy and his team now piloted was an improved version, with altered weight distribution and other tweaks to enhance its ground combat capabilities.

"All units, maintain a depth of 150 and proceed to the target point," Steiner's voice came through, leading the formation. His tone, as always, instilled a measured tension in his team while exuding an assurance that failure simply wasn't an option, cool, collected, and unwavering.

The four mobile suits glided through the suffocating deep blue of the ocean, occasionally releasing small bubbles from their metal frames as they advanced steadily towards their objective.

"We're fifteen minutes behind schedule. All units, increase speed to 30. Landfall time remains unchanged at 1500 hours."

"Hm-hm-hmm, hm-hm-hmm, hm-hm-hmm-hmm-hmm," Andy found himself unconsciously tapping out a rhythm and humming. It was a habit of his, a way to savor the pre-battle tension.

Not that he was alone in his quirks. The other members of Cyclops, this ragtag special ops unit, were all hardened war dogs with their own idiosyncrasies. A strange groaning had been filtering through the speakers for a while now, unmistakably Misha's doing.

"Ugh... I feel like crap. What's this sensation, like a snake writhing in my skull? Damn it all, can't believe I'm hungover at a time like this..."

"Misha, not again," Steiner's voice dripped with exasperation. "Fine, I authorize a hair of the dog. Just don't overdo it."

Laughter rippled through the team at their leader's resigned tone. The hulking Misha's fondness for drink was legendary. No doubt he was already reaching for the flask stashed in his cockpit.

"Hm-hm-hm-hmm-hmm..."

"Hey, Andy," Garcia's voice crackled through, punctuated by the sound of chewing gum. "What's that tune you're always humming? Sounds pretty upbeat."

"Hm? Oh, this? It's nothing special, just been my personal theme song since way back."

"A theme song, huh? I could use one of those..."

"Warm current detected in the direction of the iceberg ahead. Likely an undersea passage leading to the base," Steiner's voice cut in sharply.

In an instant, the team snapped to full alert. For all their easy banter, they were consummate professionals. Those who weren't had long since met their end. Steiner continued issuing orders:

"Garcia, Misha, proceed with the plan. Launch your assault from above the ice. Drive them towards us. Their only escape route will be that undersea passage. Andy and I will charge in from below and catch them in a pincer attack!"

"Roger that," came the synchronized response from all three team members.

Andy scanned the main monitor. Sure enough, just as the lieutenant had said, a gaping maw yawned in the towering ice wall before them, undoubtedly a passage carved by the Federation Forces to connect with their surface base.

Steiner's mobile suit, leading the way, gestured with its arm. A wordless command to follow.

Suddenly, a powerful shockwave rippled through the water from behind, violently shaking both their machines. Misha and Garcia had ignited their jets, rocketing upward to smash through the ice above in a coordinated burst.

"We've breached the surface. Enemy base confirmed. Commencing attack!"

Their transmission was punctuated by low, percussive booms, the launch of missiles. Moments later, muffled explosions reverberated through the water. The first strike had found its mark.

The two remaining suits in the depths glided slowly into the underwater passage. Its artificial nature was immediately apparent from the telltale scars of industrial drilling. As they advanced, the tunnel gradually widened, and soon a flickering orange glow from the surface above danced across their path. They had reached the base's submersible bay.

"Let's go, Andy!" Steiner's voice crackled through the comm.

"Roger that!"

Andy stomped on the cockpit pedals as if trying to punch through the floor itself. The jet pack mounted on the Modified Z'Gok's back roared to life in response. The intense acceleration pinned him to his seat as the two squat mobile suits erupted from the water in a spray of foam and concussive force, launching like twin missiles.

In the suddenly bright main monitor, Andy's hands flew across the controls. The Modified Z'Gok, which had been in a compact submersible configuration, now unfurled its limbs mid-air. This was its ground combat form, ready for bipedal movement and assault.

They found themselves in a cavernous bay, its high ceiling suggesting it was designed for receiving and transporting materials from submarines. A massive lift stretched upward, undoubtedly leading to the outside world. On the catwalks, Federation soldiers in uniform stood paralyzed or scattered in panic at the sudden appearance of these mechanical demons.

Andy, without hesitation, opened fire.

A symphony of explosions and screams painted a canvas of blood and smoke. His Z'Gok's legs swatted away soldiers who, in their terror, futilely sprayed machine gun fire from the hip. Humans were nothing before the might of a mobile suit, truly a weapon worth a thousand men. The only thing that could stand against such a machine was—

"Ugh!" Steiner's pained grunt crackled through the comm, and Andy whirled his suit around. Three massive white shadows loomed behind them, the Federation's mainstay mobile suits, the GM. Only mobile suits could truly

challenge mobile suits. Enemy pilots must have scrambled to their machines and powered up.

Steiner's Z'Gok ducked under a lunging GM, hooking it with claw-like fingers before hurling it at the other two with titanic strength.

"Andy, I'll hold them here. Take the lift and head topside. These bastards don't seem to have proper weapons. I can handle them solo!"

Sure enough, the enemy GMs weren't equipped with their usual arsenal. They had likely been repurposed for material handling in the bay. Following orders, Andy provided covering fire for his captain while maneuvering his Modified Z'Gok onto the lift platform.

As the lift began to rise, the cacophony of Steiner's cannon fire and explosions faded below. The ceiling parted, revealing a sky of startling, crystalline blue.

"Garcia here. Two GMs providing escort for a transport have been neutralized. No sign of the dog-ass yet."

"Same story at the hangars. Looks like they moved it out just ahead of us."

The ground team's reports came in rapid succession.

"Andy, I'm heading up the lift now. What's your situation?" Steiner's voice remained steady. He must have dealt with his opponents.

Andy felt a surge of anticipation. Their target seemed to be right in front of him.

"Just disembarked from the lift, Commander! I- Commander!"

His voice cracked as he surveyed the scene below. A shuttle stood poised for liftoff, its nose aimed skyward. Frost clung to the external fuel tanks, and wisps of vapor rose from the nozzles like dragon's breath. Launch was imminent.

"They've prepped a shuttle, sir. Countdown's likely started. They're... they're loading something. Transmitting visual now."

Despite being on the verge of launch, they were hoisting something into the shuttle's rear compartment via a lifter. Whatever it was, it had to be crucially important. The camera zoomed in on a yellow container.

"We've finally found you, you damned dog-ass!" Steiner's voice crackled with intensity. "Andy, stop that launch at all costs. You have authorization to use rocket fire!"

"Understood!"

Andy's Modified Z'Gok spread its arms wide, taking aim at the shuttle. Suddenly, a violent impact rocked his suit, sending it reeling backward like a boxer caught by a surprise jab. A GM on guard duty had spotted him. Unlike the ones below, this one was armed with a proper cannon.

"Commander, we've got a GM on defense!"

"I'll provide cover. Take evasive action!"

"No time! The shuttle's about to slip away. I'm going in!"

Andy flexed his Z'Gok's right arm, bringing its beam cannon to bear on the GM. He squeezed the trigger. The blast caught the enemy suit full-on, sending it into a jerky, mechanical dance as it stumbled.

But the GM didn't relent, its machine cannon spitting a hail of rounds. Explosions peppered Andy's Z'Gok, but its superior armor held firm.

"Amateur," Andy sneered. "When your mobile suit's outgunned, you aim for the camera eyes or thrusters. Like this!"

Andy's next shot struck true, demolishing the GM's head unit, and with it, the camera eyes that fed visual data to its pilot.

A bone-shaking rumble suddenly filled the air. The shuttle's main engines had ignited, belching forth a torrent of crimson flame. In mere seconds, it would be beyond reach, soaring into the stratosphere.

"Not if I can help it!"

Andy whirled his suit around, raising its left arm. The hand missile unit's cover snapped open like the maw of a striking serpent as he yanked a plug deep in the cockpit.

He took aim at the shuttle's launch pad. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught movement, the fallen GM wasn't out of the fight yet. Andy's mind screamed a warning, but it was too late. The GM's cannon erupted in a final, desperate volley.

Whether Andy heard the near-simultaneous explosions is uncertain. In that instant, his cockpit crumpled inward, its jagged metal tearing into his flesh. Shards of shattered monitor screens lanced through his face.

The GM's last-ditch attack had found its mark, the exposed, open missile launcher on Andy's Z'Gok's arm.

White smoke engulfed the area. All sound was swallowed by the deafening roar of jet engines as the entire base shuddered. Slowly at first, then with gathering speed, the shuttle rose. Shrugging off the chains of gravity, it climbed higher and higher, its contrail stretching into the azure sky.

In the silence left behind, Andy tasted blood. His fading consciousness clung to a quiet hum.

"Hm-hm-hmm, hm-hm-hmm, hm-hm-hmm-hmm..."

Strangely, he felt no fear of death. He remembered now, this tune, his ever-present "theme song," was one he used to sing as a child, lost in games of make-believe war, toy gun clutched in small hands.

Andy almost laughed at the irony. Somewhere along the line, the game had become reality. And now, here he was, that childhood ditty his only companion as life ebbed away.

My soul will probably ascend to the stars, Andy mused through the staccato rhythm of his fading heartbeat. An age where ninety billion souls call space their home. Perhaps I'll be reborn out there, another kid caught up in the thrill of playing at war. That wouldn't be so bad. After all, there's no game quite as exhilarating as war...

The three remaining members of the Cyclops team found a small measure of solace as they laid Andy's broken body to rest. Despite the grievous wounds that had claimed his life, his face bore an expression of unexpected serenity, as if, in his final moments, he had recaptured a fragment of childhood innocence.

Universal Century 0079. The war between the Principality of Zeon and the Earth Federation Forces, which had erupted just a year prior, was now tilting inexorably in the Federation's favor. Zeon's defeat loomed on the horizon, a bitter inevitability.

Far above, beyond the arc of that ascending shuttle and the ethereal path of Andy's departing soul, a young boy made his home among the stars. His name was Alfred Izuruha. In many ways, he was the very picture of an ordinary child, the kind you might find in any era, in any nation.

Our story begins with his dream.

## I How Many Miles to the Battlefield?

### 1

"Fwoosh! Whoosh-whoosh-whoosh! Ka-*BOOM!*"

Al's hushed whispers mimicked the sound of falling missiles as his pen flew across the sketchbook sprawled on his desk.

"We did it, Commander! Enemy base destroyed. Blown to smithereens!"

His pen tip had just delivered the coup de grâce to the 'enemy base,' unleashing a spectacular explosion across the page.

"Excellent work, Corporal Alfred. I knew you had it in you."

Lost in his fantasy, Al muttered the commander's praise under his breath, a satisfied grin spreading across his face. He was playing both parts in this one-man show.

"Thank you, sir! Might I receive a medal for this? Of course, Corporal Alfred, right away—"

"Will you shut up already?!"

Beyond the horizon of the now-obliterated 'enemy base,' a giant face framed by pigtails suddenly loomed. The enemy's ultimate weapon makes its appearance, or rather, the girl sitting in front of Al, her nerves frayed by his disruptive playacting, had whirled around to glare at him.

Lifting his eyes from the 'battlefield' of his sketchbook, Al sulkily surveyed his surroundings. The world that greeted him was devoid of guns, grenades, helmets, or the acrid scent of gunpowder, just the familiar, sterile landscape of the classroom.

At the podium, a female teacher in a crisp white suit read from a textbook in a mellifluous tone, her marker gliding across the whiteboard. Al's classmates sat hunched over their desks, faces set in concentration as they scribbled notes or tapped away at their desk terminals.

In the midst of this peaceful lesson, the valiant Corporal Alfred had been waging a one-man war on the frontlines of his imagination.

War is a cruel mistress, prone to inflicting collateral damage. For the civilian girl unfortunate enough to be seated directly in front of Al, his antics were nothing short of a nuisance.

"You've been mumbling and muttering nonstop! Can't you be quiet for just a moment? Hey, what's that—"

Her tirade cut short as her sharp eyes caught sight of the sketchbook Al was trying to hide like a mother bird shielding her eggs. Quick as a flash, she reached for it.

"What's that? Show me!"

"No way!"

"I said show me!"

"Who'd want to, stupid?"

But her fingers had already latched onto the edge of the sketchbook. The brave Corporal Alfred, for all his military prowess, was defenseless against this unexpected civilian assault. The two grappled, oblivious to the stares of their classmates.

"You were drawing something weird, weren't you? Let me see!"

Her voice rose, stirring a ripple of murmurs throughout the classroom. The teacher at the podium shot them a piercing glare.

"Dorothy. Dorothy!"

But Dorothy was too caught up in the scuffle to notice. If anything, it was Al who sensed the shift in atmosphere, shrinking back slightly.

"Hey, knock it off..."

"Then just show me already!"

"Dorothy. Dorothy Hayes! What on earth are you doing?"

The teacher's voice exploded across the room, causing the entire class to flinch. Dorothy sprang back as if shocked, whirling to face forward in her seat. The tables had turned.

"Dorothy. What's all this commotion about?"

"It's not my fault, Miss! I was just trying to tell Al off..."

Dorothy's face crumpled into tears as the teacher strode towards them.

"Al was being noisy behind me, and when I tried to tell him to stop, I saw he was doodling something, so I just..."

"That's dirty, you snitch!"

Al's outburst died in his throat as he realized the teacher's stern gaze had shifted from Dorothy to him. He shrank back in his seat.

"Al, show me."

As the teacher's outstretched palm hovered before him, Al tried to stuff the incriminating sketchbook under his desk.

"Al. Al! Alfred Izuruha! Show me this instant!"

The use of their full names was the teacher's unspoken warning that she was at her limit. Reluctantly, Al produced the sketchbook and handed it over.

"Hmm..."

The teacher raised an eyebrow as she flipped through the pages. Al's stomach churned. Those pages chronicled Corporal Alfred's numerous illustrious battle achievements, all crafted during class time.

One page, two pages, the teacher's fingers suddenly paused. She had reached the scene of Al's most recent 'combat.' There, a colossal robot, a mobile suit, stood poised to launch missiles at an enemy base.

"I'm not impressed, Al."

With a sigh, she closed the sketchbook, lightly tapping his head with it before returning it to his desk.

"Let's continue the lesson. Al, why don't you read where I left off?"

"Uh, w-where?!"

"Page eighty-nine."

Al kicked the back of Dorothy's chair, the girl having whispered the page number with smug satisfaction. He stood up, nervously leafing through his textbook before beginning to read.

"Um... 'Space Colonies and Our Lives.' Our colony is an artificial space settlement floating in—"

The teacher, having returned to the podium, manipulated the console with her slender white fingers. The writing on the whiteboard vanished, replaced by an image projected from the ceiling. It showed a cylindrical structure, reminiscent of a test tube, floating against a backdrop of stars.

This was a sight every resident of the colony had seen at least once, unremarkable in its familiarity. It was a full view of the space colony, the very place where they had been born, raised, and continued to live.

Just over a century ago, in the 2000s CE, Earth's population had exploded beyond 9 billion. The resulting drain on energy resources and environmental destruction had pushed humanity to the brink of extinction. Humanity's prosperity had become the noose around its own neck.

To preserve the species, mankind turned its ingenuity skyward. The result was the "Space Colony Initiative", a plan to create artificial habitats in the vast expanse of space. These would be enormous cylindrical structures, 6.4 kilometers in diameter and 32 kilometers long, designed to house entire populations. With this, human history turned a new page, ushering in the Universal Century, the Space Age.

Universal Century 0079. People had established lives within these colonies, working, marrying, having children, and eventually dying, just as they had on Earth. For Al and his peers, this was simply the way of things, as natural as breathing.

"As colonies were completed, people migrated en masse. Within half a century, 80% of the total human population lived in colonies like ours. Each colony can accommodate approximately 36 million people—"

The chime signaling the end of class came to Al's rescue, interrupting his halting recitation.

"That's all for today, class."

As the teacher closed her textbook and gave the dismissal, the classroom erupted into excited chatter. It was time for lunch. Amidst the cacophony of scraping chairs and forming friend groups, Al sank back into his seat with a relieved sigh.

"Man, talk about bad luck, Al," said a freckle-faced brunette boy as he opened his lunch tray. His tone was sympathetic as he addressed his friend.

"That girl, she's always tattling. What a pain in the ass."

"You said it, Chay. Sheesh."

"Oh, chicken today—"

This last comment came from Telcott, a burly boy who was already eyeing the day's menu with undisguised interest.

Chay peered into his own tray and made a gagging sound.

"Synthetic meat again? Gross."

Al took a sip of milk and grimaced.

"This is watered down. What gives?"

"They say it's because of supply shortages due to the war. It's a real pain," Telcott explained between mouthfuls, seemingly unfazed by the food's questionable quality. It wasn't so much that he lacked discerning taste as he simply didn't care what he ate.

Al and Chay watched with a mix of awe and disgust as Telcott's belly, barely contained by suspenders where a belt had given up, jiggled with each bite.

"It's Zeon and the Federation fighting the war, right? What's that got to do with our colony?" Al stabbed at his meat viciously, venting his frustration.

The space colony they called home wasn't unique. Clusters of 35 to 40 colonies, known as "Sides," were positioned in gravitationally stable Lagrange points between Earth and the Moon. These were numbered chronologically: Side 1, Side 2, and so on. Al and his friends resided in a colony belonging to Side 6.

The war raging beyond their colony's walls had been ignited by Side 3. Zeon Zum Deikun, rejecting the Earth Federation's control over the colonies and calling for independence, had issued Side 3's declaration of independence to the government.

The Federation, committed to maintaining its Earth-centric power structure, naturally refused to acknowledge this independence, and thus the war began.

However, not every Side or colony had aligned fully with either Zeon or the Federation. Some declared neutrality, while others, like Al's colony, adopted a wait-and-see approach. As Al had said, this war supposedly had nothing to do with their colony, at least on the surface.

Tired of Telcott's hungry stares after he'd finished his own meal, Al pushed his tray towards his friend with a resigned "here you go."

"Thanks, man. They say supply ships get caught up in battles and stuff, causing delays. Nope, this really doesn't taste good at all," Telcott said, his words at odds with his unrelenting appetite. Al and Chay exchanged glances and shrugged.

Chay suddenly swiveled in his chair to face Al.

"Hey, wanna see something cool to cheer you up? Guess what it is?"

With a smug expression, he dramatically reached into his pocket. Leaning in close, he held out his closed fist to Al, then slowly opened it.

"Whoa! That's awesome!" Al's eyes widened, sparkling with excitement.

In Chay's palm lay what appeared to be a small, insignificant piece of metal, a military rank insignia worn on the collar of a uniform. To a kid like Al, it was as precious as a gemstone, exuding an air of danger and offering a tantalizing glimpse into an unknown world.

"Is it real?"

"Of course it is. Bonafide, genuine Federation military insignia. Look, this yellow groove with one star means—"

"Corporal! Right?"

The hero of Al's sketchbook wars, "Corporal Alfred," couldn't contain his enthusiasm. His outburst drew curious glances from around the classroom.

"So cool. Can I touch it?"

"Just for a second. Don't get it dirty."

Al hastily wiped his hands on his shirt before gingerly accepting the insignia from Chay. He raised it to eye level, examining it with an almost reverential gaze.

"This is amazing. It's really real!"

Chay beamed at the unreserved praise.

"My big bro's a Federation mobile suit pilot. They say even some of the enemy know his name."

How much of this was true was anyone's guess. But faced with a "genuine Federation military insignia," Al was ready to believe any tale, no matter how far-fetched.

"A mobile suit pilot? That's so cool! Did he give this to you?"

"Ah, well, kind of..." Chay scratched his head sheepishly, implying he might have "borrowed" it without permission. Al nodded knowingly, glancing between the insignia and Chay's face.

"That's why you can't dirty or damage it. Gotta handle it carefully, you know?"

"Oh, right. Here ya go..." Al returned the insignia to Chay with exaggerated care, his reluctance to part with it evident. Chay's implied "borrowing" only seemed to increase the item's value in Al's eyes.

"How stupid!"

The derisive comment erupted from behind them. It was Dorothy and her friends, who had pushed their desks together for lunch.

"Getting all excited over something like that. So childish. Besides, the Federation doesn't even *have* mobile suits."

Though she was ostensibly addressing her friends, the volume and direction of Dorothy's voice made it clear her mockery was aimed at the three boys.

The trio exchanged glances, wordlessly forming a united front. Chay, matching Dorothy's tactic of speaking loudly to his friends, issued his counterattack:

"Man, girls who pretend to know everything are the worst."

"Totally."

"She says the Federation doesn't have mobile suits. Shows how much she knows."

"Excuse me?!" Dorothy whirled around, her pigtails swinging, her expression indignant.

"The Federation can't possibly have mobile suits. Don't you guys ever watch the news?"

"Looks like you're the one who needs to catch up," Chay retorted coolly. "They didn't before, but they do now."

Dorothy sprang to her feet, nearly toppling her chair. Hands on hips, she leaned forward aggressively. "Liar! You've never even seen one!"

"Well... no, but..." Chay faltered.

Sensing his comrade's peril, Al jumped to his feet. He turned to face Dorothy, nostrils flaring.

"It's not a lie. I've seen a Federation mobile suit myself!"

"Oh really?" Dorothy's eyebrow arched skeptically. "Where? When? How?"

"My dad works for a transport company. He showed me one at the port. It was a Federation mobile suit being shipped to Side 7. Big, black, and super cool-looking."

It was, of course, a complete fabrication. Despite her lack of physical maturity, Dorothy was still female enough to see through a boy's clumsy lie.

"That's a lie too. Everything you guys say is a lie. Even that badge is probably fake. Ha!"

"Why you—" Chay lunged at Dorothy, his face flushed with anger.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

As she spat out the last syllable, Dorothy delivered a swift, merciless blow. Her knee connected with Chay's groin, causing him to freeze in shock, his face contorting in silent agony.

"Ugh..."

Al, imagining the pain, winced in sympathy. Spurred by this act of treachery and Dorothy's triumphant smirk, he tackled her.

"That's fighting dirty!"

"As if a boy trying to hit a girl isn't worse!"

The two rolled on the floor, with Al clearly at a disadvantage against Dorothy's clawing attacks. Suddenly, Telcott's imposing shadow fell over them.

"Al! Keep her pinned down!"

No sooner had he spoken than Telcott, arms outstretched, began to descend upon the grappling pair. It was his forbidden special move: the human press.

Moments later, the agonized screams of both Al and Dorothy echoed throughout the school.

## 2

As soft cotton clouds drifted lazily overhead, warm sunlight streamed down onto the colony. It was winter here, and the bustling crowds wore long sleeves and coats, hurrying about in preparation for the new year, just a month away.

A space colony is, in essence, a gigantic "tube" filled with air. Yet life within was far from the sterile, artificial existence one might imagine under manufactured light and on lifeless floors.

Instead, it was a place where the sun rose and set, clouds drifted over mountains, vegetation swayed in the breeze, and seasons changed, a slice of Earth, or perhaps even more lush than Earth itself, recreated in the void of space.

On planet Earth, several key elements had been crucial for human evolution and generational survival: sunlight, water, air, and gravity. In this era, human ingenuity had made it possible to recreate these essentials within an artificial space habitat.

Life-giving sunlight was channeled into the colony interior via massive external mirrors. Plants absorbed this light, releasing oxygen, while humans breathed it in and exhaled the carbon dioxide necessary for plant life. Water evaporated to form clouds, fell as rain, and returned to the ground in an endless cycle. The space colony was, in effect, a colossal test tube ecosystem.

"Gravity" was simulated through the centrifugal force generated by the colony's rotation. One complete revolution every two minutes kept the inhabitants firmly planted on the artificial ground.

Of course, along the central axis of rotation where centrifugal force was negligible, a zero-gravity environment persisted. It was here, at the "bottom" of the test tube, that the spaceport connecting the colony to the outside world was located.

"Tch. I'm not going to make it in time," Al muttered, glancing at the wall clock while waiting in line at the information lobby. He kicked the floor in frustration, nearly propelling himself into the air before hastily grabbing a nearby safety bar. He had just arrived at the port's entrance.

"Dad's probably getting impatient waiting for me."

The port bustled with activity during this peak season, filled not only with business travelers but also tourists and those welcoming arrivals. A constant hum of voices filled the air. Despite coming straight from school, Al was well past the agreed meeting time. He adjusted his cap and pulled out his ID card and a letter from his bag, a message from his father.

The worn corners of the letter betrayed how many times Al had read it. His father, employed by a transport company, was rarely able to stay in one place for long. Yet he managed to arrange these meetings a few times a year, ostensibly for work. For Al, these visits were the highlight of his year.

"Alfred Izuruha, ID number 5360AF5... Entry request for meeting with Eames Izuruha of MI Company, currently in port. The application's been processed. Alright. That's your father, I take it?" The port official manipulated his terminal, nodding as he scanned the monitor. He handed Al a freshly printed card, then traced his finger along a line of text on the display.

"There's a message for you. Your father had to move to Wharf AE35 due to work commitments."

"What? Will this pass still work?"

"Hmm... I'm afraid not..." The official held up the card he had just issued, glancing between it and Al's anxious face. The A-Area docks were off-limits to anyone not directly involved in port operations.

"Well... I suppose we can make an exception. I'll reissue your pass. It'd be a shame for you to come all this way and not see your father."

Seeing Al's face light up, the kind-hearted official smiled and playfully stuck the newly printed card to the boy's chest.

"Just remember, no detours, alright?"

"Got it. Thank you so much!"

As Al bowed in gratitude, his cap bounced off and floated upward. The official chuckled, catching and tossing it back. With another quick bow, Al spun on his heel and darted towards the passage leading to A-Area.

"Hey, Al! You made it!"

Al's father caught his son mid-air as the boy literally flew towards him, breathless from his rush. With a smooth spin, he set Al back on his feet.

"You've grown since I last saw you, haven't you? Sorry for making you come all the way out here. Did you have any trouble finding your way?"

"Nah, I got here just fine."

"I arrived this morning, but apparently the weather's acting up, and our company's ship hasn't docked yet. We've got some urgent cargo, so I'm stuck waiting here at the wharf. Not exactly the best place for a drink..."

"That's okay. It's not like I get to come to places like this very often."

Al glanced around. They were in a vast, high-ceilinged space used for unloading cargo from spaceships. Despite being called a wharf, it wasn't directly connected to space. They stood in a viewing gallery overlooking the area. Occasional metallic clangs echoed through the otherwise deserted space.

"Still no sign of it, huh? What's wrong with the weather?"

"Well... I don't know the details, but apparently there's some fighting between Federation and Zeon forces right near the colony."

"What?! Really?"

"Don't worry, it probably won't reach us here. Our government's staying out of that war, after all."

They sat down on a nearby bench. Al immediately rummaged through his bag, producing an envelope for his father.

"This is from Mom. She said she couldn't get away from work today... Oh, and this is my report card from last term. She told me to show you..."

Al hesitantly offered the report card, looking slightly embarrassed. His father took it with a wry smile and a small sigh.

"Your mother hasn't changed, I see. How's school going?"

"It's the worst. Nothing good ever happens. Teachers yell at me, there's this annoying girl..."

His father watched Al's pouting face and swinging legs with a gentle gaze, then casually tossed the unopened report card back into Al's bag.

"You're not going to look at it?"

"No need. I trust you, Al. I'd rather hear about this annoying girl you mentioned."

"Well... Oh! Hey, Dad, didn't you say before that you'd transported mobile suits?"

"Mobile suits? Ah, right. I said I'd transported parts and chemicals used in mobile suits."

"Oh... just parts..."

Noticing Al's crestfallen expression, his father leaned in closer.

"Did something happen?"

"This girl keeps insisting the Federation doesn't have any mobile suits. She makes fun of us, saying we should show proof if they exist. Dad, the Federation does have mobile suits, right?"

"That's what I've heard, but I've never seen one myself. If one shows up here, should we snap a photo as evidence?" His father's eyes twinkled mischievously as he spoke, his hand emerging from behind his back with a wrapped package.

"Merry Christmas, Al. It's a bit early, but here's your present."

"Can... can I open it?"

Al barely waited for his father's nod before tearing into the package. In the low gravity, he didn't even need to hold the box steady. Wrapping paper floated around his head as he opened the box, his eyes widening in delight.

"A camcorder! I've wanted one of these! It's the new video camera model. I haven't even seen ads for this yet!"

"I asked a work friend to set one aside specially for you. Do you like it?"

Al immediately raised the camera to his eye, fumbling with his left hand for the power switch. The viewfinder lit up, his father's face coming into focus. It was a versatile camcorder that used discs as recording media, capable of both video and still photography.

"I've already loaded a disc for you. It's recording now. How does it look?"

Al was about to respond when a harsh voice suddenly boomed from behind them.

"Hey! What are you two doing there?!"

They turned to see a stocky, middle-aged man in what was clearly a port security uniform. Al instinctively ducked behind his father.

"We're about to bring in some Class A hazardous materials. This area was supposed to be cleared three hours ago!"

"With all due respect, we have proper authorization to be here. My son, too. We were told to wait here for our company's ship to dock."

"What the—"

The man snatched the ID badge from Al's father's chest, scrutinizing it closely.

"Eames Izuruha. MI Company. Authorized access to Wharf AE35... This can't be right."

He grabbed a nearby wall phone, punching in a series of numbers to make a call.

A low, rumbling sound reverberated through the air, accompanied by the hiss of pressurized air. The partition between the wharf and the bay was opening.

Al, careful not to draw attention, aimed his camera towards the opening without looking through the viewfinder. The video was still rolling, his pulse quickening at the mention of "Class A hazardous materials."

However, what slowly emerged along the guardrail was nothing more extraordinary than a yellow container. While covered in various seals, it looked far from ominous.

"Talk about a snoozefest," Al muttered. "It would've been cooler if it was a Federation mobile suit."

The security officer hung up the phone and turned back to them, waving his hand dismissively.

"Sorry about that. Looks like there was a mix-up on our end. You're supposed to be at Wharf AI35, not here. Someone must have misheard and given you the wrong information. That's why you got this pass. Your company's ship actually arrived half an hour ago."

"Really? What a mess," Al's father sighed, patting Al's shoulder and turning to leave. Al had no objections; his interest in the yellow container had already waned. As they stepped into the corridor, the partition locked shut behind them.

"Al, I've got to get to work right away. Here's a letter for your mother. Take it home with you."

As they walked, he stuffed the letter into Al's pocket. The boy's cheeks puffed out in disappointment.

"Dad, are you leaving already? I wanted to talk more..."

"I'm sorry, Al. Next time I visit, I'll try to set aside more time."

"Dad..." Al fell silent for a moment, then looked up with an accusatory gaze. "Dad, are you ever coming back home? Mom said the other day that you have no intention of coming—"

"She said that? That's not true, Al. It's just that... I *can't* right now."

His father took off Al's cap, flipped it around, and placed it back on his head, a habitual gesture he always made before saying goodbye.

"Listen to your mother, and try not to cause her too much trouble. See you next time."

Al could sense his father's mind already shifting towards work. As he watched his father's retreating back down the corridor, Al tugged his cap down lower, a touch of loneliness in his eyes.

Descending from the port back to the artificial gravity zone, Al spotted a bus heading for Main Street. He sprinted towards it, but the doors closed right in front of him, his desperate shouts falling on deaf ears as it pulled away.

"Come on! You couldn't have waited a few seconds? Jeez!"

Checking the schedule, Al's shoulders slumped even further. It would be a long wait for the next bus. Unlike adults, he couldn't use other transportation options. Walking to the next terminal might be faster at this rate.

The road near the port was wide but lined with dull, featureless warehouses. No interesting detours to be found. Al dramatically readjusted his bag and started trudging along, eyes downcast, oblivious to the fact he was crossing against a red light.

The sudden screech of brakes pierced his ears. Al's head snapped up, his eyes widening in terror as a red open-top electric car swerved into view. If the driver's reflexes had been any slower, Al might never have seen light again. But the vehicle pirouetted at the last second, its tail whipping around as it screeched to a halt broadside.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

A woman's voice. The sound of a car door opening, hurried footsteps. Al, frozen in place and collapsed on the ground, cautiously opened his eyes. A young woman with long hair was leaning over him, her face etched with concern.

"Ah... y-yeah..."

"Here."

The woman bent down, extending her hand. With her help, Al managed to stand. A sweet scent tickled his nostrils, somehow familiar, nostalgic even.

"You don't seem injured. Thank goodness." She gently brushed dirt from his clothes, then paused, studying his face.

"Wait a minute, you're—"

They stared at each other in silence as a truck detoured around them. Both were frantically searching their memories. The realization hit them almost simultaneously.

"Al! It is you, isn't it?! Alfred Izuruha. You lived next door. Right?"

"Chris?"

"That's right. I'm Christina Mackenzie." Without hesitation, she pulled the bewildered Al into a tight hug. "Oh my God. This is unreal. Running into my old neighbor right outside the port!"

"Chris? That Chris?" Al's eyes were wide with disbelief, but soon his voice lifted, his face breaking into a smile. "The one who suddenly disappeared, saying she was going to Earth for government work."

Christina had been the only daughter of Al's next-door neighbors, a big sister figure from his past. They'd walked dogs together, gone on picnics, celebrated birthdays, she'd been like family to Al. Every year, he'd eagerly anticipated Christmas Eve, when they'd celebrate with her homemade cake.

Al had felt incredibly lonely when Christina suddenly disappeared from his life.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't say goodbye back then. The demands of government work, you know," Christina apologized, her eyes quickly scanning Al for injuries. "Are you sure you're not hurt? Should we go to a hospital?"

"No need, I'm fine. But... could you give me a ride home instead?"

Christina smiled, opening the passenger door of her car with a wink. "Your wish is my command. Hop in."

"Lucky!" Al exclaimed, leaping into the open-top car. "I've always wanted to ride in one of these!"

"Shall we go for a spin then?" Christina slid into the driver's seat with a mischievous grin, seemingly unfazed by their near-accident moments ago.

"Ready?"

"Yeah! Let's blast off! Whoa!"

Al let out an exhilarated cry as the car lurched forward. The dull scenery rapidly fell away, wind whipping against his cheeks, tousling his hair. It was almost hard to breathe, but in the most exhilarating way possible.

The car sped off, leaving only a whirlwind and the echo of Al's delighted laughter in its wake. There was no roar of an engine, no exhaust fumes, the hallmarks of an electric car. Within the colony, internal combustion engines that devoured oxygen and belched toxic gases were strictly forbidden.

"So?" Christina asked. "Feeling better?"

"Huh? What?"

"I asked if you're feeling better," she repeated, brushing her hair to the side and glancing at Al. "You looked pretty down earlier. Didn't even notice the red light. Did something happen?"

"Oh, well..." Al hesitated before continuing. "I just met with my dad."

"Your dad? At the port? Were you seeing him off on a business trip or something?"

"It's not like that, Chris—" Al realized Christina didn't know about his father's prolonged absences due to work. After a moment's hesitation, he began to explain. "After you left, Dad's job changed..."

Christina listened, nodding occasionally. The sky seemed to have cleared a bit. As they entered the colony's main street, the "ground" of the level above became visible through the transparent ceiling, a unique view only possible in the cylinder-shaped colony using centrifugal force for artificial gravity.

As they entered the urban area, Christina naturally slowed down. Stopped at the first red light, she turned to Al with a sympathetic smile, having heard his story.

"I see. That must be tough... But you have to be understanding, Al. It's your dad's job, and you're growing up now, right?"

"Do we always have to put up with everything just because it's work?" Al pouted. "That's not fair. Oh, hey—"

Suddenly remembering, Al pointed his new camcorder at Christina. Through the viewfinder, he saw her startled expression.

As the light turned green and they started moving again, Christina chuckled, "Come on, Al. What are you up to? You're making me nervous."

"You're probably going back to Earth soon for work too, right? So I'm recording this to remember."

"Well..." She gave Al a gentle look. "Actually, I might be staying for a while. I've got a job here now. At least until the end of the year."

"Really? That's great!" Al's face lit up, lowering the camera. "So we can have a Christmas party together? Will you bake a cake like you used to?"

"Hmm, I don't know. I'm much busier with work now than I used to be—"

Al's protest was cut short by a sudden, low roar that swept through the city, an urgent, pulsing siren. Not the familiar sound of emergency vehicles, but something far more ominous.

"That's—" Christina's lips tightened. "An air raid warning. It can't be!"

All traffic lights simultaneously turned red. Following Christina's lead, drivers pulled over to the side of the road. People froze, their eyes darting about in confusion.

"Look!" someone shouted, but the cry was unnecessary. A pillar of fire erupted nearby with a deafening boom. From the billowing black smoke emerged a sleek, white steel giant. It steadied itself against a building, raising its head skyward. It seemed to have been ambushed.

"A-A mobile suit?!"

"That's a Federation GM Command. RGM-79G. What on earth—"

"Federation?!"

Al immediately raised his camera. Zooming in, the shaky image captured a mobile suit unlike any he'd seen before, at least outside of TV or photographs.

Suddenly, the GM's head jerked back, showering sparks. It had been hit by fire from above. Al panned the camera upward, catching a glimpse of a green mass descending rapidly, another mobile suit, but stockier than the GM.

Al lowered the camera. "What's that?"

"This is terrible, it's a Zeon Rick Dom II. Wait, there's a Zaku too. Zeon's main mobile suits."

"Those are—"

Even as they spoke, more Zeon units descended, rifles blazing. The number of GMs on the ground seemed to be increasing as well. The colony was engulfed in a maelstrom of explosions and screams.

A GM with a damaged head toppled slowly into a cluster of buildings, sending up a cloud of gray dust and debris. A Zaku touched down, only to be met with machine gun fire from another GM emerging from behind. The entire street lit up like a fireworks display. The battle seemed evenly matched.

"The GMs must be from the Federation garrison here. Zeon's launched an air raid. But why target this colony? Unless—!"

An electronic chime interrupted them. Christina snatched up her phone, cupping it and turning away from Al as she exchanged a few terse words. Al, transfixed by the mobile suit battle he was witnessing for the first time, barely noticed.

"Understood. I'll be right there." Christina slammed the receiver down and turned to Al.

"Al, I'm sorry. You need to get out now."

"Huh? Why?"

"It's work. I have to go immediately. Please."

Her tone and eyes left no room for argument. Al reluctantly complied.

"Listen, Al," Christina called as he stepped onto the sidewalk. "Go straight home. If anything happens, follow the broadcast instructions or the police. Understand?"

"Yeah!"

Whether Christina heard his reply was uncertain. She slapped what looked like a permit onto her windshield, flicked on her headlights and hazards, and peeled out with a sharp U-turn.

"What the hell, Chris too?!"

Left alone, Al stamped his foot in frustration. Oddly, viewing the mobile suit battle through his camera had dulled his sense of fear. Perhaps it was overshadowed by his renewed resentment towards both Christina and his father for abandoning him for work.

"Hey, Al! What a coincidence!"

Turning towards the familiar voice, Al saw Chay and Telcott. Both boys' faces were flushed with excitement at the sight of real Mobile Suits.

"This is awesome! Those are Federation mobile suits, right? I bet Dorothy's eyes are popping out of her head right now. Serves her right!"

Suddenly, an explosion, closer than any before, rocked the street. Perhaps a stray round had found its mark. A warm blast of air buffeted the three boys. Around them, screams intensified as people began to flee en masse.

"Hey, you kids!" A middle-aged man called out as he ran past. "What are you doing standing around? Get to shelter now!"

"Tch. Adults are so stupid," Chay scoffed.

"Should we evacuate?" Telcott asked hesitantly.

Amidst the panicking adults, the children who had given up on comprehending the situation seemed oddly calm. For them, war wasn't yet a reality.

"Evacuation is for cowards," Chay grinned, puffing out his chest proudly. There, pinned to his shirt, was the borrowed Federation military insignia. "I'm not running away. Let's go to the observation deck in the forest park. We'll get a better view from there."

"But—" Telcott started to protest.

"What's the matter, Telcott? Scared?"

"I'm not scared," Al interjected boldly. "Let's go, Chay."

"That's the spirit, Private First Class Alfred!"

"H-Hey, I'm a Corporal!"

"Without insignia, I decide your rank. Let's move, Private Telcott!"

"Gotta follow the superior officer's orders, I guess," Telcott sighed, ever the easygoing one.

As the two boys took off against the flow of fleeing people, the self-demoted "Corporal Alfred" took a deep breath, exhaled dramatically, and despite his grumbling, sprinted after his friends into the chaos unfolding around them.

### 3

The forest park, not far from the city, was a carefully cultivated green zone. For a colony that had to create an artificial ecosystem, vegetation was crucial. In fact, they needed to design areas even more lush than Earth's

natural landscapes. The dense foliage deep within the park was therefore precious territory.

It wasn't long before the three boys reached the observation deck on the hilltop.

"Whoa! It's even prettier than fireworks!" Telcott exclaimed.

"But it's not as intense as in the movies," Chay commented. "If only we could see it up close..."

The battle raged on, with the Zeon forces seemingly at a disadvantage.

A Zeon Rick Dom, cornered by the coordinated attack of two GMs, desperately ignited its verniers and leapt skyward. It sprayed machine gun fire from the hip, causing an orange fireball to erupt as it struck a gas tank in the industrial district. Lives were likely lost in that explosion, but for the boys, it was a distant tragedy, disconnected from their reality.

"Woohoo! Got 'em!" Chay cheered.

"Wait, which side are you rooting for?" Al asked, confused.

"That's Corporal Chay to you. Isn't it obvious? I'm a Federation corporal."

"Oh, right. So I guess we're Federation soldiers too," Telcott nodded.

"Don't lump me in with you!" Al snapped at the easygoing Telcott. "I'm not Chay's subordinate! I'm a corporal too, remember? I always have been!"

"But Chay's got a real corporal's insignia!"

"G-Guys, look!" Chay's voice suddenly filled with panic. "That Zaku, it's coming this way!"

"What?!"

Sure enough, a Zaku had altered its course and was now hurtling towards them at breakneck speed. It rapidly filled their field of vision. A gust of wind kicked up, blinding the boys with dust.

"Whoa!"

Rubbing their eyes, they struggled to see clearly. The cityscape was suddenly overshadowed by an enormous silhouette. As their vision cleared, their pupils dilated in shock. The source of the shadow was the Zaku itself, looming before them like a colossal statue.

"H-Holy..." Chay whimpered, his bravado evaporating.

In that instant, the Zaku swung its arms and rocketed upwards, the backdraft nearly knocking the boys over. Whether the pilot had noticed the children or not, Al and his friends had narrowly escaped a potentially deadly encounter.

The three boys craned their necks skyward, tracking the Zaku as it rocketed almost vertically into the air. Its back-mounted verniers flared to life, propelling it higher. Suddenly, with a series of sputtering explosions, the mobile suit's thrusters flickered and died.

"It's been hit!" Al exclaimed, peering through his zoomed-in camera. "The verniers are busted!"

"It's falling towards the forest!" Chay pointed.

There was no need for the warning. Having lost propulsion, the Zaku plummeted earthward, disappearing behind the tall trees.



Moments later, the ground shook with its impact. A flock of birds took flight, startled by the crash.

The boys exchanged glances, and Al was the first to voice what they were all thinking. "It crashed in the forest. It's close! Let's go check it out!"

"I don't know..." Chay hesitated.

"What's the matter, Chay? Scared?" Al taunted.

"I'm not scared! But what if the Zeon pilot survived? What if he's armed?"

"Then we'll fight and take his weapon! Come on!"

"No way, Al. As your superior officer, I can't let you put yourself in danger. That's an order!"

"I'm not—" Al jumped back in frustration, pointing at Chay. "I'm not your subordinate! If you won't go, I'll fight alone. I'll show you what a real corporal's courage looks like!"

"Hey, Al, wait!"

But Al was already gone, deaf to his friends' protests. He turned on his heel and sprinted into the underbrush, branches scratching his arms as he pushed through. Under normal circumstances, Al might have been the voice of reason, often calming an overeager Chay. But today was different. A day full of disappointments had left him raw, and being called Chay's subordinate had only fueled his frustration.

As he ran through the cool forest, Al found himself intoxicated by a new sense of expectation bubbling up in his chest. He was venturing alone into enemy territory. Corporal Alfred was about to become a hero.

After navigating a narrow path and skirting a gentle, grass-covered slope, Al came upon a scene of destruction. Trees lay bent and broken, all pointing downslope as if a giant hand had swept through. The ground was torn open, exposing fresh earth. This had to be the Zaku's crash site.

Al vaulted over a fallen tree and slid down the soft earth, pushing aside branches and leaves until suddenly, the view opened up before him. There, embedded in the ground, was an enormous steel mass.

"Whoa..."

Al gasped, taking in the full sight. Like a mechanical Gulliver washed up on shore, a steel giant lay sprawled before him. Up close, it was so massive that Al's mind initially struggled to reconcile it with the Zaku he'd seen fall from the sky.

The mobile suit had managed to land in a semi-upright position, its legs bent and back against the ground, having mowed down a swath of trees in its descent. Whether its pilot was unconscious or dead was unclear, but the Zaku showed no signs of movement.

"Amazing..." Al muttered, cautiously approaching the Zaku's leg. He reached out to touch the metal surface but quickly recoiled. "Ouch! It's still hot!"

Birds called overhead, but the sounds of battle had faded away. Surrounded by trees and faced with this motionless steel giant, Al felt as if he'd stepped into a world where time stood still.

"It's not moving at all. I wonder if the pilot died..." Al raised his camera, capturing the fallen giant in the viewfinder. "I'll show this to Chay later. He won't dare call me a private after this."

Even at maximum zoom, Al couldn't fit the entire Zaku in frame. He shuffled around carefully, completely absorbed in filming every detail of the mobile suit. The heavy armor, the thick pipes connecting at the knees, the cockpit seemingly located in the abdomen. There was a torn pipe around the waist, likely from being hit, and the air was thick with the acrid smell of burning oil.

Lost in his filming, Al tilted the camera upward. Suddenly, something that wasn't metal caught the edge of the frame. A foot? A human foot, standing on the Zaku's knee. Al quickly zoomed in to confirm. It was a soldier in a pilot suit, pointing a gun directly at him.

The pilot looked young and slight, his grip on the weapon somewhat awkward. Despite this, Al lowered his camera and instinctively stepped back. "Uh..."

"What the? It's just a kid," the soldier muttered, holstering his pistol with visible relief. He crouched back down on the Zaku's knee, apparently resuming some kind of operation.

Though initially startled, Al's fear quickly subsided when he realized the soldier had no intention of attacking. He raised his camera again and inched closer. Strangely, he felt no terror. Though he had earlier boasted about taking down any surviving Zeon soldiers, he knew full well he was incapable of such a feat. What kept him from fleeing was an inexplicable sense of approachability he sensed in the young soldier.

The pilot, muttering to himself, finished whatever he was doing on the knee and climbed down to the leg area. He opened a small panel and began manipulating something inside.

Al crept around for a better angle, zooming in on the soldier's actions. As he leaned in for a closer look, a twig snapped under his foot.

The soldier whirled around, startled. "You're still here?!"

"Yeah. Hey," Al asked, unabashed, camera still rolling, "You piloted this, right? Did you get shot down?"

"Ugh..." The soldier flinched, Al's innocent question striking a raw nerve. "Mind your own business, kid. Go home and go to bed!"

"What are you doing? Repairs?"

"Shut up, will you? Aren't you scared of me? I'm a Zeon soldier!"

"There's no Zeon or Federation in this colony. This is the first time I've seen a real mobile suit. Can I watch a little longer?"

"Of course not, idiot. Go home already!"

The soldier waved Al away like a bothersome dog and resumed his work. But Al wasn't about to back down. He raised his camera like a weapon and took another step forward.

"Oh, I get it. You're setting a 'trap,' right? So the enemy can't use the disabled mobile suit later. If anyone tries to move it, it'll explode. That's it, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right," the soldier answered wearily. "Do they teach that stuff in school these days?"

"Nah, a friend told me."

"Geez, kids these days... Whoa!" The soldier turned and nearly collided with Al, who had crept up close. "You really don't know fear, do you? Hey, that camera..."

"Hehe," Al darted away nimbly. "I've got it all on film now. This shows how to disarm the 'trap,' right?"

"You little—"

The soldier lunged for the camera, but Al was quick. He dodged at the last second, slipping to the side. However, the soldier had anticipated this move. With a swift leg sweep, he sent Al tumbling, the camera flying from his hands.

"Gotcha," the soldier caught the camera with a light exclamation. "I'll be taking this."

"Give it back! It's a present from my dad!"

Al tackled the soldier without hesitation. Caught off guard, the soldier's knees buckled, and they both went rolling down the slope. Broken branches and sharp twigs jutted from the ground. The soldier instinctively wrapped his arms around Al, shielding him from harm, though Al was too caught up in the moment to notice this protective gesture.

As soon as they stopped moving, Al sprang up, straddling the soldier. "Give it back!"

"You little brat. You're really asking for it now!" The soldier raised his left arm but froze mid-motion. Al had suddenly stopped shouting, his gaze now fixed intently on the soldier's collar.

"What's wrong with you?" the soldier asked, confused by the sudden change.

"This..." Al murmured.

"This? What about it?" The soldier traced Al's gaze to his own collar insignia.

"This? What's so special about it?"

Al remained silent, his eyes locked on the rank insignia.

"You want it?" the soldier asked, a hint of understanding in his voice.

It was the real deal, a genuine rank insignia worn by a real Zeon soldier who piloted an actual mobile suit. Of course Al wanted it. Seeing the boy's eyes dart between the insignia and his face, the soldier couldn't help but smile wryly.

"Sorry, kid. I can't just give it to you."

"What if..." Al hesitated for a moment before blurting out, "What if I trade you my camera for it?"

"It's not about that," the soldier chuckled, standing up and brushing dirt from his clothes. "For a soldier, their rank insignia is like their soul. You can't just trade something like that away, you know?"

"Hmm..." Al's eyes gleamed with even more desire. He knew the actual monetary value of a military insignia was probably negligible, certainly not

worth trading for his camera. But right now, he wanted it more than anything. The soldier, sensing this, seemed to be teasing him.

"There is one way you could get this, though."

"Really? How?" Al's excitement was palpable.

"You'd have to become a Zeon soldier yourself," the soldier grinned. "You don't hate Zeon, do you?"

Al shook his head vigorously. The thought of one-upping Chay with his Federation insignia added to his enthusiasm. "I'll do it. I'll become a Zeon soldier!"

"The Zeon military is tough. You sure about this?"

This time, Al nodded just as emphatically.

"Alright then. I hereby appoint you as a soldier of the Zeon military, right here and now. What's your name?"

"Al. Alfred Izuruha."

"Very well." The soldier removed his own insignia and pinned it to Al's chest. "Alfred Izuruha, from this day forward, you are a corporal in the Zeon army."

"Sir, yes sir!" Al saluted proudly, his eyes gleaming at the insignia now adorning his chest. "It's an honor, sir!"

"I'm your direct superior officer, Bernard Wiseman. My orders are absolute. I'll be holding onto this camera's disk for now. Any objections?"

"None whatsoever, sir!"

Of course, Bernard Wiseman had simply outsmarted Al. But with both parties satisfied, perhaps this was the best outcome.

"Good." Bernard ejected the recording disk from the camera and handed the device back to Al. "Your mission is to scout this colony. In other words, you're a spy. You must never reveal to anyone that you're a Zeon soldier. Always maintain your civilian cover."

The surrounding trees began to rustle, and a warm breeze swept over them. In the distance, another Zaku was descending, likely coming to retrieve Bernard.

Noticing this, Bernard placed a friendly hand on Al's shoulder. "Alright, I've got to go. Remember, not a word about this to anyone."

"Got it!"

"Good answer. See you around!"

With a quick wave to Al, Bernard sprinted towards the newly arrived Zaku. After a brief moment, the mobile suit, which had been partially hidden by the trees, ignited its verniers and soared into the sky. As the trees swayed and birds scattered in panic, Al stood alone, his eyes shining with wonder as he watched the Zaku disappear.

"Amazing! So cool! I'm a real Zeon soldier now, a genuine corporal!"

He fingered the insignia on his chest, studying it intently. Then, as if shaking off all the day's frustrations, he leapt high into the air.

"I did it! I really did it!"

In the forest, with the disabled Zaku lying nearby, Al's joyous cheers echoed endlessly.

## II Over the River and Through the Woods

### 1

As Al and Chris walked together, Al was animatedly recounting his exaggerated version of the events during the Zeon attack.

"And then, I leapt at this Zeon soldier. He had a gun, but I knocked it right out of his hands—"

Al gesticulated wildly as he spoke.

"We ended up in hand-to-hand combat, but of course, I was at a disadvantage being smaller. So, I threw sand in his eyes and when he flinched, I got in a solid kick!"

"Wow, really? That's amazing, Al," Chris responded, smiling as she walked beside him, listening to his heroic exploits. They had bumped into each other that morning and decided to walk together for part of the way.

It had been a week since Zeon's sudden attack on the colony. Apparently, their goal had been to strike at the Federation Forces stationed there. Despite not having fully signed a security treaty with the Federation government, the colony's government was now dealing with left-wing pushback and citizen protests, dominating the daily news, though Al remained largely oblivious to such matters.

"And when we were grappling, I managed to snatch this from him," Al declared proudly, pointing to the Zeon rank insignia on his chest. "A real Zeon soldier's badge!"

"My, you're so brave, Al," Chris praised.

"Oh, it was nothing," Al said, scratching his head sheepishly. "But it's a shame he got away in the end. Another Zaku showed up, and he managed to escape."

"What a pity. I'm sure you would have caught him otherwise."

Buoyed by Chris's praise, Al was practically skipping as they walked.

As they left the residential area, the street filled with people heading to work. Though some buildings and facilities had been destroyed in Zeon's air raid, cleanup efforts were underway, and the city was gradually returning to normalcy.

"Your school's that way, right?" Chris winked at Al as they waited at a busy intersection for the pedestrian signal to change. "I'm heading to the station, so I guess this is where we part ways?"

"Chris, you said you work for the government, right? You always seem so busy. What exactly do you do?"

"Hmm, let's see..." She tapped her chin thoughtfully before flashing Al a smile. "You could say I'm a babysitter for troublemakers. That's the kind of job it is."

Al looked puzzled at Chris's playful response.

"What's that mean? Your job is looking after someone's kid?"

"Haha, well, something like that. My role is to whip him into shape until he becomes a fine adult."

"Oh, so you're like a teacher. What's this kid's name?"

"Everyone calls him Alex."

"Hey, that's like my name!" Al grinned.

"You're right, I hadn't thought of that. I hope Alex grows up to be a brave warrior just like you, Al."

The signal turned green, and the crowd began to move, gently pushing them along. It was time for Chris and Al to go their separate ways.

"See you, Al," Chris said, starting to walk away.

"Oh, Chris!" Al called out quickly. "Do you think I could meet Alex sometime?"

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Well, I thought I could teach him the rules of the battlefield and the basics of being a warrior myself."

"My, that's very kind of you. But I'm not sure about a meeting. He's quite shy around strangers. Well, take care!"

With a bright smile and a waft of fresh perfume, Chris waved and disappeared into the crowd.

"Shy, huh? He's still got a long way to go as a warrior then," Al muttered, puffing out his chest.

Corporal Alfred, as he fancied himself, set off for school with his head held high, ready to face another day of imaginary battles and playground heroics.

Even at school, Al's tale of adventure hadn't lost its luster. He remained the center of attention, his story of single-handedly confronting a mobile suit pilot during the air raid and snatching a rank insignia elevating him to hero status among his peers.

"That's pretty much how it went down," Al was saying during lunch break, holding court by the classroom window for Chay and Telcott. "You can't let the enemy overwhelm you. You've got to overwhelm them. If your resolve is weak, death is all that awaits you."

His tone was self-important, but his face beamed with barely contained joy.

"Man, Al, you really are something else. Sorry I called you a corporal before," Chay admitted.

"Can I see that insignia again?"

"Sure thing."

Al reached into his pocket and produced the Zeon insignia. Chay, mirroring Al's earlier reverence, extended his hands gingerly to receive the coveted item.

"Wow... The real deal is really something," Chay muttered, inadvertently revealing the truth about his own "Federation insignia." Neither Al nor Telcott seemed to notice. "Does it smell like... blood to you guys?"

"Of course it does. I fought a hardened Zeon soldier who wouldn't hesitate to hurt women or children. Look, I've still got the scars from that fight."

Al rolled up his sleeve, revealing fresh scratches on his arm. In reality, these were from branches whipping his skin as he ran through the forest and tumbled down the hill with the Zeon pilot.

Al's fantastical account would have been laughable to any worldly adult or even to the kind-hearted Zeon soldier who had given him the insignia. But his audience of similarly imaginative boys his age was captivated.

However, there was at least one skeptic in their class.

"Are you seriously peddling that ridiculous story again?" Dorothy's exasperated voice cut in. She had apparently been eavesdropping. "It's embarrassing to listen to. You know there's a word for that kind of thing, delusions of grandeur."

"Shut your trap, idiot," Chay retorted coolly. "Weren't you the one spouting nonsense about the Federation not having mobile suits? If anyone should be embarrassed, it's you and your ignorance."

Dorothy sputtered for a moment before launching into a tirade. "W-What? I just didn't know! I wasn't lying like you guys are!"

"When did we ever lie?"

"Right now, for starters! There's no way anyone could believe Al's story!"

"Oh?" Al's response was cool, almost detached.

If Al had been fully aware that his story was fabricated, he might have lashed out at Dorothy's accusation. But he had repeated his tale so many times that he had begun to believe it himself on some level. In that sense, to him, it wasn't exactly a lie. He didn't feel like he was deceiving his friends.

"Well, why don't you go check for yourself then? There's a Zeon mobile suit lying in the forest, just like I said."

Al was right about that much. The "trapped" Zaku was too dangerous to easily remove, so the police had merely cordoned off the area until military experts could arrive to deal with it.

Chay jumped in to support Al. "Besides, if Al's lying, how do you explain this insignia and his injuries? Huh?"

"Well, that's..." Dorothy faltered, then spun on her heel with a parting shot. "Anyway, if I say it's a lie, then it's a lie! Hmph!"

The boys burst into laughter at Dorothy's clumsy retreat.

After their mirth subsided, Chay sighed regretfully. "Man, I really wish I hadn't chickened out back then. I should've gone into the forest with you, Al."

He punctuated his words by punching his palm, clearly frustrated at missing his chance to be the hero. "Next time an opportunity like that comes up, I'm definitely not letting it slip by."

"Huh?!" Telcott suddenly exclaimed.

"What is it, Telcott?"

"I thought I saw something flash in the sky just now."

"What? Really?"

The three boys pressed against the window. They weren't the only ones who had noticed; students in other classrooms were also peering out, some pointing at something in the distance.

Sure enough, a faint point of light appeared in a corner of the sky, quickly streaking across before fading. More followed in rapid succession, like scratches being etched across the blue canvas of the sky. Though difficult to see clearly in the daylight, it was evident that something was happening outside the colony.

"What could it be? Shooting stars?"

"No, it's a battle," Al declared, straightening his posture. "They're fighting just outside our colony."

"Hey, someone turn on the TV!" A classmate burst into the room. "There's breaking news!"

Someone quickly switched on the classroom television, and all eyes turned to the screen where a news anchor was calmly reading from a script.

"We repeat: Currently, a battle between Zeon and Federation forces is taking place in airspace not far from this colony. While it's unlikely that the fighting will directly affect our colony, we ask all citizens to remain calm and go about their business as usual. We will provide updates as more information becomes available."

A murmur rippled through the classroom.

"Do you think they'll cancel afternoon classes?"

"See? I told you it was a battle between Zeon and the Federation," Al said. "It must be mobile suits fighting each other."

"Damn it," Chay grumbled. "They're so far away we can barely see anything. Hey, Al, why don't we head down to the port? If they're fighting out there, we might see damaged mobile suits or warships coming in. Maybe Zeon will even try to invade!"

"What about afternoon classes?" Telcott asked nervously.

"Nobody invited you, Telcott. Come on, Al, let's go!"

Chay, having listened to Al's heroic tales, was likely itching for some action himself. Al had no reason to refuse, backing down now would tarnish Corporal Alfred's reputation.

"Alright, let's do it!"

"Hey, wait up! Are you really skipping class?"

But the words fell on deaf ears as the trio pushed past their classmates clustered around the window and dashed into the hallway.

The city streets hummed with an undercurrent of tension, despite the absence of official traffic restrictions. The battle raging beyond the colony's borders had cast an invisible shroud of anticipation over the populace.

Through this charged atmosphere, Al clung to the back of Chay's bicycle as they raced towards the port. Telcott, carrying the weight of two men in his substantial frame, huffed and puffed some distance behind on his own bike, struggling to keep up.

Above them, the sky still sparkled with the deadly ballet of combat. The dazzling flashes of mobile suit beam weapons and artillery fire reflected off the colony's massive mirrors, creating a mesmerizing yet terrifying light show. However, the intervals between these bursts of violence had begun to stretch, hinting that the battle was approaching its conclusion. Whether the Zeon forces or the Federation would emerge victorious remained a mystery.

"Aw, man," Chay groaned, standing up on the pedals to get a better view of the spectacle above. "Please don't let it be over yet! It'd be so much cooler if they'd crash into the colony again, like last time!"

"Chay, watch out!" Al's warning came just in time as Chay nearly collided with a man on the sidewalk, his neck craned skyward in fascination. With a quick jerk of the handlebars, they narrowly avoided disaster.

"That was close," Chay muttered. "What's that guy doing, standing around like that?"

"Just keep your eyes on the road!" Al admonished, his heart still racing from the near-miss.

Ignoring Al's advice, Chay made an impulsive decision. "The sidewalk's no good. We're hitting the street!"

Before Al could protest, Chay tilted the bike sharply, eliciting a yelp from his passenger as they swerved onto the road. Traffic had begun to congeal into the early stages of gridlock, but that didn't deter Chay. He weaved recklessly between cars, the bicycle's frame quivering as they brushed past side mirrors and bumpers.

"Damn, not here too," Chay clicked his tongue in annoyance as an illegally parked vehicle blocked their path. Without missing a beat, he declared, "Alright, Al, we're cutting across!"

Not waiting for a response, Chay surged forward, aiming to slip between two cars and dart across to the opposite lane. Al felt his body lurch backward from the sudden acceleration. Just as they emerged into the open space, a deafening horn blast shattered the air mere inches from them.

"Whoa!"

"Eek!"

Their cries of terror were drowned out by the screech of tires as a massive trailer truck bore down on them. For a heart-stopping moment, Al was certain they were about to become road pizza. However, the truck driver, displaying reflexes that bordered on superhuman, wrenched the wheel to the side. The enormous vehicle shuddered, its tires kissing the curb as it swerved around the reckless cyclists, leaving them in a whirlwind of displaced air and adrenaline.

"You fucking idiots!" The driver's enraged face appeared from the high cab, his words lashing out like a whip. "Got a death wish or something?"

The voice struck a chord of familiarity in Al's terror-addled mind. As his racing heart began to slow, he lifted his gaze to the truck's cab, only for his jaw to drop in shock. The driver's short blonde hair and refined features were unmistakable. Recognition flashed across the man's face as well, his eyes

widening before he hastily retreated into the cab and set the truck back in motion.

As Al gaped in astonishment, the truck smoothly pulled away, followed by three identical vehicles that swept past them in a cloud of dust and diesel fumes.

"Man, what a jerk," Chay grumbled, seemingly oblivious to their brush with death. "We had the right of way! Come on, Al, let's go."

"Wait!" Al suddenly sprang into action, leaping off the bike before Chay could protest. "I just remembered something important!"

Without further explanation, Al took off running after the trucks, leaving a bewildered Chay and a wheezing Telcott in his wake.

Darting between pedestrians and leaping over obstacles, Al's eyes remained fixed on the receding taillights of the truck convoy. Fortune smiled upon him as the lead vehicles' brake lights flared, a red traffic signal had halted their progress.

Seizing the opportunity, Al redoubled his efforts, his lungs burning as he closed in on his quarry.

The driver's eyes flickered towards him for a moment before deliberately looking away, attempting to ignore the boy's presence. But Al knew without a doubt that this was Bernard Wiseman, the Zeon pilot whose downed Zaku he'd encountered in the forest just a week ago, the very man who had given him his corporal's insignia.

Gone was the pilot suit, replaced by the nondescript uniform of a civilian trucker. Yet the face was unmistakable.

"Bernard, come on! It's me!" Al pounded on the window, refusing to be dismissed.

As the light turned green and the truck accelerated, Al clung desperately to the door. He couldn't make out what Bernard's passenger, a burly, mustachioed man with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, was saying, but the man's calm demeanor contrasted sharply with Al's frantic state.

"Easy there, Bernie. You know this kid?"

"That's the kid who gave me the disk," Bernard muttered, his jaw tightening.

"All the more reason to be cautious," the mustached man replied, his voice low and measured. "He knows we're Zeon, doesn't he? We can't afford a scene. Pull over."

"But Lieutenant Steiner—"

"Easy now," Steiner interrupted, a sly grin spreading across his face.

"Remember, I'm just the 'boss' here. No need for military titles. Now, stop the truck and get out there. Smooth things over with the boy."

Reluctantly, Bernie eased his foot onto the brake, guiding the massive vehicle to the roadside. Al, still clinging to the door, continued his impassioned tirade, his small fists pounding against the glass.

Steiner chuckled at the spectacle. "Once you've calmed him down, give me a call. You remember the number, right?"



"Yes, sir—I mean, boss," Bernie stammered, his response drawing a disapproving look from Steiner.

"That's a pretty weak affirmative. You'll never make it in special ops with that attitude," Steiner admonished, his tone half-joking, half-serious.

"Understood... boss," Bernie replied with more conviction, nodding as he reached for the door handle.

The moment the latch released, Al practically tumbled into the cab, his words tumbling out in a breathless rush.

"What's the big idea, Bernard? I thought I was gonna die back there!"

"For crying out loud, you're something else," Bernie sighed, deftly maneuvering the boy back onto solid ground before following suit. "You really don't know the meaning of fear, do you?"

In the cab, Steiner had already slid into the driver's seat, his hands gripping the wheel with practiced ease. The door slammed shut with a resounding thud, and the truck pulled away as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired.

Bernie clicked his tongue in frustration as he watched the convoy disappear down the street, leaving him behind with the overeager youth.

"Hey, Bernard," Al pressed, his eyes wide with a mix of confusion and excitement. "What's going on? Why are you back in the colony?"

"Pipe down, will ya? Because of you, I—" Bernie cut himself short, noting Al's bewildered expression. With a defeated slump of his shoulders, he conceded, "Ah, what's the use... Look, Al, there's just one thing I need you to understand."

Al tensed at Bernie's serious tone, his young face a canvas of anticipation and nervousness. But then, Bernie's stern facade cracked, a mischievous grin spreading across his features. He reached out, gently flicking Al's forehead with his index finger.

"From now on," Bernie continued, his voice softening, "don't call me Bernard anymore. Bernie suits me better. It feels more... natural, you know?"

## 2

"Are you sure this is okay? What if someone comes home?" Bernie fidgeted on the sofa, his eyes darting nervously around the room. After their roadside reunion, Al had suggested they find a more private place to talk. Now they sat in Al's living room, the boy having just returned from the kitchen with a tray of tea.

"Relax, it's fine," Al reassured him, setting down the tray. "Mom won't be back until nine because of work. Dad's... well, he's been away for a while now. During the day, I'm the only one here."

Bernie's brow furrowed. "But wait, don't you have an older sister?"

"A sister?" Al looked puzzled.

"Yeah, I saw her on that disk of yours. The one with long hair."

"Oh!" Al's face lit up with recognition. "That's not my sister. That's Chris, our next-door neighbor. She just got back from Earth recently. Some government work, I think."

"I see," Bernie nodded, taking a sip of tea.

Al leaned forward eagerly, his eyes shining with curiosity. "Never mind that, Bernie. What's going on? Did you quit Zeon to become a truck driver or something?"

"Well, it's not exactly—"

"Oh, I get it," Al interrupted, his face falling. "You got shot down that time, so they kicked you out of the military, huh?"

Bernie choked on his tea, a mix of indignation and wounded pride flashing across his face. "Don't be ridiculous! I'll have you know I'm now part of Zeon's elite special operations unit!"

"Special ops?" Bernie's hand flew to his mouth, but it was too late. Al's eyes widened, practically sparkling with excitement as he edged closer. "What's that? Oh, I get it! Those guys from earlier are part of it too, right? What are you doing here in the colony? It's a mission, isn't it?"

Bernie tried to backpedal.

"Whoa, hold on. Did I say something? I don't recall mentioning any of that."

"Come on, don't be like that!" Al pouted. "You can tell me. I won't say a word to anyone!"

"Hey, if you want help with math homework, I'm your guy," Bernie deflected, grinning weakly.

Al's expression suddenly shifted, his eyes narrowing slyly. "Fine. If you won't tell me, maybe I'll just let everyone know that Zeon soldiers have infiltrated the colony."

"You wouldn't dare!" Bernie's face paled.

"I mean, I don't want to," Al shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "But if you're not going to trust me..."

"Are you blackmailing me, you little punk?" Bernie's outburst quickly faded into resignation. "Geez, you're something else, kid."

Al's demeanor softened. "I promise, Bernie. I won't tell a soul. I'm a Zeon soldier too, remember?" He proudly tapped the insignia pinned to his chest, the very one Bernie had given him.

Bernie sighed deeply, weighing his options. If he was damned either way, maybe trusting Al was the better choice. "Alright, alright. Truth is, I don't know much myself. It all started with that disk of yours."

"The camera disk?"

"Yeah. When I submitted it after returning to base, I got called in by the higher-ups. Next thing I know, I'm transferred to special ops. Apparently, there was something on that disk they'd been looking for. Though I'll be damned if I know what it was."

Al furrowed his brow, trying to recall anything unusual he might have recorded. Nothing came to mind beyond Bernie's Zaku.

Bernie continued, "So here we are, sneaking into the colony. We used the battle outside as cover, posing as a civilian ship seeking emergency shelter. It's the only way to infiltrate a neutral colony like this."

"Wow," Al breathed. "So what does your special ops team do? Just pretend to be truckers?"

"That's just a cover, dummy," Bernie lightly rapped Al's head. "Special ops are the jack-of-all-trades on the battlefield. Sabotage, hand-to-hand combat, reconnaissance, assassinations, you name it. We even pilot mobile suits. Only the best of the best make it into our ranks."

In reality, their unit was more of a collection of misfits, which is precisely why they were assigned such diverse and often undesirable tasks. It was through these trials that they had become elite soldiers.

"That's amazing!" Al's eyes shone with admiration. "So being chosen for special ops is a big honor. You must be incredible, Bernie!"

Bernie's chest puffed out slightly. "Naturally. You keep bringing up how I got shot down, but that was just a fluke. I let my guard down for a second. The fact that I made it out at all is a testament to my skills."

"Uh-huh," Al nodded, hanging on every word.

"I was just one kill away from becoming an ace, you know. It was bad luck, really. But my abilities were so impressive, they recruited me for special ops anyway."

Al was completely star-struck now. "Wow, Bernie. You're a real ace pilot! Hey, tell me about the battles you've been in!"

"You want to hear about it?" Bernie drained his teacup and settled back, striking a pose of exaggerated importance. His eyes took on a familiar glint, not unlike the one Al got when spinning tall tales for his friends. "Well, I guess I should start with my first deployment. Back then, I was just a rookie..."

Al listened with rapt attention, nodding along to Bernie's every word. If Al's teachers could see him now, they'd be shocked at his unprecedented level of focus.

The winter sun sets early in the colony, casting long shadows across the landscape as a chill wind rustles through the trees. But for the two engrossed in conversation inside, time seems to have lost all meaning.

Bernie's tales of heroism have reached a fever pitch, his gestures growing more animated with each embellishment.

"...and that's when I swooped in from behind, swinging my Zaku's heat hawk, and bam! Sliced clean through the GM's arm. Not that I'm bragging or anything, it was just a Federation grunt, after all."

"No way, that's amazing!" Al's eyes sparkle with admiration.

Bernie's expression suddenly turns somber, his chin resting on his hand. "You know, surviving because of your skills... it's a double-edged sword. It means you see more of your comrades fall."

"I see..." Al nods solemnly.

"The ones who buy it in space, now that's truly horrific," Bernie continues, his voice lowering. "In zero gravity, the blood and... other stuff just floats

around the cockpit. Their faces swell up so much you can't even get the helmet off."

A moment of heavy silence follows before Al asks, his voice small and hesitant, "Bernie... have you ever killed anyone?"

The question catches Bernie off guard, a visible shudder running through him. He turns away, trying to mask his discomfort. "It's not like some detective novel, kid. This is war. You either take them out, or they take you out. That's all there is to it. Don't make me say more."

"It sounds... harsh," Al murmurs.

"Yeah, well, none of us are doing this for fun and games," Bernie sighs.

While the veracity of Bernie's stories remains questionable, to Al, whose own "war games" are just that, games, every word drips with the intoxicating scent of gunpowder and danger.

"Hey Bernie, tell me more!" Al leans forward eagerly.

"Maybe later," Bernie grins, patting his stomach. "I'm starving. Got anything to eat?"

"Sure! It might not be fancy pilot rations, but I'll find something," Al springs up and dashes to the kitchen, determined not to lose Bernie's storytelling momentum.

The refrigerator yields little beyond raw ingredients, but a quick peek in the microwave reveals a casserole left by his mother. As Al fiddles with the controls, a commotion erupts from the living room, a muffled thud followed by what sounds like a strangled yelp.

Before Al can react, a familiar voice rings out: "Al! Al! Where are you? It's terrible!"

"Chris?!" Al bolts from the kitchen, racing down the hallway. He flings open the door to find an unexpected tableau: Chris has someone pinned face-down, their arms twisted behind their back. The pained groans leave little doubt as to the identity of her captive.

"Al! This guy's a burglar! He snuck in while you were gone!" Chris exclaims.

"It's... a misunderstanding!" Bernie wheezes.

"Chris, stop! Bernie's my cousin!" Al blurts out, the lie coming easily in his panic.

"Cousin?" Chris blinks, her grip loosening. "Oh... oh no. Don't tell me I... did I make a mistake?"

Bernie nods emphatically, and Al mirrors the gesture with equal vigor.

"Oh gosh, I'm so sorry!" Chris releases Bernie, helping him to his feet. She's dressed casually today, her hair braided, hardly the appearance of someone who could take down a grown man, and yet...

As they settle back onto the sofa, Chris continues to apologize profusely. "I'm really, truly sorry. I jumped to conclusions and... is your arm okay?"

"It's fine, it's fine," Bernie massages his shoulder, managing a pained smile.

"So you're Chris, huh? Even prettier in person, and quite the fighter too."

"In person?" Chris tilts her head, confused.

"You were in that video Al showed me. The one where you're getting into a car?"



"Oh, that—"

Al jumps in, spinning their fabrication further.

"Bernie's from Dad's side of the family. He's in town for work and stopped by to visit."

As Al busies himself with righting the overturned teacups, Chris furrows her brow.

"But Al, why are you here? Your mom called, worried because she couldn't reach you at home. That's why I came to check. It's odd though, wouldn't she have known Bernie was visiting?"

The "cousins" exchange a panicked glance. There's no easy way out of this one.

"Well, you see—" Al begins.

"Ah, we might as well come clean, Al," Bernie interrupts with a nervous laugh. "The truth is... well, your mom and I don't exactly get along."

"Huh?" Al gapes, but Bernie throws him a conspiratorial wink.

Turning back to Chris, Bernie smoothly continues his improvised tale.

"I lost my parents when I was young, and Al's family took me in for a while. But I... well, I caused a lot of trouble. By the end, it was practically like I'd been kicked out. That's why I can't exactly waltz through the front door anymore."

"Oh my..." Chris murmurs.

"Al snuck me in today, hoping I'd be gone before his mom got home," Bernie finishes with a rueful smile.

Al, catching on, nods vigorously. "Right! So, um, about all this..."

Both "cousins" press their index fingers to their lips in a plea for secrecy.

Chris giggles, shaking her head. "I had no idea! Alright, I won't say a word to your mom. But my silence comes at a price, you know?"

"A price?" Bernie raises an eyebrow.

"You can't tell anyone I managed to take you down," Chris winks mischievously. "My parents already think my job makes me too masculine. If they hear about this, they might faint!"

"Job?" Al perks up, curious. "Chris, weren't you a teacher?"

"I said it was something like that," Chris clarifies. "I work for the military, actually."

"You're a soldier?!" Al exclaims as Bernie tenses visibly. In this colony, "military" can only mean one thing, the Earth Federation Forces.

Chris laughs, waving her hand dismissively. "See? Everyone assumes 'military' means combat. But not everyone in the military fights. We have doctors, nurses, teachers, cooks, all sorts. Remember, I told you I look after troublemakers?"

"So... you work in a military daycare?" Bernie ventures, relief evident in his voice.

"Something like that," Chris nods.

"Geez, Chris, you had me worried for a second," Al sighs.

An electronic chirp from Bernie's pocket cuts through the conversation. He pulls out a small pager, angling it away from Al's prying eyes, though not quite fast enough to prevent the boy from catching a glimpse.

"What's that, Bernie?" Al asks, curiosity piqued.

"Just the boss calling me back to work," Bernie replies smoothly. "Seems I've been playing hooky for too long."

"Oh, I should get going too," Chris rises, smiling at Bernie. "How long will you be in town?"

"Hard to say. As long as the job takes, I suppose," Bernie shrugs.

"Well, I hope we run into each other again," Chris says warmly.

"Me too," Bernie grins, rubbing his arm playfully. "Though maybe next time, go easy on me?"

"Hey! I thought we agreed not to mention that!" Chris laughs, her cheeks flushing slightly.

As night settles over the colony, the warm glow from the Izuruha household's windows is punctuated by the sound of laughter, three voices blending in a moment of unexpected camaraderie.

### 3

"Hey kid, we're almost there," the truck driver called out to Al, who was perched on the passenger seat. "Gotta say, I'm impressed you're delivering dinner to your old man at the factory. Wish my own brats were half as thoughtful."

The truck rumbled through the darkened industrial district. Al flashed a sheepish grin at the driver, who was humming contentedly to himself.

After Bernie and Chris had left, Al had ventured into the city. He'd spun a tale to catch a ride with this late-night trucker. Of course, the story about bringing dinner to his father at the factory was pure fabrication. His real mission was to trail Bernie.

The message on Bernie's pager had clearly displayed an address. If Al could track it down, he might uncover the Zeon special ops team's hideout.

"Some friend that Bernie is," Al grumbled under his breath. "Ditching me like that. I'm a bona fide Zeon corporal too, you know."

"This looks like the area you mentioned, kid," the driver said, easing off the accelerator. The truck slowed to a stop in a poorly lit industrial zone.

"This the right spot?"

"Yeah, I think so. Thanks a bunch," Al nodded, adjusting his cap before hopping down from the truck.

"Take care now. Say hi to your dad for me!" The friendly driver honked twice in farewell as he pulled away, leaving Al alone in the shadows.

"43 Veracruz Street, Andy Company," Al muttered, double-checking his note. The street signs confirmed he was in the right place. Bernie's team had to be nearby.

"Maybe over there?" Al scanned the area before darting off in a promising direction. The factory district was eerily quiet at night, with only the distant hum of machinery breaking the silence. It wasn't a place he wanted to linger.

After a short jog, Al spotted a lit building within a fenced compound. He could make out moving shadows inside.

"No company name," Al clicked his tongue, running his finger over a worn, grimy plaque on the fence. "Is this not the place? Wait a second..."

His eyes widened in recognition. Beyond the fence sat a line of familiar trailers, the same ones Bernie's team had been driving. There was no doubt now; this had to be their base.

Carefully, Al squeezed through a gap in the fence and ducked behind one of the trailers. So far, so good, he hadn't been spotted.

The factory appeared to be a run-of-the-mill vehicle maintenance facility. The yard was littered with rusted car parts and discarded tires, the air heavy with the acrid scent of oil and metal. Light spilled from the second floor of an adjacent office building.

"What are they up to in there?" Al wondered, catching his breath before creeping towards the office.

Instead of using the metal staircase leading to the second floor, Al circled around to the back. Confirming that light was indeed coming from an upstairs window, he began carefully scaling a pile of scrap metal. This approach would make him less likely to be seen by anyone inside.

Though the precarious climb might have defeated a heavier adult, Al's slight frame allowed him to scramble up with relative ease. Reaching the window, he found the blinds drawn but in poor repair, with several slats bent and broken. Al pressed his eye to one of these gaps, peering inside.

The room was a stark, grimy office space devoid of any personal touches. A battered desk dominated the center, with four men seated around it.

Al's gaze was immediately drawn to the mustached man at the far end, the same one he'd seen with Bernie in the truck earlier. An unlit cigarette dangled from his lips. Flanking him were the hard-faced driver and the ruddy giant Al recognized from before. And there, with his back to the window, sat a blonde man who could only be Bernie.

The three seemed to be listening intently to the mustached man, Steiner, Al recalled, as he spoke. They nodded occasionally, murmuring in agreement. Al held his breath, straining to catch any snippets of conversation through the window.

"Now that we've covered the Kämpfer's production schedule, let's get to the heart of the matter," Steiner was saying. "Our mission, as you know, is to capture the Federation's secret weapon, codenamed 'The Reject.' If capture proves impossible, we're to destroy it."

"'The Reject'?" Bernie echoed, confusion evident in his voice.

"You're new to special ops, so you wouldn't know our history with this thing," Steiner crushed his unlit cigarette in the ashtray, looking up. "It's been

our target for months now. We almost had it cornered in the Arctic, but it slipped through our fingers at the last moment."

"Yeah, and Andy paid for that with his life," the sharp-eyed man, Garcia, spat bitterly.

"Enough, Garcia," Steiner warned.

The ruddy-faced giant, Misha, chimed in. "Andy was a good man. Brave and skilled. And now we've got this green rookie to replace him? Give me a break."

"Cut it out, both of you," Steiner raised his hand, silencing the veteran operatives. "What's done is done. Let's focus on the present."

He continued, "After losing it in the Arctic, we searched high and low but couldn't pick up its trail. The Federation pulled a clever one, disguising it as civilian cargo. But fate smiled on us, we got an unexpected lead." Steiner produced a video disk, the very one Bernie had received from AI in exchange for the corporal's insignia.

"Take a look at this footage," Steiner said, inserting the disk into a laptop on the desk. The screen flickered to life, showing a yellow container being loaded into a shuttle.

"This was taken by Andy in the Arctic," Steiner explained. He then switched to another clip, the one AI had recorded. "And here's the same container, now at the colony's spaceport. We've confirmed it's identical, down to the scratches and heat signature."

"That container holds part of the weapon," Garcia added. "It's still incomplete, hence, 'The Reject.'"

"But what exactly is this 'Reject'?" Bernie pressed.

Steiner grinned, tapping a key. AI's voice crackled through the speakers: "Aw, man. Boring! I was hoping it'd be a Federation mobile suit or something. Rats!"

The three veteran operatives burst into laughter, leaving Bernie bewildered.

"The kid hit the nail on the head without even realizing it," Misha chuckled.

"You mean... there's a Federation mobile suit in that container?" Bernie's eyes widened.

"Bingo. Still in development, but yes," Steiner's gaze hardened. "You've heard of the Federation's 'Gundam,' right? The one that's supposedly taken down over a hundred Zakus?"

Bernie nodded. The Gundam's reputation was legendary, a demon on the battlefield that had dealt crushing blows to Zeon forces time and again.

"Well, this," Steiner tapped the screen, "is a new Gundam. One designed for Newtypes."

"Newtypes?"

"People who've awakened extraordinary combat abilities in mobile suit warfare," Steiner explained. "Whether such individuals truly exist is debatable, but High Command is in a panic. They fear that if this 'Reject' is completed and falls into the hands of a Federation Newtype, we'll be facing something far deadlier than the original Gundam."

"Zeon's confirmed the existence of Newtypes too," Garcia added. "If we can snatch this thing, it could turn the tide of the war. But if we let it slip through our fingers..."

"Our defeat becomes almost certain, or so the higher-ups believe," Steiner finished. "Personally, I doubt a single mobile suit can change the course of the war. But our orders are clear: The Cyclops Team is to capture or destroy 'The Reject.' And now, it's right under our noses!"

Steiner slammed his hands on the desk for emphasis, then gestured to Garcia. "Give us the details."

Garcia inserted another disk, bringing up a map of the colony. Several areas were highlighted in blue, with one large red spot in the center.

"The blue areas are Federation facilities. The red spot is where 'The Reject' is nesting, a mobile suit factory. Used to be a chemical plant before the Feds bought it out."

"Impressive intel gathering, Garcia," Steiner nodded approvingly.

"Just following the money and power consumption," Garcia shrugged. "A little bribery goes a long way."

The screen changed to show an aerial view of the converted factory.

"We believe the green ass head is housed in this high-ceilinged section next to the research facility," Garcia continued. "We don't know its completion status, but stealing a mobile suit is a bit more complicated than grand theft auto. We'll need our own suit to pull this off."

"Leave that to me and the Kämpfer," Misha grinned.

"Given how much time has passed, we should assume it's near completion," Steiner mused, chewing on his cigarette filter. "If a pilot manages to board before Misha can reach it, things could get messy. Even if it needs a Newtype to reach its full potential, its capabilities are still unknown."

"So, we're looking at close-quarters combat?" Garcia's eyes gleamed dangerously.

"Seems like our best bet," Steiner nodded. "We'll need to infiltrate the factory, prevent the pilot from boarding, and plant explosives as a backup plan. The question is, how do we get inside?"

Steiner's words were cut short by a loud crash outside the window. Everyone froze, heads snapping toward the sound. Another, louder clatter of metal followed, accompanied by a yelp of surprise.

"What the hell?" Garcia's hand flew to his weapon as Misha tensed, ready for action. Steiner quickly shut down the laptop.

But Bernie, lacking the seasoned reflexes of his comrades, reacted in a startlingly ordinary way. He leapt up, knocking over his chair, and flung open the blinds and window. It was a dangerously naive move, had an enemy been lurking outside, he'd have been an easy target.

Fortunately, all they could see was a collapsed pile of scrap metal in the spill of light from the room. As Bernie leaned out to get a better look, his eyes widened in shock. Clinging desperately to the window frame, looking up

at him with a mixture of fear and sheepish embarrassment, was a familiar face.

"A-Al?!"

"Bernie..." Al wheezed, his fingers white-knuckled from the effort of holding on.

Without a second thought, Bernie reached out. "Hang on, Al! I'll pull you up!" The instinct to help overrode any questions about why the boy was there in the first place. As the other operatives looked on in bewilderment, Bernie hauled Al into the room. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I-I'm fine," Al managed, still catching his breath.

Garcia was the first to recover from the shock. "Hey, this is serious! Was that kid spying on us?!"

"It... it seems so," Bernie admitted, sheepishly.

"This isn't a joke. Captain, what do we do?" Garcia's hand twitched near his weapon.

Steiner studied Al and Bernie, his expression unreadable. "Bernie, this is the boy from the disk, right? The one who followed our trucks?"

"Yes, sir..."

"I see," Steiner's brow furrowed, realizing Bernie had failed to keep Al in the dark. "What to do..."

"There's no question, sir. We need to silence him," Garcia growled.

"Hold on, Garcia—" Steiner raised a hand, then, surprisingly, his face softened as he approached Al. "Well now, young man, Al, was it? Why did you come here?"

Al swallowed hard before blurting out, "I wanted to help the special ops team! I swear I wasn't trying to interfere or snitch or anything!"

"Oh? And why's that?" Steiner's tone was gentle, almost fatherly.

Al puffed out his chest, the Zeon insignia Bernie had given him displayed proudly. "Because I'm part of Zeon too! I'm a real corporal! If there's anything I can do for Zeon, just name it. I want to be part of the special ops team!"

"Are you out of your mind?!" Bernie's voice cracked. "This isn't some game, Al!"

"I know it's not a game!" Al shot back, indignant.

Misha let out a hearty laugh. "Now that's spirit! Some of our actual recruits could learn a thing or two from this kid."

Steiner knelt down to Al's level, his face a mask of warmth that belied his deadly profession. "Al, you're a brave young man. It seems we've found quite the ally. I'm the commander of this unit."

"Captain!" Garcia protested.

Ignoring him, Steiner continued, "Unfortunately, you can't be an official member of our team. We can't put you in danger. But as a fellow Zeon soldier, we could use your help."

Al's eyes lit up at the flattery, especially coming from the team's leader. He snapped a crisp salute. "Of course, sir! What can I do?"

"Well, since you're a local and won't draw suspicion, how about keeping an eye on Federation facilities for us? Discreetly, of course. And remember, our presence here is top secret."

"You mean... surveillance?" Al asked, excitement building in his voice.

"Exactly. Watch from a distance and report anything unusual immediately," Steiner nodded approvingly. "It's a crucial role that could make or break our mission. Do you think you're up for it, Corporal Al?"

"Yes, sir!" Al beamed, chest swelling with pride at being addressed by his rank.

"Excellent," Steiner beckoned Bernie over and whispered something in his ear before turning back to Al. "From now on, you and Bernie are partners. You two stick together, understood?"

"Alright, let's go," Bernie sighed, giving Al a gentle push towards the door. "I'll take you home."

"Okay!" Al's eyes shone with determination as they left the office, Bernie trailing behind with the air of a reluctant babysitter.

The moment the door closed, Garcia spat in disgust. "Captain, why didn't we just silence the brat? You can't seriously believe he'll keep quiet!"

"We can't risk a kidnapping scandal right before the operation," Steiner's voice had lost all its warmth, cold and calculating once more. "Besides, as you said, who would believe a child's wild story? Still, I've instructed Bernie to keep a constant eye on him, just in case."

"Seems like we found the perfect job for our rookie," Misha chuckled.

Steiner's lips curled into a slight smirk, and even Garcia grudgingly nodded in agreement.

"Now that our little distraction is gone, let's get back to the Kämpfer," Steiner declared, his voice sharp with renewed focus. "We don't have much time before the operation begins!"

"Hey, Al! Wait up!"

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows as Al hurried home from school. Two of his classmates, Chay and Telcott, called out to him from across the street.

"Al! There's a 'war' in the park," Chay shouted excitedly. "We're finally battling the kids from the next class. It's been ages, come on!"

The two boys were decked out in makeshift military gear, scrounged helmets and toy rifles slung over their shoulders. With proper uniforms, they might have passed for pint-sized soldiers.

"The battlefield hero, 'Corporal Al,' has to be there!" Telcott chimed in.

"Let's go, hurry!" they urged.

Normally, Al would have jumped at the chance. But today was different.

"Sorry, guys," Al called back, waving his cap. "I've got somewhere I need to be!"

"What? Come on, this is war!" Chay protested, but Al was already sprinting away.

"Can't waste time playing games," Al muttered to himself as he ran. "War games are for kids. I'm part of a real war now. No time for that stuff anymore."

Rounding a corner, Al scanned a row of parked cars until his face lit up with recognition. He darted towards one particular vehicle.

"Bernie!"

Inside the car, Bernie jolted awake, a magazine sliding off his face. He sighed heavily at the sight of Al. "Well, well. Time for our little 'picnic,' I suppose?"

Before Bernie could fully sit up, Al had already scrambled into the passenger seat.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Bernie!"

"More like sorry I had to wait," Bernie grumbled, adjusting his seat and starting the engine. "So, where to, Al? According to Garcia's intel, there are quite a few Federation facilities around."

As Al unfolded a map, Bernie merged into traffic. They both knew this "surveillance" mission was meaningless, just a ploy to keep Al occupied. Bernie found the whole charade ridiculous, but orders were orders.

"Hey, Bernie," Al piped up, "You guys infiltrated the colony to get that 'Reject' Federation mobile suit, right?" He'd pieced together most of the plan from his eavesdropping. "So isn't all this running around kind of pointless?"

"Who knows?" Bernie shrugged. "We follow the captain's orders. That's a soldier's duty."

"That chemical plant Garcia mentioned, that's where they're building the 'Reject,' isn't it?" Al thrust the map towards Bernie's face.

"Maybe," Bernie replied noncommittally.

"The captain was wondering how to sneak in there, wasn't he?"

"Was he?"

Frustrated by Bernie's lack of enthusiasm, Al pouted and folded up the map. "Fine. I was going to tell you a great way to get in, but never mind."

Bernie's interest was piqued despite himself. "Oh? You've got some brilliant plan?"

"Use the colony's underground maintenance tunnels!" Al's eyes sparkled with excitement.

Bernie knew about the tunnels, a maze-like network beneath the colony's outer shell, used by the public works department for repairs and utilities. Access was strictly controlled, with entry points secured by passcodes known only to authorized personnel.

"Don't be ridiculous," Bernie scoffed. "Sure, those tunnels might lead to the Federation base, but we'd need the access codes. Unless you happen to know them."

Al said nothing, but his smug expression spoke volumes. As they stopped at a red light, Bernie's eyes narrowed.

"Wait... do you actually know the codes?"

"Our class took a field trip to the tunnels this spring," Al explained, puffing up with pride. "The guide dropped his maintenance point handbook. We found it, but before returning it, we made a copy of the access codes."

"You little troublemakers," Bernie shook his head, half impressed and half exasperated. "What on earth were you planning to do with that?"

"You never know when you might need a secret hideout," Al shrugged. "Or a quick escape route."

Bernie couldn't help but chuckle. The colony's public works department certainly hadn't anticipated their secure tunnels being used for children's games.

"Well, well. That changes things," Bernie said, making a sharp U-turn. "Alright, Al. Show me the maintenance point closest to the Federation factory."

"You got it! Take the Number 14 expressway towards Arcana Arch Bridge," Al directed, his excitement building.

As they drove, Bernie explained the colony's structure to Al, how the massive cylinder was divided into alternating land and transparent "window" sections, each spanning about 85 square kilometers. These reinforced windows, known as the "Rivers of Light," allowed sunlight into the colony.

Their destination was near one of the bridges spanning these "rivers," close to the Federation's secret factory. By the time they arrived, dusk had settled in, and streetlights were flickering to life.

"This looks like the spot," Bernie said, pulling over. "Let's see if those codes of yours actually work."

They climbed down to a maintenance access point hidden in the colony's outer wall. A large hatch for equipment and a smaller door for personnel stood before them, both showing signs of infrequent use.

"This must be it," Bernie mused, eyeing the keypad. "Alright, Al. What's the code?"

"I'll do it!" Al insisted, pushing Bernie aside and pulling out a worn scrap of paper from his bag. "No peeking, Bernie. This is my intel!"

"Cheeky brat," Bernie muttered, but couldn't hide a smirk.

Al punched in the code, and with a pneumatic hiss, the door slid open.

"Bernie, look!" Al exclaimed triumphantly.

Bernie whistled in admiration. The supposedly top-secret maintenance tunnel entrance had opened at the command of a schoolboy. They high-fived, both realizing the potential of this discovery.

"Not bad, Al," Bernie nodded. "Looks like your info checks out. We should be able to get through the inner barriers too. Hand over that paper."

"No way!" Al clutched the paper to his chest. "I told you, this is my intel. You're not taking credit for it!"

"Come on, Al. Don't be difficult now," Bernie groaned.

A mischievous glint appeared in Al's eyes. "I might tell you the codes, but... there's a condition."

## 4

"Wow! So this is what Bernie and the others were building here!" Al exclaimed, his voice echoing through the cavernous space despite being told to stay quiet.

"Shh!" Bernie clapped a hand over Al's mouth. "Keep it down! If we're caught, I'll be in big trouble."

It was clear from Bernie's exasperated expression that Al had somehow convinced him to sneak into the Zeon special ops team's secret factory. The vast room reeked of oil and metal shavings, but was eerily empty, the rest of the Cyclops team must have moved to the office area.

"Mmph, okay, Bernie. I won't shout anymore," Al mumbled, prying Bernie's hand away. But he couldn't contain his awe as he gazed at the sight before them. "So this is what was inside those trailers..."

In the dimly lit factory, a colossal figure lay sprawled on its back atop a maintenance cradle. The mobile suit, easily 17 meters tall, dwarfed the two interlopers. Even in the low light, its blue coloration was striking. The bulky legs, thick chest plate, and muscular styling clearly marked it as Zeon design, in stark contrast to the Federation's sleeker, more knight-like mobile suits.

Parts of its armor were still missing, exposing intricate inner mechanics like a patient mid-surgery. It was clearly a work in progress.

"They didn't bring it here fully assembled," Bernie explained in a hushed tone. "This MS-18E 'Kämpfer' is designed for easy on-site assembly for special missions."

"Cool. Can it move yet?" Al asked, his eyes wide.

"Almost, I'd say."

Al reached out, running his hand along the pristine armor. "This is what you'll use to fight the Federation, right?"

"Maybe," Bernie shrugged, then put his hands on his hips. "Alright, I showed you the factory like you wanted. Now, about those access codes..."

"Did I promise that?" Al feigned innocence. "I just said it'd be nice to see inside."

"Why, you little—" Bernie started, but was cut off by a voice from above.

"Bernie? Is that you?" It was Steiner, calling from the elevated walkway connecting to the office area. "You're late. The strategy meeting starts at 1800 hours. Get up here!"

"Y-yes, sir!" Bernie snapped to attention. Once Steiner was out of sight, he unceremoniously scooped up Al and shoved him into a nearby wooden crate.

"Hey! What gives?" Al protested.

"Stay put," Bernie hissed, securing the lid and weighing it down with a concrete block. "Cool your head for a bit."

Ignoring Al's muffled complaints, Bernie hurried up the stairs to the meeting room.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, slipping inside. The other Cyclops team members were already there, Garcia sorting through weapons and disguises, Misha poring over maps.

"Now that we're all here," Steiner began, "let's review the operation. Everyone, have a seat."

As the team gathered around, Steiner set up a laptop. "The boy is taken care of?" he asked Bernie.

"Sent him home, sir. Probably doing homework by now," Bernie lied smoothly.

"Good," Steiner nodded, pulling up a map of the Federation factory. "We move at nightfall. Misha will create a diversion with the Kämpfer while Garcia, Bernie, and I infiltrate the base."

"We're taking that thing through the city?" Garcia asked, eyebrows raised.

"They won't risk firing in populated areas," Steiner explained, zooming in on the factory layout. "Our intel on the interior is outdated, but it's all we have. Misha, you'll breach the roof to extract the 'Reject.' The rest of us will prevent the pilot from boarding and set explosives as a backup. Destruction is priority if capture fails. The main issue is getting inside."

"What about the maintenance tunnels?" Bernie interjected hesitantly. "We could enter from below, undetected."

Steiner's eyes narrowed. "I considered that, but blasting open access points would alert security immediately."

"But if we had the access codes..." Bernie started.

"Bernie..." Steiner's gaze sharpened. "Do you know something?"

Before Bernie could answer, the door burst open. "That's not fair, Bernie!" Al shouted, face flushed with anger. "You said that was my information!"

Chaos erupted as the team leapt to their feet, but Steiner waved them down. "Explain, Bernie," he said calmly.

Sheepishly, Bernie recounted the day's events, Al's knowledge of the tunnel codes, their reconnaissance, and the boy's refusal to share the information without conditions.

Steiner listened intently, then turned to Al. "So, young man, what are your terms?"

Al took a deep breath. "Let me join the mission to attack the Federation base!"

The room exploded in protests, but Steiner silenced them with a raised hand. He studied Al for a long moment, then spoke. "Al, can you promise not to be a liability?"

"Captain, you can't be serious!" Bernie sputtered.

Steiner ignored him. "Age doesn't matter on the battlefield. Courage and quick thinking make a good soldier, sometimes better than those who've wasted years hesitating."

The team continued to object, but Steiner cut them off. "Doing the impossible is what makes us the Cyclops team," he said with a hint of a smile. "So, Al, do we have a deal? The codes for a place on the mission?"

"Yes, sir!" Al beamed, practically vibrating with excitement.

"Very well," Steiner nodded. "We'll revise our plans. The operation's codename will be 'Plan Rubicon.' We move out tomorrow at 1800 hours."

"It's finally complete," Misha announced, handing a clipboard to Steiner after a final check. "All systems are go. We just need to unlock the weapons systems now."

The two men stood beside the towering form of the Kämpfer, Zeon's latest mobile suit. Sunlight slanted through the factory windows, casting long shadows across the floor. It was a new day, the operation looming ever closer.

Steiner's decision to include AI in the mission had been unexpected, but Misha and Garcia, veterans who'd served alongside their captain for years, sensed there was more to his plan. They'd thrown themselves into the Kämpfer's assembly without question. Now, with mere hours until the operation's start, their work was nearly done.

Steiner nodded as he reviewed the clipboard, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. He reached into his pocket, producing a lighter.

"Giving up on quitting, sir?" Misha asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

"Even a condemned man gets a last smoke before execution," Steiner replied, lighting up and taking a long drag. He exhaled slowly, a wry smile playing across his face. "I'd say I've earned this much."

"Bit morbid, don't you think?" Misha frowned.

Steiner's expression grew serious as he gazed up at the ceiling. "Zeon's going to lose this war, Misha. Why else would they give us that 'insurance policy' that violates every treaty in the book? They're preparing for failure."

A heavy silence fell between them. Misha followed Steiner's gaze upward, catching a glimpse of movement through a skylight. Bernie and AI were up on the roof, no doubt preparing for their role in the night's events.

"Captain," Misha began hesitantly, "about the boy..."

"Don't worry," Steiner cut him off. "I've got a plan for him."

"I figured as much. Still, he's a spirited little brat, isn't he?"

Steiner chuckled, a faraway look in his eyes. "Kids never change, do they? I remember being like that once. Playing at war without a clue of what it really meant..."

"Same here," Garcia called down from where he was perched on the Kämpfer's shoulder, adjusting some final components. "Never thought I'd end up making a career out of it, though. Hey, can I get a hand unlocking these weapon systems?"

"Hey, Bernie. Why is Misha piloting the Kämpfer instead of you? Weren't you recruited for your piloting skills?" AI asked, oblivious to the fact that they were being discussed in the factory below.

The two were sprawled on the roof, ostensibly keeping watch for suspicious activity around the factory as the Kämpfer's final preparations were underway. Of course, Bernie knew this was just a pretext, Steiner's real

intention was to keep the talkative Al out of the way. It was no wonder Bernie was sulking at being assigned babysitting duty.

"Bernie, are you even listening?" Al prodded.

"I hear you," Bernie grumbled. "Misha's got more experience. The captain values that over raw skill."

"But isn't the Kämpfer supposed to take out the Federation's new mobile suit? You're just one kill away from being an ace... Maybe I should tell the captain—"

"Don't you dare!" Bernie snapped, sitting up abruptly before flopping back down with a sigh. "Besides, this mission is about capturing the enemy suit, not destroying it. Not really my style."

"But what if the enemy suit powers up? You'd have to fight it, right? Can Misha handle that?"

"Who knows?"

"Could you beat it, Bernie?"

Bernie snorted, his arms folded behind his head. "Piece of cake for someone like me."

"Wow, you really are amazing, Bernie!"

A comfortable silence fell between them as Al mimicked Bernie's posture, soaking up the sun. After a while, Bernie spoke up, his tone more serious.

"Are you really sure about this?"

"About what?"

"Attacking the Federation base with us. You could die, you know?"

"I'm not scared of dying," Al said with bravado. "Are you scared, Bernie?"

"I—" Bernie hesitated, then rolled over, turning his back on Al. "Damn it, why did the captain let this kid come along..."

Ignoring Bernie's muttering, Al checked his watch, his voice brimming with excitement. "Just five hours until the operation starts! I'm so ready for this!"

No one paid much attention to the solitary maintenance vehicle parked along the 14th Avenue, which ran parallel to the embankment of the "River of Light." Night work was common enough, and the sight of such a vehicle near an access point to the colony's underground maintenance tunnels was hardly unusual.

Even if a passerby had noticed the group of men descending from the vehicle, they likely wouldn't have been alarmed. Since the recent Zeon attack had been repelled by the stationed Federation forces, the sight of three men in Federation uniforms might raise an eyebrow, but not suspicion. Who could imagine these were actually Zeon soldiers about to assault a Federation base?

The only truly odd element was the presence of a young boy among them, his face a mask of serious determination. It was a strange grouping, to say the least.

This unlikely band consisted of Al, joined by the Cyclops team's elite: Steiner, Garcia, and Bernie. They now stood before the maintenance tunnel entrance that Al and Bernie had scouted the day before.

"Right on schedule, 18:00 hours," Steiner announced as the hands of his analog watch formed a perfect vertical line. "Operation begins now. AI, if you would."

"Roger that," AI replied with solemn gravity.

He flipped open the control panel and punched in the access code, his fingers dancing across the keypad just as they had during yesterday's reconnaissance. As he pressed the final red button, a crisp electronic tone confirmed their success.

"We're in," Garcia whispered from his position by the door, flashing a thumbs-up to signal the all-clear.

"Move out," Steiner ordered with a subtle hand gesture.

One by one, they filed into the tunnel: Garcia took point, followed by AI, then Bernie, with Steiner bringing up the rear. Before sealing the entrance behind them, Steiner cast a final glance at the colony's artificial sky.

"It's all on you now, Misha," he murmured.

"Well then, time for a little stroll, shall we?" Misha drawled, his voice dripping with feigned nonchalance.

Inside the Kämpfer's cockpit, a symphony of lights blinked and pulsed across the control panels. With a practiced motion, Misha reached for the flask dangling from an overhead pipe, taking a long swig of liquid courage. The flush on his cheeks betrayed that this wasn't his first drink of the evening. But this wasn't carelessness or a lack of professionalism, it was Misha's way of steadying his nerves for the chaos to come.

Exhaling sharply, he gripped the controls, squeezing the throttle and pressing down on the pedals. A satisfying vibration coursed through the cockpit as the mobile suit defied gravity, its back-mounted verniers igniting with a roar.

Forty-three tons of cutting-edge weaponry lifted off, shrugging off the shackles of Earth's pull. Like a modern-day titan awakening from slumber, the Kämpfer raised its massive arms, as if stretching after a long rest.

The factory's confines were far too cramped for such a behemoth. The Kämpfer's head scraped the ceiling, its arms colliding with the walls. But Misha showed no mercy, pushing the throttle to its limit. If this place was a coffin, he'd break it open from the inside.

A deafening boom shattered the evening calm of the industrial district. In an instant, the "Andy Company" maintenance facility, office building and all, was reduced to splinters and twisted metal. As dust and debris billowed upward, the Kämpfer emerged, a colossus standing tall amidst the destruction.

"How's that fresh air taste, Kämpfer?" Misha chuckled, taking another swig from his flask. He wiped his mouth, guiding the mobile suit forward with earth-shaking steps before igniting the verniers once more. "Now then, shall we get this party started?"

Distant screams might have reached his ears, but they were drowned out by the Kämpfer's thunderous leap into the sky. From this vantage point, the colony's nighttime landscape spread out below, a canvas of darkness punctuated by pinpricks of light.

Misha tilted the Kämpfer's head slightly, orienting himself towards his target. With a burst of acceleration, he set course for the Federation's secret factory, home of the slumbering "Reject."

As the mobile suit soared over the "River of Light" and weaved between towering structures, the gears of Operation Rubicon began to turn in earnest. And caught within those whirling cogs was one small, fragile gear, a child who had yet to truly comprehend the brutal realities of war he was about to witness firsthand.

# 1

"Hmm-hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm—"

Garcia hummed a spirited tune as he advanced through the underground tunnel, a machine gun slung from each shoulder and his eyes gleaming with intensity. Though with the gum in his mouth, as usual, the rhythm wasn't quite on beat.

The maintenance tunnels formed a complex network beneath the colony's outer shell. A labyrinth of pipes large and small lined the chilly passageways, alongside bundled cables and heavy-duty rail hangers that stretched into the darkness. The four-person team crept forward, checking their maps and sweeping their flashlights across the surfaces.

While the passage was wide enough for two people to pass comfortably and the ceiling cleared their heads, the dim emergency lights that dotted the walls every few meters did little to dispel the oppressive atmosphere. Occasionally, condensation from the overhead pipes would launch a sneak attack, dropping cold beads of water onto their heads. The space felt like an elongated coffin, as if they were waiting to suffocate in its grip.

Yet Garcia's oddly carefree humming somehow managed to ease everyone's tension.

"Hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm—"

"What song is that?" Bernie asked.

"It's my best friend's theme song. The guy who was in Cyclops before you."

Garcia's flashlight beam licked the darkness ahead and came to a stop. Not a dead end, a shutter blocked their path. It was a partition designed to reinforce the tunnel's structure and contain any accidents.

"Perfect, just like the map shows. Once we open this, it's a straight shot to the Federation armory, Lieutenant."

"Good," Steiner checked his watch before turning to Al. "18:20. Misha's Kämpfer should have left the factory by now. Hurry, Al!"

"Yes sir!"

Al's fingers danced across the key lock beside the partition with practiced ease. He'd memorized the passcode long ago, and this was already his third time unlocking a shutter tonight.

The moment they heard the lock click, Garcia eagerly grabbed the manual handle with both arms and began cranking. The shutter gradually rolled upward, this deep in the maintenance tunnels, all doors were designed for manual operation in case of emergencies.

Beyond lay another emergency light-dotted passage stretching into the distance, identical to the one they'd traveled. But their destination was nearly within reach.

"Garcia, this is the last partition, right? You're certain?"

"This is Block 12's shutter. I've confirmed it. No mistake."

"I see," Steiner nodded deeply before calling out, "Al."

"Sir!"

Al snapped to attention with a crisp salute. Steiner bent down before him with a gentle smile.

"You've done well. Thanks to you, we've managed to infiltrate deep into Federation territory without detection. It's all thanks to you. Thank you."

"N-no, I... heh, it's an honor, sir!"

"You're truly a brave young man, Al. Which is exactly why I must do this." In one fluid motion, Steiner's right arm struck Al's solar plexus. "Don't hate me when you realize what happened!"

"Huh?! Ugh—"

A dull thud echoed through the passage. Before Al could cry out or even process what was happening, the captain's precise strike to his vital point caused his body to slump forward, eyes rolling back as consciousness fled.

Steiner caught Al's falling form and quickly checked him over. Other than being unconscious, he was unharmed, the mark of a battlefield professional. "I'm sorry, boy..."

"Commander, what are you—"

"Bernie." Steiner fixed him with a stern gaze. "Take this child and escape through the maintenance tunnels immediately. Understood?"

"Escape?!"

"That's right. How could we bring a mere child into battle? If you understand, take him now!"

"Y-yes sir!" Bernie accepted Al's limp form from Steiner. "Then, after escaping, what should I—"

"Bernie. Listen carefully because I won't repeat myself," Steiner said, his brow furrowing.

"This operation has an 'insurance policy.' If we don't complete the mission by Christmas, high command plans to destroy this colony with nuclear missiles, along with us 'failures.'"

"Nuclear missiles?! That violates the treaty!"

"Exactly. That's precisely why we negotiated with command to come here ourselves. War isn't a game, but it's not lawless slaughter either. We can't involve innocent civilians who know nothing of this conflict. We are proud soldiers of Zeon!"

After his passionate declaration, Steiner took a steadying breath.

"Bernie. Zeon will lose this war. There's no need to waste young lives on the battlefield. Don't worry about what comes after, evacuate this colony immediately. Understood?"

"B-but attacking the Federation with just two people is reckless! Let me—"

"Reckless is what we Cyclops do best," Garcia chuckled softly. "Besides, a rookie like you would just get in the way. I ain't keen on dying while covering for someone else."

"This is an order, Bernie. What say you?"

"....."

"Those who can't give clear answers don't last long in Spec Os."

"Yes sir."

"You've got the wrong idea, Bernie." Garcia spat out his gum and raised his thumb. "Think we're going to our deaths? Don't underestimate us. We'll take care of that 'failure' quick and be back to work you to the bone before you know it."

"Now go!"

Pushed forward by Steiner, Bernie clutched AI and turned to leave, but not before snapping a sharp salute. "Good luck to you both!"

"Now I understand why we brought that kid all this way," Garcia grinned at Steiner. "Without that kind of baggage, that rookie would never retreat."

"Cyclops has always been just the three of us, Andy and us two. Can't have anyone interfering with our final performance."

"Let's move out!"

The two men pressed forward down the passage once more.

"Whoa there! Stay back, folks. I'm piloting under the influence here."

Misha's Kämpfer had entered the downtown district. Where minutes ago the main street had buzzed with chatter and laughter, now it churned with screams and the thundering of fleeing footsteps as the massive steel giant appeared.

Each step of the Kämpfer crushed street trees and twisted lampposts, sending cracks spider-webbing through the asphalt and kicking up clouds of dust. Before this artificial Gulliver, the people below were like helpless Lilliputians, scattering in panic.

"Come on, clear out already," Misha manipulated the controls carefully to avoid crushing the humans underfoot. "Tch, flattening peaceful types like you would give me one hell of a hangover."

He took another swig from his flask. Drunk, yes, but his skills remained sharp.

"Unidentified mobile suit, unidentified mobile suit! Halt your advance and respond immediately!" The hysterical voice blared across all radio channels in the cockpit. This was the colony's own defense force, not the Federation. "Failure to respond will be considered a hostile act, and we will open fire. Respond immediately!"

As if to block the Kämpfer's advance, a convoy of military vehicles screeched around the intersection. Armored vehicles mounted with rapid-fire anti-aircraft guns and carriers loaded with Petit Mobile Suits, three-meter-tall mini mobile suits designed for anti-personnel and anti-material combat operations. Above, armed helicopters cut through the air with their grating rotor blades.

Through the Kämpfer's external audio monitors came their amplified shouts to civilians: "Citizens, evacuate this street immediately. Repeat, citizens evacuate this street immediately!"

Amid screams, shouts, and sobs, people scattered like startled spiders into the side streets. Without delay, the defense force troops launched their missiles at the Kämpfer.

Sparks and smoke bloomed across the giant's chest, but the Kämpfer didn't even flinch. It swatted away the attack helicopters firing at its head like annoying insects, took another step forward, and dispersed the explosion's aftermath. Its armor hadn't even been scratched, let alone dented.

The Petit Mobile Suits tried to block its path, but they were like infants before the Kämpfer. After exhausting their meager ammunition, they were pathetically kicked aside, crashing into friendly armored vehicles. A massive fireball erupted, superheating the surrounding air. Crimson flames licked hungrily at the tenant buildings, their roar punctuated by the heavy boom of a burning helicopter crashing somewhere in the distance.

In the end, these were just security weapons deployed for colony peacekeeping. They were no match for a full-size mobile suit with overwhelming mobility.

"18:30, according to schedule, the Lieutenant and the others should have infiltrated the arsenal by now." Misha checked the time and pushed the control stick forward. "The pests are gone, time to hurry!"

The Kämpfer ignited its foot verniers and lifted off, tilting forward. As it nearly fell face-first, the back thrusters roared to life. The mobile suit began to surge through the air in a prone position, sliding through space. This flight mode enabled high-speed movement.

Suddenly, the cockpit's side monitor image wavered as warning signals blared intermittently. Large enemies approaching. Though visual confirmation was impossible, it was clearly multiple mobile suits, likely Federation GM Commands.

"So, you Feddies gave shown up. Sticking your nose where it doesn't belong when you haven't even signed a security treaty," Misha spat out, his alcohol-laden breath coming hard and fast.

"I'll shoot every last one of you out of the sky."

"Ugh..."

Al let out a soft groan as he finally managed to open his heavy eyelids. His back was cold, his body sluggish. His unfocused gaze wandered through the dim light before his eyes started to close again. If this wasn't his alarm waking him, surely he wouldn't be scolded for dozing a little longer.

In that hazy space between dreams and reality, he watched Bernie struggling to turn some kind of handle on the wall. An unpleasant sound of grinding metal. A shutter slowly closing beside him. This seemed like some kind of corridor...

Then his consciousness snapped back to the moment before his eyes had closed. This wasn't his bedroom, and it wasn't morning. He was lying on the floor of a maintenance tunnel.

And the time was...

"B-Bernie!" Al jolted upright, noticing how the scene around him differed from his memory like a spot-the-difference puzzle. There was a conspicuous void in the space where two people should have been. Steiner and Garcia were gone. "W-what's going on?"

"Oh, Al. You woke up already?" Bernie paused turning the partition handle and looked over. "Was hoping you'd stay asleep until we got outside."

"Bernie, what's happening?" Al stood up but staggered, clutching his stomach. The punch was still affecting him.

"That's right. The Captain hit me. Where are the Captain and Garcia? What's going on?"

"Here's what's going on," Bernie wiped away a water droplet that had bombed his forehead from the overhead pipes, speaking with carefully controlled emotion. "The Captain and Garcia are heading to the arsenal alone. We're going back the way we came."

"W-why?!" Al rushed toward him. "Why are they doing this?"

"Still don't get it, do you? From the very beginning, the Captain planned to get you out of here right before the infiltration."

"That's dirty!" Al exploded.

"They tricked me! Damn it. I won't let them do this!"

"Hey, Al!" As he spun around and tried to slip through the still-partially-open partition, Bernie grabbed him by the collar. "Where do you think you're going? Wait!"

"Bernie, you're too soft! The Captain and Garcia are trying to steal all the glory! We need to—"

"You idiot!" Bernie's hand cracked across Al's cheek. "How full of yourself can you be?! Don't you understand what the Captain was thinking?"

"Bernie..."

"Do you realize what it means for just two people to infiltrate a Federation base?" He gripped Al's shoulders firmly, drilling each word into the boy's ears with an uncompromising gaze.

"Sure, this tunnel gets us in, but it's a one-way ticket, they'll have the escape route sealed off. Taking the arsenal means being completely surrounded by enemies. Even with the Kämpfer's arrival, surviving that bullet storm is a gamble. The Captain let you escape because he didn't want you to die!"

"The Captain and Garcia..." Al's whole body trembled. "Are they planning to, to die?"

"You can't fight a war unless you're ready to die," Bernie shoved him against the wall. "So what'll it be? Want to go try to reclaim your precious glory in exchange for your life? I won't stop you."

"....."

"Though that's not even an option anymore." He pressed a receiver into Al's hand. "Listen. The Captain and Garcia just succeeded in taking the arsenal!"

"Here we go!" With a casual grunt, Garcia connected the wires in his hands. A muffled explosion scattered sparks from the wall-mounted circuit panel.

"Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm. Captain, I've destroyed the door's power supply. They won't be able to open it from the outside."

"Or from the inside, right?" Steiner was busy setting up gun mounts around the door. "The fireworks are ready too. How much time can we buy before they break in?"

"Two minutes to get through the door, another minute to deal with the fireworks, I'd say."

They stood in a space so vast you might mistake it for a baseball field, the Federation's secret arsenal. They'd climbed from the maintenance tunnel to the base's underground power room, disguised themselves as Federation soldiers, and infiltrated the arsenal. For professionals like them, the rest had been surprisingly simple. Just close the door and pull the trigger.

Three or four casualties lay motionless on the floor, each one precisely shot through the chest or head, reduced to mere objects. As Steiner had predicted, the Kämpfer's assault had thinned out the base's security.

Through the thick steel door, they could hear Federation soldiers scrambling. They must have discovered the situation inside.

"Good, let's plant the explosives on the 'failure' while we have time," Steiner looked back and let out a breath. "No... not a failure after all. It really was completed, the Newtype Gundam..."

The blue ceiling lights seemed to emphasize an almost clinical cleanliness. Even the maintenance equipment in the corner and oil-stained tools looked like surgical instruments. And there in the center, laid out on what could have been an operating table, was their so-called "failure."

Its body was fully assembled and apparently adjusted, with all cables removed. Maintenance completion seals dotted key points, it looked ready to stand up the moment a pilot climbed aboard. Only the coloring remained incomplete, with most of the armor still unpainted.

"Let's make sure it becomes a failure," Garcia climbed the work platform stairs and planted his foot on the mobile suit's torso. "But man, what an ugly mobile suit. Is this really the new model?"

His assessment wasn't wrong. The machine was remarkably ungainly. The arms, legs, and chest all seemed disproportionately bulky.

"It is unusually crude for Federation work, but... Never mind. Garcia. I've finished setting the charges on this side."

"Almost done here too. There, finished."

They'd planted shaped charges capable of breaching even thick armor across the machine. If they couldn't capture it, they'd destroy it in one blast. Even a Federation prototype couldn't survive that.

"Found some logs in the static simulation I/O behind the cockpit. Looks like they're really pushing development."

"Our intel was right," said Steiner. "There's probably a test pilot. Don't let anyone near the cockpit. We can't let them activate this thing."

"Don't wake the sleeping giant, eh?" Garcia grinned, then glanced at the door. A red line was slowly creeping upward from the corner, enemy troops trying to cut through from behind. "They're coming."

"Right, let's split up."

No further discussion was needed between these veterans of countless battles. They smoothly separated, taking cover behind equipment and crates at 45-degree angles to the door, submachine guns ready.

The cut section of steel door crashed inward, shaking the arsenal. Gunfire followed as a shower of bullets poured through, covering fire from soldiers shooting from the hip.

"Move in!" a deep voice boomed from the corridor. "Spread out and squash these bugs. Don't damage the Alex!"

Federation soldiers stormed in with guns blazing, sweeping the arsenal. Their eyes found no targets, but the moment they stepped inside, they screamed their last. They were caught in a devastating crossfire from unexpected directions.

The barrage stopped abruptly. One soldier, late to the charge, leaped over his fallen comrades. He was immediately riddled with bullets, collapsing in a spray of blood.

The intensity of fire suggested an entire platoon lay in wait.

This was Steiner and Garcia's "fireworks," sensors by the door triggered multiple hidden machine guns, creating a deadly curtain of bullets. Anyone entering would be cut to pieces.

At least until the cartridges ran empty.

But these weren't amateur opponents. Realizing the trap, the Federation soldiers began testing it. First with uniforms. Then gun holsters. Each triggered the roaring response, shredding the decoys. Finally, they pushed in a cart with boxes, clearing away the bodies. The responding gunfire lasted barely two or three seconds before falling silent.

A painful stillness descended.

Steiner and Garcia exchanged glances. Now came the real test.

The soldiers kicked aside the cart and charged in with a battle cry, weapons raised.

The two men squeezed their triggers.

"At this rate, they'll both be killed!" Al waved the receiver frantically. "Bernie, what are we going to do?"

"I know that! Stop yelling!"

As an agitated Bernie snatched the receiver from Al, the phone slipped and Garcia's voice blared through the speaker: "Captain! Fall back while moving right! I'll cover you!"

Their hands-free receivers, worn to coordinate movements during the firefight, carried the voices to Bernie's unit as well. Though muffled by the encryption, the tone made it clear both men were in dire straits.

"Sorry! Once I'm behind you, you fall back too! Ugh, gh..."

Steiner had apparently taken several hits already. His voice was faltering.

"Bernie, come on, Bernie!"

"I know!" He punched the tunnel wall in frustration. "What's Misha doing? He should've been here by now."

"Can't you contact Misha?"

"If we could, the Captain would've done it already. Damn it! What should we do?"

"Bernie—" Al's voice rose. "We're letting them die! We have to help them!"

"B-but—"

"Bernie, what kind of soldier are you? How can you stay here while our comrades are dying? Some soldier you are!" Al fired off in rapid succession, then took a breath. "The Federation won't expect an attack from behind. This is our chance!"

"G-Garcia... Don't worry about me anymore..." Steiner's voice, mixed with labored breathing, came through the receiver. "I guess I'll... go ahead... and meet Andy..."

"I won't let that happen!" The machine gun fire intensified, making their voices harder to hear. "Captain, over here, quickly!"

"Sorry, Garcia..."

Al approached Bernie, who stood frozen, biting his lip until it bled, and shouted as if to snap him back to reality.

"Bernie!"

"Alright, let's go back!" He adjusted his rifle and gave his small comrade a firm nod. "Run, Al!"

"Captain, it's no use. Misha's not coming," Garcia threw the words at Steiner, who lay propped against their makeshift container shield, without looking back. "I've tampered with Federation mobile suits before. Even a new model should have similar controls. I'll try to hijack this 'failure!'"

There was no response from Steiner. Perhaps he couldn't respond, or his consciousness was fading, or maybe his heart had already stopped beating.

"Gh—" Garcia reloaded both submachine guns and charged toward the Federation's prototype, firing from the hip.

"UOOOOOOHHH!"

Instantly, the scattered enemy fire converged on him. Garcia's bullets raked the Federation soldiers' ranks. Screams and blood sprayed across the walls as men became mere meat tumbling through the air. But several bullets mercilessly tore into Garcia's body as well. Spurting blood from wounds across his body, he pressed on, climbing the work platform. He crawled toward the cockpit, searching for the hatch release.

"Damn, where is it, where—AGH!"

Dozens of bullets ripped through the flesh of his back at once. His body arched backward, hands clawing at empty air. Garcia tumbled to the floor.

"Captain, Garcia. This is Misha. Currently one hundred meters from the arsenal!" A somewhat panicked bass voice came through the receiver slipping from his ear. The Kämpfer's transmission. "Got held up by GMs. Sorry for the delay!"

"You didn't make it in time this round, you old drunk bear..."

"Garcia, what's wrong?"

"Captain's down. I'm done for too. The charges are set. It's up to you now..."

"Garcia!"

Drowning out Misha's voice from the receiver, Garcia could hear Federation soldiers approaching, their weapons ejecting spent cartridges. He let out a death cry.

"I'll take care of these bugs before you get here! Misha, this is goodbye!"

His fingers fumbled at the black box hanging from his waist, pulling its pin ring.

A flash. The air in the arsenal expanded violently. Garcia had detonated a powerful bomb at the cost of his life. In the next instant, an eardrum-shattering explosion centered on his position engulfed the enemy soldiers, shredding their bodies.

The arsenal wall, transformed into a human shredder in an instant, shook with massive impact. The wall nearest the blast couldn't withstand the pressure, it buckled inward and shattered. Smoke and pulverized building materials billowed. The outer corridor gaped like a gut wound exposing its innards.

"Al! Al! Are you alright?"

Bernie shook Al, whom he'd sheltered under his curved back, while brushing off fallen wall fragments.

"I-I'm okay. Bernie, what happened?"

"Looks like Garcia used a bomb. We got caught in the blast."

The pair had raced through the underground tunnel and managed to slip into the base during the chaos, finally reaching this corridor leading to the arsenal. It was a straight shot to the underground power room. They hadn't encountered a single soldier, and were just one corner away from the battlefield's entrance.

Bernie had no real plan. His mind was consumed only with the thought of charging in guns blazing from behind. But he never expected Garcia to sacrifice himself to take out the Federation soldiers just one wall away.

The explosion's force was devastating. Only moans and cries for help could be heard. The gunfire had completely ceased. They'd taken down the Zeon soldiers in the arsenal. What was left to shoot at? The anguished shouts of surviving soldiers calling out to their comrades echoed.

"Al, what's happening around us?" Bernie rubbed his eyes, tears streaming down his face. "The explosion dust got in my eyes. Tell me what you see!"

"It's okay, no one's coming. There's a hole in the wall, I can see inside. That's—is that the Federation's new model? Ah!" Al's eyes caught someone quickly climbing the gray machine visible through the crumbled wall. "Someone's there! A pilot!"

"W-what?"

It was the back of someone in a red pilot suit. They rushed up the stairs and opened the cockpit hatch. It took barely two or three seconds. The figure disappeared inside the machine.

"They got in!"

"Damn it all!"

Bernie forced his bloodshot eyes open, grabbed Al's arm, and leaped over the fallen wall debris into the arsenal.

Just then, a thunderous explosion tore a huge hole in the arsenal's high ceiling.

"Whoa!"

They'd been attacked from outside. A dark shadow suddenly blocked out the visible night sky. A mobile suit.

"You'll pay for what you did to the Captain and Garcia!" A clear voice cut through the receiver. It was Misha's Kämpfer. "Take this!"

The giant's shotgun, with power far exceeding a tank cannon, blazed. But in that instant, the Federation's prototype shed its reputation as a 'failure.' Its back jets roared to life and the machine lifted upward. The mechanical mass had gained a soul.

The Kämpfer's shell, dodged at the last second, tore into the arsenal floor and scattered explosive force. Bernie instantly grabbed Al and rolled across the floor. Hot exhaust washed over their bodies as the prototype powered up its drive system.

A tremor ran through the machine's entire frame, and flames erupted from its main propulsion nozzles. Still on its back, the prototype slid head-first across the floor at tremendous speed. Its head finally smashed through the arsenal wall, and the machine shot out into the base courtyard like a bullet.

"Al, we're escaping now!" Bernie shouted. The time for fighting with machine guns had passed. "We'll get out of the arsenal through the hole it made. Run!"

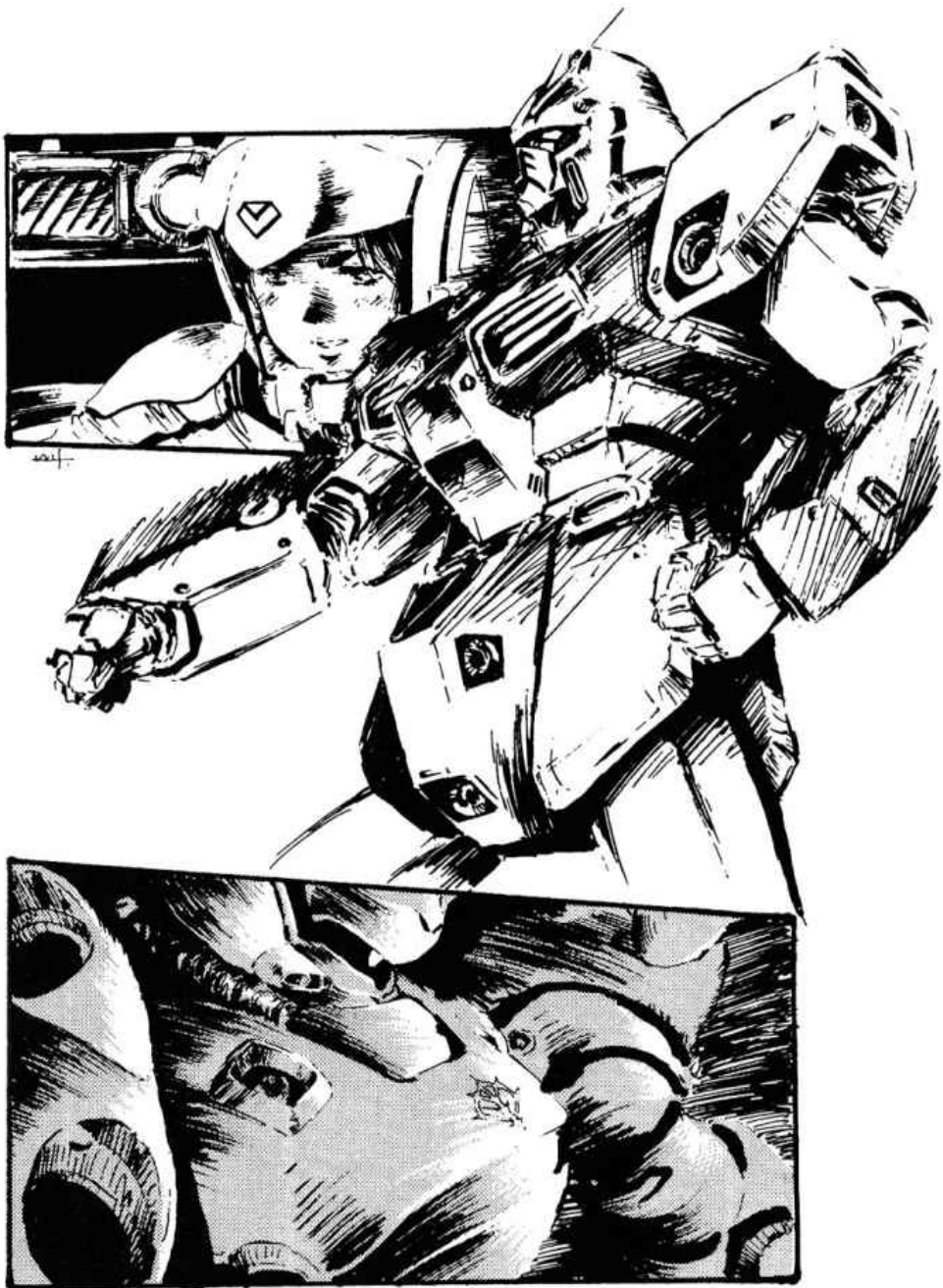
They sprinted away. Smoke filled the air around them, and smoldering debris littered the ground. The soldiers' voices were strained, nearly screams. In the chaos-filled arsenal, no one had the capacity to deal with them.

They crawled through the massive hole the prototype had torn in the wall and tumbled outside. The outside air brushed coolly against their cheeks. Here too they evaded the soldiers rushing back and forth, slipping away to the side. Al and Bernie ran all the way to the fence surrounding the base.

"Bernie, look!" Al's shout stopped him as he was about to climb the fence. His gaze pointed diagonally upward. "The Kämpfer!"

The Kämpfer and the prototype faced each other in the base's wide courtyard. Like statues, they stood motionless, glaring at each other.

Illuminated from below by the base's floodlights, the two machines appeared even more massive and imposing than they actually were.



"Bernie, will the Kämpfer be okay? Can Misha destroy that thing?"

"Look carefully at its body, Al." Bernie jerked his chin upward. "The charges the Captain and Garcia planted are still there. Misha has the detonator. He won't even need to fight."

As if hearing this, Misha's voice came through the receiver: "Captain, Garcia, I'll make use of your parting gift."

The harsh sound of machinery being operated mixed with his words.

Suddenly, a roar filled the base. The ground shook as darkness was torn apart by orange light. Fireballs bloomed across the prototype's body one after another, engulfing it completely in explosions.

It became a massive pillar of fire. When the air's rumbling ceased, the floodlights illuminated only billowing black smoke.

The sound of collapsing metal rang out. Lukewarm heated wind swept away the veil of smoke. The prototype's gradually revealed form was deformed in places, its armor warped and peeling.

The standing prototype swayed its upper body greatly, then finally staggered and fell to its knees. Gray armor crumbled off like falling tiles.

"W-what?!" Misha's voice exploded from the receiver.

"T-that's...!" Bernie gasped.

Beneath the peeling gray armor, a brilliantly white machine surface became visible. Not a scratch marked it. The impact of falling to its knees shed the remaining armor pieces. The prototype's true form had been hidden beneath layered armor installed for both secrecy and protection.

The prototype stood once more. Gone was the ungainly mobile suit the Captain and Garcia had described. In its place stood a smart, beautiful giant colored in blue and white, utterly demolishing its 'failure' nickname.

"WOAHHH!" Misha roared.

The Kämpfer drew its beam saber, a weapon that concentrated accelerated particles into a blade, from its waist, raised it high, and charged at the prototype with increased vernier thrust, kicking up clouds of dust.

The prototype's left arm snapped up. Its cover slid open, revealing three gun barrels that glowed dully at the Kämpfer as it raised its beam saber to strike.

The charging Kämpfer had no time to dodge. In the next instant, the Gatling gun's roar tore apart darkness, earth, and sky. Hidden in the prototype's arm was a 90mm motor cannon.

The Kämpfer took the full force directly to its body, its frame swimming like a boxer under a barrage of punches. Its armor was pierced, its chest caved in, but there was nowhere to escape. In this ring without ropes, its body continued taking fire, arms flailing like a drunk's dance, until it finally arched backward, and collapsed into mere wreckage.

No more voices came through the receiver. The signal itself had died.

Silence returned. The prototype stood looking down at the fallen Kämpfer, thin smoke still drifting from its gun barrels. The soldiers who had watched the mobile suit battle remained where they were, some sitting, all speechless for a time.

By the fence, two figures stood frozen, faces drained of color, staring in shock.

## 2

No matter what unspeakable events unfold in the night, be they gruesome accidents, bloody incidents, horrific tragedies, unexpected disasters, or sudden catastrophes, the sun will always rise over Earth, exposing the scars of carnage in the harsh light of day. The same held true for this colony, with its artificial land beneath an artificial sky.

The Zeon mobile suit that had appeared suddenly in the streets at midnight. The wreckage of the destroyed Colony Defense Force. The skeletal remains of buildings caught in the crossfire, mountains of debris. The Federation's GMs, shot down in combat, had crashed their metal carcasses into residential areas and forested zones, reduced to little more than scrap iron.

In the unfortunate areas ravaged by stray bullets, fallen helicopters, and crashed mobile suits, an entire night of firefighting had proved futile. Whole districts had burned to ash, with embers still smoldering here and there.

And then there was the Federation's new model that had defeated the Zeon mobile suit, Misha's Kämpfer. Already, busy military personnel had covered it with tarps where it lay on its back in the wide yard of the Federation base disguised as a chemical plant, hiding it from prying eyes.

A short distance away lay the Kämpfer, half-buried where it had crashed into the ground, little more than scrap metal now. Its supposedly impregnable armor was riddled with bullet holes, leaking fluids that spread across the soil like blood.

Two soldiers who had climbed the crushed cockpit and cut open the hatch with torches took one look inside, then groaned and covered their mouths, averting their eyes. One could well imagine what had become of the pilot.

The Zeon Special Forces Unit Cyclops's "Operation Rubicon" had ended in complete failure. On this day, with just one week remaining until Christmas.

Who could have imagined that the quiet that had returned to the colony this morning was merely a temporary peace, granted with a stay of execution?

No one, except perhaps the young soldier who remained as Cyclops' sole survivor.

The forest was cool and damp, with the sharp scent of dew-covered grass hanging in the air. Bird calls echoed from above, while squirrels scampered through branches. Here, the scars of Zeon's assault on the city seemed like a tale from another world.

Bernie sat cross-legged on the grass, transferring items from a dirt-stained wooden box into his bag. A sleeping bag lay sprawled carelessly beside him.

This was where he, Steiner, and Garcia had buried their escape kit; passports, papers, cash, civilian clothes, and everything else they'd need to slip out of the colony disguised as ordinary citizens after the operation. Though now, two sets would go unused.

A twig snapped behind him, one of the warning markers he'd scattered around the area. Someone was approaching. Bernie quickly closed the box and stuck a toothbrush in his mouth. Though he had a pistol concealed in his jacket, it was better to look like a young camper than appear suspiciously alert. The sleeping bag was part of that same camouflage.

Feigning sleepiness while rubbing his eyes, he kept his sharp gaze hidden as he looked toward the sound. Behind a tree, he spotted small shoes, a child.

"Bernie, it's me."

"Oh, Al..." Bernie relaxed as Al emerged from behind the tree trunk, removing the toothbrush. "You weren't followed?"

"No, the city's too busy for that."

"How are things?"

"Collapsed buildings, burned districts... Lots of dead people, it seems."

"The police? Have they noticed me?"

"Don't know. But people are saying all the Zeon soldiers died."

"I see," Bernie sat back down, relieved that the remaining Zeon soldier, himself, hadn't been discovered.

"That's one worry off my mind."

"Bernie. What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he snapped harshly at the anxious Al. "Packing! I'm getting out of this colony today!"

"Whaaaat?!" Al's eyes went wide, his voice rough. "E-escape?!"

"The operation failed. No point sticking around."

"Then what about that thing? Are we just leaving the Federation's mobile suit alone? What about the Captain and the others? They'll have died for nothing!"

"Al, listen!" After shouting Al down, he continued in a calmer voice. "High Command put an insurance policy on our operation. If we can't deal with the 'defect' by Christmas night, they'll sink it, and this whole colony, with nuclear missiles."

"Wh-what?! Nuclear missiles?"

"Yeah. One shot would obliterate a colony like this and then some. That's why I'm running. Right now."

"But, but—" Al grabbed Bernie's chest. "Then we just need to defeat the 'defect' before Christmas night, right? Then they won't fire missiles at the colony!"

"Are you kidding? How?!" Bernie drew his pistol, brandishing it. "This is all I've got now! How am I supposed to take down the 'defect' with this, huh? Unless you've got a mobile suit stashed in your storage shed, there's nothing we can do!"

"A mobile suit..." Al's voice caught as he started to hang his head, but suddenly looked up, eyes sparkling. "We do have one, Bernie!"

"What, you gonna fight with a plastic model?"

"No! The mobile suit you first arrived in!"

"The Zaku?"

"Yeah! They still haven't figured out how to disable its trap system, so it's still there. You can disable it, right? Fix it up so it works again?"

When Bernie nodded, Al's voice grew excited.

"Then it's simple! The 'defect' is no match for Bernie in a mobile suit!"

"Yeah, no match at all. One of us would be scrap metal in seconds," Bernie stood up irritably, took a few steps with his back turned, then spun around. "My Zaku!"

"That's not true. The Federation's new model just moves a little faster, right? Bernie, you told me before about taking down a GM with a Zaku missing an arm and leg. Compared to that—"

"Shut up shut up SHUT UP!" Bernie clutched his head, then took a deep breath and glared at the chattering AI, his voice rising in desperate anger.

"I've never shot down a single mobile suit in my entire life!"

A moment of silence split the air between them. Al's eyes went wide, and his voice exploded: "But you said you were one kill away from being an ace!"

Bernie looked away. "Never said that."

"Yes you did! You said one more kill would make you an ace!"

"Then I lied. I'm just a rookie straight out of school, dead weight to everyone else. I've barely even fought in mobile suit battles!"

"You said they recruited you for Special Forces because of your pilot skills."

"Cyclops was just a sacrificial pawn for high command. Any warm body would do for reinforcements. I got dragged here without even knowing what was going on."

"Liar!" Al's voice cracked. "That's a lie. You're just scared of that thing, so you're lying!"

"Yeah, I'm scared," Bernie turned his back, his voice tight. "How could I not be? This thing's so important they'll launch nukes to destroy it. Even Misha's Kämpfer couldn't touch it."

"Misha let his guard down! You're different, Bernie. You can beat it!"

"Don't you get it yet?! I can't do it! That's why running's my only choice!"

"Then what happens to the colony? Are you saying everyone should just die on Christmas?"

Bernie sighed and pulled something from his pocket, two pieces of paper, travel passes. "I've got two. Parting gifts from the Captain and Garcia. You live alone with your mother, right? Use this to escape somewhere. Tell her you won a contest or something, and get out of the colony before Christmas."

"What about everyone else? I have lots of friends. What about Chay? Telcott? Dorothy and the teacher—"

"I can't look after people I don't even know."

"But... what about Chris? Chris will die too!"

"Chris?"

"Yeah. We talked about her at home, remember? That—"

"I remember," Bernie looked away, his words bitter. "But there's nothing I can do!"

The trees rustled in the wind. Bernie slowly shook his head, leaning back against a tree, still facing away from Al as he continued in a calmer voice. "There's nothing I can do anymore, Al. Please understand. Take my advice and just run..."

"Liar. You're lying, Bernie... I don't believe you..." Al shook his head, eyes down. Then he looked up suddenly, as if shaking off his doubt, words tumbling out. "Bernie, you're really an amazing pilot, right? You could beat that thing easily, right? You're just feeling down because the Captain and the others died!"

"Even if that were true, I'm running. I've made up my mind! If you want to fight, do it yourself. Yeah," Bernie twisted his face in a self-deprecating smile, his tone turning mocking as he shrugged dramatically.

"If you're up for it, I'll fix up that Zaku. I'll even teach you how to pilot it. Then you can go fight that thing. How about it?"

"That's—" Al's choked words came back fierce. "That's impossible and you know it!"

"Then there you have it. Don't try to force me to do what you can't do yourself." He shoved the travel passes into Al's pocket. "Now use this to escape. It's the best solution."

"Bernie!" Something finally burst inside Al. He knocked Bernie's arm away and stepped back, throwing up his hands. "What kind of soldier are you?! Abandoning innocent colonists and running away... are you really a proud soldier of Zeon?! Maybe you're the one who doesn't understand the Captain's heart!"

"You... little..."

Bernie glared at Al for an instant but flinched from the intensity in the boy's eyes. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and clenching his fists as if holding himself back.

"I looked up to you. I thought you were a hero. Even if you weren't an ace, you were... Forget it, I don't want this anymore!" Al tore something from his chest and hurled it at Bernie with all his might. "I hope you die!"

He spun around and ran off, blind with anger, without a backward glance or final word.

"Tch... Acting like he knows everything, the damn kid..."

Bernie sighed and picked up what Al had thrown at his feet. It was the sergeant's stripes he had given Al before.

"Al? Al. Why such a scary face?"

The gentle voice stopped Al in front of his house, snapping him back to reality as his eyes darted around.

He'd fled here almost unconsciously after hurling those angry words at Bernie and running through the forest. By the time he'd reached his

neighborhood, he was out of breath and had stopped running, but the unresolved anger in his heart had apparently left his face tense.

The voice belonged to Chris, Al's neighbor. Despite it being a weekday afternoon, she was dressed casually in pants and a sweater, without makeup.

"Chris, you're off work today?"

"Yeah, well, after what happened last night, you know?" She meant the Zeon assault, of course. Al nodded. "The military's overwhelmed dealing with the police and media. No place for me there right now."

"I see..." Al looked back at her with a forced smile. "How's Alex? Doing well?"

"Alex?! Oh, Alex. Too well. Such a headache sometimes," Chris sighed. "Got quite the lecture this morning. 'Causing too much trouble for everyone,' they said..."

"Sounds like a handful."

"Yeah, well..." Her voice grew more serious. "By the way, how's Bernie doing?"

Al scowled, answering dismissively.

"Who cares about that guy!"

"My, my, did you two fight? You were getting along so well."

Al maintained his sour expression. Chris raised an eyebrow, tilting her head as she studied him, then sat on the hedge to match his eye level, a slight smile playing on her lips.

"Such a gloomy face. Something wrong? I'm happy to listen if you want to talk."

"Well..." Al glanced at her gentle expression and mumbled hesitantly.

"Chris, you're a soldier too, right?"

"Yes, more or less."

"Then, if there was this really strong enemy, and if you didn't defeat them, lots of innocent people would die, like, everyone in the colony, would you fight?"

Chris blinked at the sudden question.

"That's quite the scenario."

"I'm serious, Chris."

"Sorry. Well, in that case..."

She answered clearly and firmly.

"I would fight."

"But they're super strong! You might get killed! And what if all those people who might die had nothing to do with you?"

"My answer's still the same. I'd fight."

Al blinked at her matter-of-fact response, which held such quiet determination.

"Why? Wouldn't you want to run?"

"Maybe at first. But, in the end, I'd fight. It's hard to explain why... I guess losing your soul is scarier than losing your life."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it this way, Al. Isn't it better to fight and fall than to run away from something you know you have to do and live with that shame forever? That's not really living, is it?"

"I don't... really get it."

Chris smiled at Al's earnest attempt to understand. "Is this for your next 'operation'?"

"Huh?"

"Is there some bully picking on everyone that needs to be taught a lesson?" Chris playfully punched her palm. "Go for it. Who cares if you lose? Better than running away without fighting."

"It's not like that," Al shook his head solemnly. "If I don't fight, everyone in the colony will die."

"My, my. Quite the 'operation,'" she feigned impressed surprise. "Then all the more reason. Stop worrying and face them head-on. I'll back you up if needed. Oh, or maybe I shouldn't say that for this kind of thing?"

"No, thank you."

Chris nodded, satisfied with Al's brightened response. Then, as if just remembering, she handed him two envelopes. "Oh right! Almost forgot the important thing. These letters came to your house. The mailman delivered them to me by mistake. One's for you, Al."

"What?" He checked the addresses eagerly. One for his mother, one indeed for him. Both had the same sender. "They're from Dad!"

"Oh? From your father? I wonder what they say."

"Hold on, I'll open it now!"

Al tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter, his eyes darting back and forth. His expression changed with every line.

"What does it say?"

Al's voice burst out. "Dad's coming back to the colony! And he's not going anywhere else, ever! Yes!"

"That's wonderful, Al!" Chris clapped her hands, sharing his joy. "When is he coming back?"

"Let's see, let's see..."

His eyes scanned the letter, stopping at one spot as he read aloud rapidly. "December twenty-fifth, Christmas—" His voice jumped like a skipping record, then slowed to a crawl. "Christmas... night..."

"Well, a day-late Santa Claus, I suppose."

Al bit his lip, gripping the letter with trembling hands, not noticing the sweat from his palms soaking into the paper.

"Al, what's wrong?"

He kicked off from the ground. Turning his back on Chris, blind and deaf to everything around him, his chest heaving, shoving past pedestrians and ignoring their angry shouts, he started running.

Back toward the forest he'd once fled from.

Darkness had fallen over the colony as the sun no longer reflected in its mirrors. This was especially true in the depths of the forest park, where streetlights were few and far between.

Al ran down the narrow path, fighting for breath, pushing past branches and grass that blocked his way. He must have been running for quite a while, countless scratches and bruises marked his arms and legs.



The already dim forest had become practically a maze after sunset. During the day, lost children could orient themselves using posted signs and the tall landmarks placed at regular intervals, but these were useless now.

Still, Al pressed on, relying on memory and instinct, pushing aside branches and trampling through weeds.

His foot caught on something and he fell ungracefully. His shoe had slipped on bare earth where grass had been torn away. Looking up, his eyes now adjusted to the darkness, he could see the whole slope had been gouged out by some massive force. Broken trees all pointed downward.

This was the place, where Bernie's Zaku had crashed into the forest.

Al took a deep breath and charged down the slope, hoping to find the steel giant sleeping wounded in the darkness.

But through the trees, what first caught his eye wasn't cold metal, but a flickering orange glow. A fire, someone had built a campfire right next to the Zaku.

"Bernie!" Al burst from the bushes, calling out to the figure by the fire. It was definitely him. "Bernie! I've been looking for you. So this is where you were!"

"Oh, Al!" Bernie turned toward him, an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth, unsurprised in the firelight. "Figured you'd show up here eventually, but that was quick."

"Bernie, I thought you'd left already. I'm so glad!"

Al rushed to him past the dancing flames, words spilling out.

"I won't try to stop you anymore. But before you go, please, just one favor! I need you to fix this Zaku!"

"Fix this? What for?"

"Isn't it obvious? So I can pilot it and defeat the 'defect'!"

"You? Pilot this? Defeat? The 'defect'?" Bernie repeated each word mockingly, then put his hand to his forehead, laughing. "This is rich! You're gonna pilot this thing and take it down? No way in hell you could do that, idiot!"

"I can!" Al crashed into Bernie's chest, grabbing him. They both tumbled to the ground, just like when they'd first met in this same spot. "I can. I definitely can!"

"Ah, hahaha!"

"Stop laughing!"

Red-faced, Al straddled Bernie's stomach and swung his small fist at his face. But Bernie's strong hand caught it. As Al tried to throw a second punch, he suddenly stopped short.

"Yeah, you can. You sure can, Al." Bernie's expression had completely changed as he looked up at him. There wasn't a trace of mockery in his voice. "If you can do it, there's no way I can't!"

"Bernie..."

"Let's do it, Al. Let's do this thing." Bernie gripped Al's halted fist firmly. "You and me, we'll smash that 'defect' to pieces!"

"Bernie, you mean it? You're not lying?"

"Yeah, I mean it. I went back to help the Captain and the others, didn't I? It's not over yet." Standing up, Bernie took Al's hand and pressed something into it. "Here, you forgot this."

"The Zeon, sergeant's stripes. *My stripes!*"

"That's right. Your stripes, Sergeant Alfred. No more playing war. We're going to carry out this operation with our own two-man unit. You ready?"

Al's response burst out with explosive energy: "You bet!"

"Good," Bernie nodded firmly, gazing at the Zaku's hulking form dimly reflecting the firelight. "First we need to fix this guy up. Then we can talk strategy."

Al stood beside him, studying his face.

"But Bernie, you were lying after all. All that talk about running away—"

"I meant it at the time. Even went to the spaceport. Got my ticket and everything. But, somehow I ended up here. Don't know why myself."

"I know why," Al grinned at his partner's sidelong glance. "It's because Bernie really is an ace after all. Even if you've never shot down a single mobile suit, you're the greatest ace ever to me!"

"Quit buttering me up," Bernie tapped Al's cap with a click of his tongue, but his tone was cheerful. "Come on, enough chatter, help me out here. We don't have many days left till Christmas."

### 3

"Al, I'm going to connect this next. Keep your eye on the monitor."

Bernie's voice came through the radio into the Zaku's cockpit where Al sat. Bernie was outside, reconnecting severed cables.

"Okay, try it!"

"There! How's that?"

"HE-6 is lit up," Al read out the red number glowing on the self-diagnostic monitor, indicating the Zaku's damaged sections.

Almost five days had passed. While the city was buzzing with Christmas Eve excitement, the two of them had been working tirelessly in the forest, trying to revive the Zaku to take down the Federation's new model.

Fortunately, the damage wasn't too severe, mainly a hit to the waist area that had severed the hydraulic connections and wiring. Bernie had been forced to crash-land when the valve feeding fuel to the back verniers stopped working.

The Federation hadn't captured this Zaku partly because of its location deep in the forest, but mainly because they'd realized it was "trapped." Try to repair and move it carelessly, and it would detonate its remaining fuel, destroying both the mobile suit and anyone working on it.

Since Bernie had set the trap himself, disabling it was simple enough, just open the panels across the machine and input the codes. After that, it was just a matter of patient repair work. The colony was littered with parts from the GMs that Kämpfer had shot down, in both forest and city. They could

salvage what they needed from those. The Zaku had its own maintenance kit, and they'd bought any missing tools from shops in the city.

"How's C-23?"

"That's fine," Al twisted around in his seat in the cramped cockpit, surrounded by instruments, monitors, and control sticks, checking another display. "The whole C series looks good."

"Right."

Bernie was clearly struggling outside, his breathing revealing his efforts.

"How about now?"

"HE-6 is gone!"

"Perfect! Clear it then. Press the white button below."

"This one!" Al leaned forward to press the white button under the panel.

The monitor displayed a wireframe image of the Zaku, which gradually filled with green light from head to toe.

When it finished, Al cheered.

"We did it, Bernie! No more red spots. That means repairs are complete, right?"

"Alright! Disengage the safety and try the main switch. Don't touch the stick though, it'll move now."

"Um—this one?" Al stretched up to turn the switch above his head. After a slight jolt, a pleasant vibration came through the seat. All the cockpit's meters and lamps sprang to life at once. The front and side monitors flickered on with satisfying pops, showing crisp images of the forest from the Zaku's perspective. "Bernie, we did it! It's alive! Hey, can I move it just a little?"

"Just a tiny bit. Try pulling the right stick back very gently. Just barely."

"Okay!"

Al repositioned himself in the seat, his feet barely reached the pedals, and cautiously gripped the stick, pulling it back.

Suddenly, a scream over the radio: "Waaahhhh!"

"Bernie!" Al frantically opened the cockpit hatch and jumped out. The Zaku had raised its right arm while still lying down. He could see Bernie sprawled underneath. "Are you okay?"

"How could I be okay? Ow ow ow!" Despite his words, Bernie seemed fine as he got up rubbing his backside. "I said just a tiny bit! You knocked me right off!"

Al sighed with relief and ran along the Zaku's massive frame until he could look down at Bernie. "But Bernie, it moved!"

"Yeah," Bernie looked up, his mouth breaking into a grin. "It sure did. Haha!"

"Haha, it moved, Bernie!"

"Yeah, it really moved, Al! Hahahaha!"

Bernie caught Al as he jumped down, spinning him around while they both kept laughing.

"Bernie, can we beat it now? Can we destroy that thing?"

"Yeah. Looks like the Federation took the Zaku machine gun, but there's a heat hawk buried under the mobile suit. Plus spare ammo we can use as

explosives." Bernie gave the dizzy Al a thumbs up and a wink. "Just need to set the trap. It'll be a piece of cake."

"Awesome! Hey, what should we call the operation? I was thinking, how about Operation Christmas?"

"Operation Christmas, huh? I like it. Right," Bernie put his hands on Al's shoulders, speaking firmly as if convincing himself. "Operation Christmas begins tomorrow at 1500 hours. Let's go set up the forest trap now. Might take all night. You okay with that at home?"

"Yeah. Told them I'm staying at a friend's."

"Well-prepared! Good. Got your flashlight? It'll be dark soon."

"Yeah. Let's go, Bernie!"

Al nodded firmly. Even without any parties, this Christmas Eve spent with Bernie would surely be unforgettable.

"Bombs here, here, and here. Lure it to this position, while I hide here." Bernie checked several spots on his hand-drawn map. "First target is its arms. Can't get in close for melee combat until we take out that gatling gun."

Looking up, he squinted at the Zaku gleaming with morning dew in the rising sun, then turned gentle eyes to Al sleeping beside him, breathing softly. They were both covered in mud.

"Mm, yeah..."

"You awake, Al?"

"Yeah... Oh, sorry. When did I fall asleep..."

"You worked hard last night. Don't worry about it." Bernie peered at Al's troubled face.

"What's wrong? You're sweating badly."

"Had a bad dream... You were..." Al trailed off, looking anxiously at Bernie. "Bernie. That thing won't get you, right? We'll definitely win, right?"

"Yeah. Of course. Look, I've been refining our strategy right now. Planning how to come back alive."

"Let me see." Al studied the attack plan as Bernie spread out the map.

"Wow. As expected. This'll be easy, right?"

"Well, ninety percent sure. If we knew the enemy's weak points, this plan would be foolproof. Trust me."

"What should I do?"

"You'll be here," Bernie pointed at the map. "When it comes to this spot, detonate the bombs. I taught you how, right?"

"But, those are set to explode when the 'defect' cuts the wires, aren't they?" That's what they'd spent all night setting up in the forest, tripwires connected to detonators.

"So—"

"We can't be sure it'll cut the wires, and it might notice and go around them. This is an absolutely crucial role, Al."

"Got it. I'll do it."

"And this!" Bernie pulled out a video disk and a package from his jacket. "If Operation Christmas fails and I don't make it back, watch this disk and follow my instructions. Don't look at either until then."

"Bernie..." Al's eyes wavered anxiously as he took them. "You don't mean—"

"Hey, hey, don't look so serious. This is just insurance, worst case scenario."

"But Bernie, remember what you said? That you can't fight a war unless you're ready to die?"

Bernie hesitated, then quickly recovered with a laugh. "You remember the weirdest things. That was a lie. A joke. Who goes into battle planning to die?"

"But..."

"What? Don't you trust me?" Bernie took Al's cap, turned it backward, and placed it back on his head with a pat.

"Just watch. I'll take down that 'defect' and protect this colony."

"No... don't do that..."

"Hm? The cap?"

"That's what Dad does when he says goodbye." Al adjusted his cap. "Now you're doing it too..."

"Don't be silly, worrying about something like that." Bernie brushed it off lightly. "That dream you had, it's reverse prophecy. It's telling us Operation Christmas will succeed."

"Yeah... You're right. Of course."

"That's better. Only six hours until the operation starts. I need some sleep. But first, I could really go for something good to eat."

"I'll go get something!" Al's voice bounced as he spun around. "Wait here!"

"Hey, don't run so fast, you'll fall! Are you even listening?" But his voice didn't reach Al, who disappeared among the trees. Watching him go, Bernie whispered softly.

"Take care of yourself, Al..."

"Weaknesses of that white mobile suit?!" Chris nearly dropped the tea set she was carrying. "I'm always happy to see you, but what brought this on suddenly?"

"Please, Chris. There's no time left," Al rushed out his words. "If we don't know by three o'clock, our operation might fail. You're in the Federation military, right? Haven't you heard anything?"

Al had started heading home to get food, but remembering Chris was next door, he'd burst in with this abrupt question. His mind was consumed with one thought: learning the new model's weakness to tell Bernie.

"The white mobile suit's weaknesses..." Chris sat on the sofa across from Al, tilting her head. "But what does that have to do with your 'operation'? Teaching some mean upperclassman a lesson?"

"No, I told you before, it's not that kind of operation!"

"Did you?" The kettle whistled in the kitchen, and Chris stood up. "Oh! Water's boiling. I'll make us some tea."

"This is no time for tea, Chris!"

Frustrated by her departure to the kitchen, Al jumped up and vaulted over the sofa rather than walking around. The movement knocked something off the bookshelf where it had been half-hidden, a photo frame.

"Come on, not now of all times!"

Al picked it up irritably and turned it over. It showed Chris alone, smiling brightly, at what looked like an airfield. And, Al recognized what she was wearing. That red pilot suit!

"Oh my, where did you find that picture?" Chris returned with the teapot and casually plucked the frame from his hands, not noticing his shock. She giggled. "My graduation photo from officer training school last year. And Papa said he'd lost it. He was so against it, you know. 'A woman doing such things,' and all that."

"Chris, that photo..."

"Ah," she stuck out her tongue. "The suit gave it away? I kept it secret because I thought you might be intimidated if you knew I was a mobile suit pilot."

"But Chris, you said your job was looking after a kid named Alex..."

"Sorry about that! But I never actually lied. My job is test pilot," she explained smoothly. "I test new military models. My parents cried and begged me not to go into actual combat."

"Then, then—" Al swallowed hard, "Alex is the name of that white—"

Suddenly, screams erupted from outside.

"W-what?!" Chris cut him off, rushing to open the window and look out. People in the street were all staring in the same direction. Following their gaze, she caught her breath. "That's a mobile suit! A Zaku?!"

"What?!" Al sprang up beside her, squeezing in to look toward the forest. The Zaku was jumping out, verniers blazing. Though distant, Al instantly knew who was in the cockpit. "Why?! It's too early!"

"It's heading for the base," Chris murmured, but was cut off by the shrill ring of the phone. Al forgotten, she lunged for the receiver. "Hello. Yes, it's me. Yes, I saw it. It's heading your way, right? Understood, I'm coming right away!"

She spun toward the door but couldn't go further. Al stood blocking it, arms spread wide.

"Al! What are you doing? Move!"

"No!" Al shouted back. "You're going to try to stop that Zaku with the 'defect,' aren't you? You can't do that!"

"What are you talking about, Al? What 'defect'? Just move! Every second counts!"

"No way!" Al latched onto Chris, words tumbling out. "Listen, Chris! If that Zaku can't destroy Alex, Zeon's going to hit this colony with missiles!"

"Al!" She slowly peeled him off, staring intently into his eyes. Her face was serious.

"You understand, Chris?"

"Yes, I understand perfectly." Her tone suddenly turned stern. "But I don't have time for your 'operation' right now! This isn't playing war, Al."

She shoved him aside and darted through the door.

"Chris!"

Al scrambled up and chased after her, stumbling and scraping his knee at the entrance, but feeling no pain. He heard an engine roar. By the time he tumbled outside, Chris's car was already shrinking rapidly down the street.

"Please, let me in!" Al confronted the guard. "I need to talk to someone important in the military. There's something they need to know!"

"Just let him in," called a man leaning against a taxi behind them. "Kid says his dad's inside the base. I can't leave till I get paid."

Al had gotten here using the same trick he'd used on the truck driver before, making it to the entrance of the Federation base, the secret factory housing Alex.

"Look, if it's no then it's no," the guard roughly shoved Al away. "This is an emergency, understand? A Zeon mobile suit is heading this way."

"That's what I need to talk about!"

"Just let him in already," the taxi driver, tired of waiting, moved to support Al, pressing closer to the guard. "Emergency or not, I've got a living to make."

"This is hardly the time. We're fighting to protect you people!"

"Don't give me that crap!" The driver raised his eyebrows. "When did we ask for that? If anything, it's because you built your base here that Zeon's coming. Barely a handful of locals even like you being here."

"What did you say?!"

Suddenly, the driver lunged at the guard, grappling him. "Go kid! Run in and get your dad to bring the money!"

Al didn't need to be told twice. He tried to slip past them toward the barracks, but another guard hidden in the shadows caught him by the collar and threw him to the ground.

"Ugh..." The driver let out a muffled cry and collapsed, eyes rolling back. The guard had struck his solar plexus with his rifle butt.

"What should we do with the kid?"

"Throw him out with this one."

The guard hoisted up the driver and tossed him onto the taxi's hood like garbage.

"Let go! Let me go! This is important!"

"Yeah, yeah," Despite Al's desperate struggles, he was thrown outside the gate just like the driver.

"Don't come back!"

"Hey! That's quite rough treatment!" A man shouted from a car that had just emerged from the back parking lot. "Manhandling colony residents like that is unacceptable!"

"And you are?" the guard asked, more cautiously since the man had come from inside.

"You don't appear to be military personnel."

"I'm a reporter from the Daily Sunrise. Here on assignment, with proper clearance." He got out of his car and helped Al up while glaring at the guards. "Treating a child like that..."

"A reporter? Give us a break. You know this isn't the time!"

A low rumble cut them off as a massive shadow fell over them. A whirlwind kicked up, pelting them with sand. Looking up, they saw a white mobile suit leaping out from the base.

"The 'defect.' Alex!" Al's voice trembled. "Chris is gone. We were too late!"

"What's that? Hey!" The reporter shielded his eyes from the dust, pointing skyward. "They were building a new model under the pretense of being stationed here? Clear treaty violation. I'll blast this in the papers."

He spat the words at the guards who had turned away, then helped the still-shaken Al into his car. "Come on, it's dangerous here. Let's go."

"Mister, head for the forest," Al told the agitated man as he got in and stomped the accelerator. "That Zaku's trying to lure the new model into the forest. We have to stop the fight!"

"Hm? Why do you think that?"

"Because that's the plan!"

Al opened the window and leaned out to watch Alex's path. Bernie's Zaku was visible ahead of it.

"It does look like it's fleeing to the forest. Luring the new model? Alright, let's get closer," the reporter pressed the throttle deeper. "But why do we need to stop the fight?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," the reporter glanced at Al while gripping the wheel. "Go ahead."

"Zeon's planning to attack this colony with nuclear missiles to destroy that new model. That Zaku is fighting alone to prevent that. But, but..." Al turned a tearful face to the silent reporter. "Never mind. You won't believe me anyway."

"You're right, I can't believe it..." As Al started to deflate, the reporter added with surprise, "That you know about this! That's a scoop I just got myself. Who told you?"

"What, then?!"

"Yes. What you're saying is true. This colony was targeted for nuclear missiles. For exactly the reason you said."

"'Was' targeted." Al caught the past tense. "What do you mean?"

"Just hours ago, the Federation apparently sank the Zeon ship carrying those missiles. The information came from a Zeon soldier who died attacking the base a week ago. He'd sewn a letter into his clothes."

Probably Steiner, Misha and Garcia's bodies had been too badly damaged to identify.

"If their operation failed, the colony would face nuclear attack. He wrote that even if it was his own side's operation, he couldn't allow treaty violations and mass murder. Quite an honorable man."

"Then the nuclear missiles won't..."

"No, they won't. The colony's safe."

"Oh no..." Al's whole body shook as he groaned. "There's no reason to fight anymore. We have to stop him. Stop Bernie. Mister, stop here! I'm going into the forest!"

"H-hey!" The reporter had to slam the brakes as Al grabbed the wheel. Before the car fully stopped, Al tumbled out.

"What's with that kid? Hm, what's this?"

He picked up a package left on the seat. Al had forgotten it, the package Bernie had given him.

"Where did that Zaku go?!"

Inside Alex's cockpit, Chris, wearing her red pilot suit, scanned in all directions. This was indeed a new model, instead of limited square monitors, external images were displayed on a 360-degree spherical screen surrounding the seat. It was like piloting a transparent mobile suit.

Alex had followed the Zaku into the forest. As the giant machine walked, Chris felt as if she were floating on a flying chair.

Something glinted beneath her feet. But it was too late, Alex had caught the thin wires strung between the trees. By the time she realized what was happening, pillars of fire were already erupting.

A violent shock hit Alex, rocking Chris hard. The armor would hold against this level of blast, but billowing black smoke engulfed the mobile suit.

"Oh no..." The omnidirectional monitor went completely black. Chris was rattled, having lost all visibility.

She'd fallen right into the trap Bernie and Al had set.

Through the smoke, an eerie light glowed, the Zaku's mono-eye. The machine, which had been hiding between the trees, leapt up with an agility belying its massive steel frame.

"RAAAHHH!" Bernie roared in his cockpit, his right arm yanking the control stick. The Zaku's arm rose in response, heat hawk gripped tight. "Take this!"

The massive axe, its blade glowing red-hot, bit into the white giant's left arm. Light and sparks flew.

Alex twisted its arm in response, but it snapped mid-motion, small explosions erupting from the cut as it was torn away.

"Got you, you 'defect!'"

"The arm—!"

Both pilots shouted from their respective cockpits, but there was no communication between them. From outside, it looked like two silent giants locked in combat. If either knew who they were fighting, this bloodbath could end without waiting for one of them to die.

"Ngh!"

With Chris's muffled cry, Alex thrust its right arm toward the Zaku as it raised the heat hawk for a second strike. The armor plates opened, revealing gun barrels.

"There's more?!"

Bernie's shout came just as Chris pulled the trigger. The gatling gun roared to life. The Zaku's frame reeled backward.

"Gah, ugh!"

Bernie let out a sound between a groan and a scream as he slammed into the console. He'd barely dodged a direct hit, but sparks poured from the Zaku's left shoulder where it had been struck. The arm hung limp, useless.

Blood trickled into his eye, and something fell into his mouth, one of his own teeth.

He spat it out and looked at the main monitor, his pupils dilating. Alex's right arm gatling gun gleamed coldly before him.

Just as he squeezed his eyes shut, Chris pulled the trigger. A dry click, but no gunfire. She was out of ammo.

"No, not now!"

In that instant, the Zaku struck. It lunged into Alex's guard, ramming it full force. The two machines tumbled together down the forest slope with an earthshaking crash. Birds scattered and trees snapped as they fell, breaking more tripwires as they went.

Like ships tossed in a sea of explosions, neither machine could attack as they rolled to the bottom of the forest.

"The m-monitor—!"

Chris cried out amid the chaos as sections of her omnidirectional display went dark or filled with static. The explosions had taken out the vulnerable camera eyes.

The Zaku's single eye made it less vulnerable to such damage. The mobile suits were now evenly matched.

As they stopped sliding, the Zaku straddled Alex, pressing all seventy-four tons of its weight down. Its heat hawk howled through the air, but the Alex's back verniers fired with tremendous force.

The enemy suit lurched upward, throwing the Zaku off balance. The heat hawk missed by inches, carving a gash in the earth. Scorched soil rained down on both machines.

Alex kicked the Zaku off while sliding backward along the ground. There were no more trees here, only buildings, they'd somehow ended up right by the Federation base.

Rising to its feet, Alex raised its remaining right arm as if protecting the base behind it, drawing the beam saber from its shoulder.

"Looks like this is the final round."

Bernie wiped the blood from his forehead, rubbed it on his uniform, and gripped the controls again. The Zaku readied its heat hawk in response. The two mobile suits faced each other across the gap.

At that moment, both their monitors showed the same shadow, a small human figure running toward them, a boy.

"AI?"

"AI?!"

In their steel-enclosed spaces, cut off from any communication, both pilots spoke the same name at the same moment.



"Bernie, you don't have to fight anymore!" Al ran toward them, shouting with all his might. "Chris, don't destroy that Zaku! Neither of you needs to fight!"

"Al, sorry for deceiving you," Bernie bit his lip and took a deep breath. "But this is real war. Watch carefully!"

The Zaku kicked off the ground. Alex lunged forward. Heat hawk and beam saber crossed between the machines, releasing a brilliant flash.

"Ah, ah, ahhh..." Al stood frozen.

The two machines stopped moving. The Zaku's heat hawk was buried in Alex's neck, while Alex's beam saber had pierced the Zaku's chest.

The heat hawk moved slowly, not from its pilot's will, but pulled by gravity. Alex's head dropped away. Then the Zaku, its chest pierced, erupted in flames. The fire grew rapidly until, with a tremendous roar, the Zaku's upper body exploded.

"B-Bernie!"

Alex was thrown back by the blast, crashing into the military building behind it. It lay motionless. The Zaku, its upper half gone, burned fiercely. Black smoke billowed upward.

"Bernie..."

His knees buckled. All strength left his body, and Al collapsed to the ground. Even as military personnel rushed past to begin fighting the fire, he couldn't move from that spot.

His eyes saw nothing, his ears heard nothing, his dry lips barely parted, as ash fell like snow on his shoulders and head.

Universal Century 0079, Christmas Day.

Soon real snow mixed with the ash, painting everything in a world of silver, as if mourning the end of a small war, in a small colony, in a corner of space.

## Epilogue 0080 - Spring

Carefree, bright children's laughter could be heard from somewhere. They seemed to be celebrating something. Today was the first day of school in the new year.

Sunlight filtering through the window fell gently and warmly into the small room. Its owner must be a young boy, still in his mischievous years. The wastebasket overflowed with paper scraps, toy guns lay scattered carelessly on the floor. The desk was cluttered with notebooks, textbooks, and pens.

Among the pile, a small black device peeked out. A video camera, still loaded with a disk.

It seemed deliberately hidden beneath the stack of notebooks.

Whether the boy had watched the video, that remained unknown. But if someone were to operate that camera, they would see this scene on the display:

A young man with blonde hair, speaking to the camera in the forest.

*"Al... listen carefully."*

This is how he would begin addressing the screen.

*"By the time you watch this video, I'll probably no longer be in this world. This is my final order to Sergeant Al. The package I gave you contains tapes of my testimony and evidence. Everything I know about why this colony became a nuclear missile target."*

Through the display, the young man would smile gently at the viewer.

*"If Operation Christmas fails, take this to the police or military. If the adults believe it's true, I think it will save this colony. Consider it my Christmas present to you."*

After a pause, he continues matter-of-factly.

*"I thought about delivering it myself, but, sad as it is, I'm a Zeon soldier. I want to take down the 'defect' with my own hands. It's not that I hate the 'defect's' pilot or need to defeat the Federation. I just want to be a little more like the Captain and the others who let me escape, as a soldier. Do you understand, Al?"*

Did the young man's feelings reach the boy? He sighs, then raises his face with determination, looking at his audience through the lens.

*"Al, I'll probably die, but don't hate the Federation soldiers or the 'defect's' pilot for that. They're just like me, doing what they have to do. It might be impossible, but please don't hate others or blame yourself. This is my final request..."*

The young man looks down, stays silent for a moment, then raises his face, now suddenly bright. In a light tone, he says.

*"If by luck I survive and the war ends, I'll definitely come back to this colony. I'll come see you. That's a promise."*

A wink. Then he makes a finger gun and playfully shoots at the lens, his expression somehow unburdened.

*"See you, Al. Take care of yourself. Say hi to Chris for me."*

The young man smiles, then raises his right arm in a crisp salute to the camera. Sharp and brave, but above all, full of affection for the person beyond the lens.

While listening to his classmates' footsteps running past the fence toward school, Al stood alone in a corner of the garden, driving a shovel into the ground. Soil flew up into his hair, but he paid no mind. His expression was too hard and lonely to suggest he might be planting flower seeds.

At his feet lay a homemade cross, apparently cut from wood by his own hand. He must have used an unfamiliar knife, his hands were covered in small cuts.

After digging until the hole was wrist-deep, Al gently pulled a small case from his pocket. Inside was something tiny and thin, practically worthless, a Zeon sergeant's rank insignia. The one Bernie had given him before.

He placed it carefully at the bottom of the hole. His lips parted as if to speak, but then pressed firmly shut as he scattered handfuls of dirt. With each movement of his hand, the case disappeared beneath the soil.

Finally, he planted the cross with care and traced its surface. A name was clumsily carved into it: "0079/12/25 Sgt.Major B.W."

For some reason, Al took off his cap and hung it on the cross.

"I'll never forget. Never."

He whispered, then took back the cap and put it on backward. For Al, this was the most heartfelt farewell he could manage.

"Al?"

At the gentle call from outside, he looked up. Chris stood beyond the fence.

She wore a neat suit, but her right arm hung in a sling—probably an injury from the battle with the Zaku. Still, her smile never wavered.

"Chris..."

"Al, I have to go to Earth for work. I need to leave right away—"

Al stood and faced her across the fence. Her eyes were gentle and clear, without a trace of their previous intensity.

"So sudden?"

"Yeah. Al, I wanted to apologize. For before. I'm sorry. I think I said too much. But please understand, I never—"

"It's okay, Chris," Al shook his head calmly. "I understand."

"Al. Thank you."

"Hey, Al! Are you in the garden?" A deep voice called from inside. "It's time for school. Your dad's offering to drive you. Hurry and get ready!"

"Okay, Dad! Just wait a minute!"

Hearing this ordinary, peaceful exchange between parent and child, Chris let out a soft sigh, brushed back her long hair, and looked up. The colony's

sky was peaceful today, with thin wisps of clouds. Occasional fireworks, set off somewhere by celebrating crowds, bloomed with distant pops.

"So peaceful. The war really is over. Al, I'll definitely come back next Christmas. Let's have a party then. I'll bake a cake."

"Don't push yourself, Chris."

"No. It's a promise." She held out her left pinky and linked it with his, smiling. "Take care, Al."

"Yeah. You too, Chris!"

"Oh, and say hi to Bernie for me. I wish I could have met him one more time."

"Y-yeah." Al's voice caught and he looked down, biting his lip. When he raised his face again, there was a smile, forced and fragile, but a smile nonetheless.

"Bernie... I'm sure Bernie would be disappointed too. I'm sure!"

*"As you may have heard from your parents or the news, the long war has finally ended, and peaceful days have returned."*

The principal began his address from the stage, speaking slowly and deliberately to the assembled children. This was Al's school yard. The students stood in their opening ceremony lines, each reacting differently, some listened seriously, others chatted, some looked sleepy, while others gazed off elsewhere.

Al's best friends, Chay and Telcott, could be seen among them. They paid no attention to the principal's speech, absorbed in their own whispered conversation. Dorothy, ever the model student, listened intently to the amplified voice.

And Al. He stood among them with a lonely gaze and an unusually mature expression for his age.

*"The war has left deep scars on this colony. Some of you may have lost parents, siblings, or friends. Though the Earth Federation Government has achieved victory, what we truly won through great sacrifice is this peace."*

Suddenly, something hot welled up in Al's chest. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He clenched his teeth and pressed his lips together. Looking down, he balled his fists, his breath trembling. His eyelids burned.

But Al couldn't stop the tears from overflowing.

"Has Al grown up? Don't you think he seems more settled somehow?"

From their car parked beside the school, Al's father looked up from his newspaper and commented on his son's silhouette standing in the schoolyard.

His mother, sitting in the passenger seat, giggled.

"It's probably because he's not wearing that cap he always has on."

"Ah, that's it..."

His father returned to his newspaper.

"You've been staring at that paper. Something interesting?"

"Well. You've heard the rumors that this colony was targeted by Zeon nuclear missiles at Christmas, right? This reporter suggests it was because they wanted to destroy a new Federation mobile suit stationed here along with the colony."

"Oh my. How frightening!"

"But what's interesting is the part about the Zeon Zaku that fought the Federation mobile suit on Christmas," he tapped the paper and continued. "They say its pilot fought alone knowing that if he didn't destroy the Federation's new model, his own side would nuclear strike the colony. In other words, he was trying to save this colony. Apparently he even left behind tapes explaining everything in case he died. The newspaper got hold of them."

"My, I wonder if it's true?"

"Who knows. Well, we'll find out the details soon enough. That pilot..." He folded the newspaper and glanced at Al in the schoolyard, adding in a tone that suggested the article no longer mattered, "Apparently survived miraculously. They say he regained consciousness this morning..."

*"We who remain must engrave this in our hearts and act to ensure such mistakes are never repeated." the principal's speech was drawing to a close. "That is our duty, our way of honoring the many who died. This concludes today's message."*

A single tear escaped down Al's cheek despite his desperate efforts to hold back, and then, as if a dam had broken, tears began falling one after another. They rolled hot down his face and dropped to the ground. There was no stopping them now.

Applause rose from the somewhat restless students. The clapping spread until it echoed throughout the school. No one noticed Al's slightly trembling shoulders.

There he stood in formation, lips pressed tightly together, holding back his voice, body rigid, letting the tears flow freely.

In the whirl of applause and smiles, he alone made no move to wipe away his tears.

## Afterword 1989 - Autumn

This novel is, needless to say, a novelization of the Original Video Animation ***Mobile Suit Gundam 0080: War in the Pocket***. While I normally avoid writing such "commissioned works," I made an exception this time because I had participated in the animation as a "story composer."

The story of ***War in the Pocket*** began with the director and staff bringing together various ideas and opinions. Through multiple brainstorming sessions, we determined the story, characters, and themes. My role was to join these sessions and consolidate everything into a coherent, written form.

Having been involved as a storyteller from the beginning, I had no hesitation in taking up my pen again as a professional novelist.

Now that I've finished writing ***War in the Pocket***, I have one request for those reading this afterword: if you haven't yet seen the OVA, please do watch it.

Though it pains me as a writer to admit this, the OVA is a truly magnificent visual work. Even knowing the ending, I felt an intense, full-body trembling emotion at its conclusion. I can only express my deepest admiration for the outstanding talent, rich imagery, and masterful direction of Director Fumihiko Takayama and all the staff involved in the production.

Given this, I faced a crossroads in determining how to approach my task of novelization. I had two choices: change the story and construct it differently, or add some new essence not present in the OVA.

I considered various ideas for the former approach. For instance, "Alex was actually just a dummy" or "The Newtype 'Gundam' never existed at all," et cetera, et cetera... However, I ultimately chose the latter option, if only to write those two manuscript pages of dialogue between the parents in the epilogue.

Viewed coldly, that parental conversation might seem superfluous. Had it been included in the OVA, it would have instantly degraded a first-rate tragedy into a third-rate happy ending.

But I felt this was acceptable for the novel version of ***War in the Pocket***. I hoped it might slightly ease the sadness and helplessness that viewers would naturally feel after watching the emotionally powerful OVA.

I still believe this choice wasn't wrong. I would be happy if those who have already seen the OVA feel the same way.

Finally, in lieu of staff credits, some thanks and apologies:

First, my thanks to everyone at Sunrise, the OVA's production company, for sending materials that proved extremely helpful.

To Mr. Shinichiro Inoue, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Monthly Newtype magazine, Ms. Mari Sano of Kadokawa Editorial Department, and Mr. Haruhiko Mikimoto. I'm truly sorry for the trouble my slow writing caused you.

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And above all, my deepest gratitude to everyone who loved War in the Pocket.

Thanks a lot!