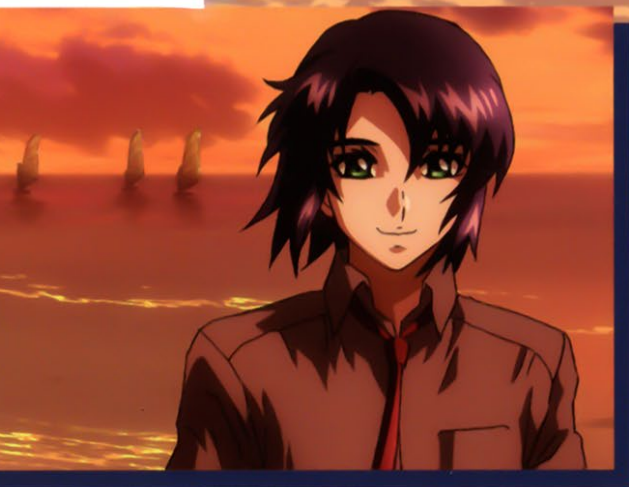




ESCAPE FOR TWO



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This novella was given away as a week one admission perk and is the first of two random offerings at the theatrical release.

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

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"Is it this way?"

Athrun Zala surveyed the bustling, eclectic streets of Orb's downtown area. A surge of nostalgia swept over him, an unexpected guest in his mind, as he trod the seldom-visited lanes of this old town quarter.

Before long, he paused at a quaint shopfront. The name of the shop, in sync with his digital guide, confirmed his destination.

Still, he hesitated before entering.

The entrance was unassuming, the door wide open, with a garishly bright sign fluttering in the breeze, carrying with it the enticing aroma of grilled delicacies mingled with the buzz of animated conversation. It was unmistakably a place of the people.

Athrun, currently seconded from the Orb military to Terminal, was engaged in gathering intelligence across various locales. This time, Cagalli specifically instructed him to hand over a report at this eatery. However, the ambiance here was utterly unexpected, hardly befitting a place the head representative of Orb would frequent.

Stepping inside with a mix of curiosity and caution, he was greeted with a vibrant "Welcome!"

A waitress, clearing tables, beamed at him.

"Please, there's a free seat at the back!"

Tentatively, he proceeded deeper into the diner. Finding an empty table, he settled down, only for the waitress to briskly present him with the menu.

— "*Monjayaki*," "*Modanyaki*"... *it seems this place specializes in grilled dishes...*

He noticed the grill embedded at each table, with various meals sizzling upon them around the room.

— *But what in the world is 'monja'? 'Modan'? What's modern about it? What exactly **do** they grill?*

The menu, with its cryptic culinary lexicon, only thickened the fog of his perplexity.

— *What is this 'Dance of the Dragon Palace'? 'Haumea Lava Grill'?*

Isn't Haumea a deity in Orb's pantheon? Is it really okay to grill that?!

Puzzled, Athrun furrowed his brow until the waitress returned.

"Have you decided on your order?"

He mumbled, "I'll... wait for my companion..."

Choosing from this menu proved daunting; he'd leave it to Cagalli, assuming she actually showed up. But why the insistence on a face-to-face meeting, eschewing digital correspondence?

Was the subject too sensitive for electronic transmission?

The thought of seeing Cagalli after such a long time stirred old memories—they were once inseparable...

A wave of nostalgia threatened to engulf him, but he anchored himself to the present.

—*No! Focus on the mission.*

His mission was to report on the strife in Southern Eurasia. He felt the data disk in his pocket, mentally revising its contents, ready for any questioning. Post-Foundation Independence—post the so-called Foundation Shock—the region remained a hotbed of tension. The lurking presence of Blue Cosmos, instigators of conflict, might still permeate the area.

A soft exhale escaped Athrun.

When will the cycle of turmoil cease? He wondered if Kira and Lacus, too, wrestled with this sense of helplessness.

Minutes later, Cagalli made her entrance, her casual attire blending her in with the everyday youth, far from incognito yet unassuming. Spotting Athrun, her face lit up with a spontaneous smile as she slid into the seat opposite him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Have you ordered yet?"

"No, not yet..."

"Then, do you mind if I choose? Let's order a few things and share," she suggested, her eyes skimming the menu with ease. She chose the monjayaki, modanyaki, and the cryptic Dragon Palace Dance.

"And for drinks... shall we try the Otohime's First Love Soda? What will you have—"

"I'll stick with oolong tea," Athrun cut in, a tad too hastily, sidestepping a potentially outlandish beverage selection. The drink menu was another puzzle he hadn't anticipated.

With the order placed, Cagalli's mood lightened.

"I used to come here a lot with Kisaka. Brings back memories."

"Oh?" Athrun conjured an image of Kisaka, a stalwart presence, finding it hard to imagine him sipping on an "Otohime's First Love Soda." The thought was inconceivable.

Lost in his own thoughts, he barely caught Cagalli's sigh.

"I just needed a break, you know."

Athrun was torn—should he feel privileged or disheartened to be her choice for a respite? Probably the former.

Their drinks arrived shortly after. Cagalli's soda was a fanciful pink concoction crowned with an umbrella. Athrun breathed a sigh of relief at his own tea, the epitome of simplicity.

"To us," she toasted, lifting her glass.

"Cheers," As he obliged out of politeness, Cagalli clinked her glass against his. The way she leaned in, looking up at him, made her look cute, and Athrun felt a bit flustered.

"Now, about that report?" she nudged, transitioning back to business.

Snapping back to the task at hand, Athrun presented the disk. Their casual backdrop momentarily faded into the background as they delved into matters of state, even if it was intended to be a respite for Cagalli.

"Here it is, all the intel we have so far."

Accepting the disk, Cagalli's tone grew serious.

"Thanks. And about Michael's base—"

"It's in the Eurasian and Foundation's military buffer zone."

"I'll need you to keep investigating. And could you delve deeper into Foundation?"

"More details, you mean?"

"They're suggesting a joint operation, you know."

"Joining COMPS, then? But--"

"Of course, but that's not on the table right now. We can't provoke Eurasia's wrath."

Cagalli sipped her drink again.

Foundation. With its brilliant independence from the Eurasian Federation and subsequent rapid economic development, it was a country shrouded in mystery. And now they were approaching COMPS.

"What do you think is going on?"

Athrun inquired, to which Cagalli frowned slightly.

"I'm not sure... but..."

It seemed too convenient. That might be what she wanted to say. Michael, who currently led the main forces of Blue Cosmos, was an existence COMPS absolutely could not overlook. If they were presenting a path to him in the form of a "request for a joint operation..."

As if using Michael as bait to lure someone in...

Perhaps sensing the same indescribable unease, Cagalli absentmindedly caressed the disk but then snapped back to the present, her smile returning.

"Enough work talk. Like I said, I'm here to unwind."

"So, I'm your chosen escape?"

Athrun half-joked, half-sighed, wishing she'd see his side of their unexpected meeting.

Cagalli heaved a sigh.

"I mean, lately, I've just been going back and forth between the official residence and the cabinet office, and even when I occasionally go to a tree-planting ceremony or something, I'm surrounded by dozens of attendants... It's constant, you know? If I so much as drop a pen, like twenty people whirl around... Of course, I understand my position, and I'm grateful for their work... But... I'm really at my wit's end. It's suffocating..."

Her voice trailed off, eyes lowered. Her exhaustion apparent. Athrun was reminded anew of her burden, she was a leader bearing the weight of a nation on her shoulders. All this as she was leading a nation through these tumultuous times after the war.

While advancing her country's reconstruction, she also had to walk a tightrope, maintaining a delicate balance in an international community that could revert back to war at any moment.

As if shaking off the dark shadow, she raised her hands in a dismissive gesture.

"So today is a complete day off. I left my security details and attendants behind, and I told my driver to come pick me up later."

"That means..." Athrun realized that the responsibility to protect her fell on him. His alertness heightened, yet he wished for her to enjoy this moment of reprieve.

"Sorry for the wait! One modanyaki!" The server announced, placing a sizzling disc on the griddle, seemingly a pancake encasing fried noodles—a carb on carb enigma.

While Athrun grappled with the dish's concept, Cagalli was presented with a bowl of monjayaki, ready to be cooked by her own hand.

Cagalli put the cabbage on the griddle and started finely chopping it with a spatula in each hand. After chopping, she arranged it in a ring, leaving the center empty. There, she poured the rich broth from the bowl. Steam rose with a flashy, sizzling sound.

"Perfect!" Cagalli beamed, her enthusiasm infectious, though Athrun's expression betrayed his confusion.

How was one supposed to eat this liquid concoction?

Cagalli mixed the cabbage, ingredients, and soup together, the mixture becoming increasingly amorphous, straying further from what one typically recognizes as food. Frankly, it wasn't exactly appetizing to look at.

"Hm? What's wrong? Eat up," Cagalli urged, and with a hesitant "Ah, okay," Athrun opted for the more recognizable modanyaki, slicing a piece with his spatula. To his surprise, it delighted his taste buds, a testament to the sauce's unique flair.

"Good, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Athrun admitted, prompting a pleased smile from Cagalli.

"This one will be ready to eat soon, too."

"I think I'll stick with this one," Athrun gestured to his current dish.

"Try it. You like cabbage, right?" Cagalli insisted.

Athrun did like cabbage, but in forms like stuffed cabbage or coleslaw, not this... his palate wasn't quite ready for such adventurous cabbage cuisine.

Cagalli, continuing her culinary effort, casually asked, "How have things been for you lately?"

Athrun recognized this as his cue to maintain a light, convivial atmosphere.

"Well, the other day, Mey--" Athrun started but then hesitated. It felt somewhat awkward to bring her up.

But as he'd been on assignments with Meyrin lately, no other harmless topics came to mind quickly.

Cagalli's curiosity piqued, "Did something happen to Meyrin? Is she okay?"

"N-no, she's fine. Totally fine. As fit as a fiddle."

"Sure, if you say so."

He had made it unnatural by being overly considerate.

Athrun pulled himself together and asked, "Speaking of which, have you been in touch with Kira?"

"Not much, but I do chat with Lacus sometimes... She loves cooking, you know. Ends up making too much all the time."

"That's Lacus for you."

"She gets all excited making things, and before she knows it, the table is full of dishes. She and Kira can't eat it all, so they share it with staff and soldiers. Apparently, it's quite popular."

"That makes sense. Homemade meals are a rarity in the military."

"Yeah, especially compared to the standard military fare," Cagalli recalled with a chuckle. "Remember the rations we had on that deserted island? Those were terrible."

Both laughed, reminiscing about when they were stranded during battle, both separated from their units.

"It wasn't the time for being picky, but yeah, it wasn't great."

"Even that crab would've been better," Athrun couldn't help but snort. He had remembered the crab that had fallen out of Cagalli's clothes.

When they first met, they had been enemies. To think that after repeatedly parting and coming together with her, they could now laugh together again so lightheartedly—what incredible fortune.

Cagalli scooped up the cooked monjayaki with a small spatula, now insistent, "Just try it. It looks weird, but it's really good."

That kind of sales pitch was usually followed by regret. There was a part of him curious enough to explore this new culinary landscape.

Reluctantly, Athrun scraped up the messy, mysterious food with a small spatula and brought it to his mouth.

"It's decent," Athrun conceded after a thoughtful pause.

"Admit it, it's delicious," Cagalli prodded.

"Well, it's decent," Athrun repeated.

"Don't say it twice."

The unique texture was battling with the unexpectedly enticing flavor. He was almost tempted to declare it delightful.

Cagalli's expression soured slightly.

"You just have no sense of adventure when it comes to food," she chided. "Watch out, I'll introduce you to something even crazier next time!"

"I'd rather not," Athrun internally balked at the idea, picturing the daring tastes of Captain Waltfeld as a more suitable target for such culinary adventures.

"Why don't you recommend it to Commander Waltfeld or something?"

"Really? He might actually like it."

"No way, anyone who drenches kebabs in yogurt sauce has a questionable taste."

Athrun countered, imagining Waltfeld's glee juxtaposed with DaCosta's resigned frustration.

"He tends to be a bit too didactic for my taste," Cagalli remarked.

Well... he agreed with that.

"Alright, challenge accepted. Something wildly adventurous," Athrun said, poking at the monjayaki suspiciously, eliciting a sly grin from Cagalli.

"You said it. I'll hold you to that."

"Sure."

As they contemplated their next culinary adventure, Athrun smiled, relieved to see Cagalli's spirits lifted. A bit of gastronomic risk was a small price for her momentary respite.

Their light-hearted banter was shattered by a sudden commotion within the restaurant.

"Wha—?"

Athrun's instincts kicked in instantly, positioning himself between Cagalli and the source of the disturbance. But before his protective instincts could fully kick in, the entire room erupted into action. Laughter from a nearby couple was abruptly replaced by the hiss of an expanding shield as they encased Athrun and Cagalli within a protective cocoon. A patron, mid-flip of his okonomiyaki, discarded his spatula in favor of a handgun drawn from an unseen holster. The waitress, who had just been offering smiles and menus, now brandished a shotgun from under a table, her aim fixed on the entrance.

"Get down, Representative!" came the unified cry from around them.

Athrun stood dumbfounded, half-crouched, scanning the room as the real situation unfolded.

A voice crackled through a hidden radio, "Seems to be an accident involving a civilian vehicle at the intersection. Emergency services have been alerted."

The waitress, hand to her ear, acknowledged the message, "Understood. Stay alert."

It wasn't an attack; the chaos was just a tragic coincidence. Slowly, the restaurant's occupants holstered their weapons, their posture relaxing as they returned to their seats. But they were no ordinary patrons or staff; they were Cagalli's details, masquerading as civilians to protect her.

The waitress, now clearly a detail in disguise, cleared her throat and resumed her service persona.

"Apologies for the disturbance. Your Dragon Palace Dance will be out shortly. Please, enjoy your meal at your leisure."

"Impossible," thought Athrun as Cagalli, red-faced and furious, slammed her hands down on the table.

"This! This is exactly why I hate this!" she exploded, her voice trembling with anger.

"Wasn't today supposed to be my day off? My private time?"

"But, Representative Athha," one disguised detail tried to justify, "you are a person of great importance. If something were to happen--"

Athrun could see both sides. Cagalli's desire for a moment of normalcy wasn't trivial; it was a breath of fresh air she seldom enjoyed. Her outrage was justified; she had dedicated her life to Orb, and this brief escape was her only solace.

"Enough!" Cagalli's voice cracked as she stormed out, the details scrambling after her.

"Wait, please..." one implored, reaching for her arm.

"Let go!" she tried to shake them off, but the security details grabbed her arm and wouldn't let go.

"We can't allow selfish behavior, Representative!"

Athrun acted, chopped the wrist of the one grabbing Cagalli's arm, and as soon as it was freed, he scooped her up by the waist, darting toward the exit.

"Athrun?!" she gasped in bewilderment but ran along as she was led.

Another detail rose to intercept them, but Athrun's shoulder sent him reeling.

"W-wait!"

At the same time, he kicked over a chair from the counter. As Athrun and Cagalli dashed out of the restaurant, they heard the sound of them tripping over the chair and falling behind them.

Outside, the street was abuzz with onlookers drawn to the accident scene, allowing Athrun and Cagalli to blend into the crowd and slip away. From behind, shouts of "After them!" echoed as their chasers emerged, scanning the crowd. Athrun, sensing their gaze, pulled Cagalli into the maze of alleys that snaked through the old town.

Holding Cagalli's hand, Athrun immediately turned a corner and squeezed sideways through a back alley barely wide enough for one person.

"Athrun?" she asked, catching her breath, her tone a mix of confusion and urgency.

"What am I doing?" Athrun thought.

In that moment, Athrun pondered the gravity of their escapade. Running off with the head of state, being chased by her own security detail, it was like he was acting as a terrorist.

The word "selfish," hurled by the detail at Cagalli, echoed in his mind, sparking a defiant resolve. Yes, her role demanded unwavering responsibility, and it wasn't a position that allowed for rash actions, but she was not devoid of personal desires or the right to a moment's peace.

She had a "heart."

If she always sat quietly in a heavily guarded place for easy protection, it would certainly make their jobs as security details easier. But that would be treating her as just a "security object," a "thing."

People are not "things". No one should be forced to kill their heart by being bound to their duties.

If her wish was for a fleeting escape, Athrun was determined to make it a reality, even if he stood alone in that endeavor.

"Which way did they go?" a detail's voice echoed in the distance.

"Team A, head toward Himuka Street!"

Athrun met Cagalli's gaze, his eyes alight with a mix of concern and determination. "Let's lose them," he urged, his voice low but resolute.

For a moment, Cagalli looked surprised, but then her face broke into a smile, and she nodded vigorously.

"Yeah!"

"This way."

Athrun and Cagalli turned another corner and ran down the back alley.

"Team B reporting, no sign of the targets yet!"

"Team A has canvassed Himuka Street. Still no sign of them!"

The security chief's brow furrowed as she absorbed the updates crackling through the radio, her pace quickening through the serpentine alleys. Her lieutenant, a blend of determination and anxiety etched on his face, muttered, "They can't hide forever. The old town's a labyrinth, sure, but for an outsider..."

The alleys of the old town, a tangled web that could confound even the most seasoned locals, were notorious. Yet, the chief knew better.

The security chief exhaled sharply, her frustration evident as she glared at her subordinate.

"Do you not realize who we're chasing? That's Alex Dino—no, Athrun Zala. The person who was Lady Cagalli's security detail before us."

A flicker of realization crossed the lieutenant's face, recognizing the name but not the connection to their former protectee.

The chief's voice tightened, "With his knowledge of Orb's streets, he's likely more at home here than we are."

Suddenly, their radios crackled to life, "Target spotted!"

Emerging from an alley, several details caught a glimpse of the fleeing duo. Clutching Cagalli, he vaulted down a flight of stairs, her surprised yelp mixing with the thud of their landing. With seamless agility, he veered into an adjoining alley.

"Wait! This way!" echoed the pursuing details' calls.

He had a mental map, a grid of the city's layout he'd memorized during his time in Orb, rechecked in preparation for their meeting.

He, too, wouldn't neglect preparations when meeting with a nation's head of state.

Meanwhile, the chief, amidst the chase, directed forces with precision.

"Teams B-2 and B-3, press on! Team A, intercept them from the front!"

Consulting the digital map projected by her goggles, she tracked the converging paths of B teams as they corralled Athrun and Cagalli deeper into the old town's heart.

Quickly rechecking the map, she barked out more orders.

"B-2, drive them into the right alley!"

—If this went well...

Just as the plan seemed to coalesce, an urgent update came through the radio.

"This is A-1, we have a visual on the targets! Moving to apprehend!"

"Ah!"

Cagalli's exclamation pierced the tense silence as they spotted more details converging on their position from ahead. With their retreat cut off by the sound of pursuing footsteps, their situation seemed increasingly dire. Yet, Athrun's

resolve only hardened; his pace quickened as they approached the imminent blockade.

As they neared the details, Athrun executed a swift maneuver, his body momentarily dipping from view as he executed a precise slide, his actions nearly a blur to the bewildered team. With a deft sweep, he upended the foremost detail's stance, creating a momentary opening. Cagalli seized the opportunity, shouldering another off-balance man out of their path with an apologetic "Sorry!" before continuing her sprint.

Athrun's hand found Cagalli's, and they dashed into the alley that branched off to the right.

"Oh, no!" Cagalli's voice was a whisper of dismay as they faced a dead end. On one side was a high fence, and at the back and the other side, walls of buildings towered.

Yet, Athrun remained undaunted. In a surge of agility, he lifted Cagalli, their bodies almost defying gravity as he scaled the wall, feet finding impossible purchase, kicking off the scant footholds and leaping up.

"Whoa!"

Cagalli's exclamation was a mix of awe and alarm.

In moments, Athrun perched atop the fence with feline grace, ducking under an overhanging branch, their temporary sanctuary.

Cagalli whispered, still feeling her unabated heartbeat.

"Did you just run up a wall?"

"Shh!"

Below, security teams swarmed into the alley, their search frantic and futile. The female security chief's arrival only heightened the urgency.

"What happened?! Where are they?!"

"Well... they definitely came this way..."

"Find them!"

When people are looking for something, they rarely look up. Watching while holding their breath, the teams searched behind the pillars in the alley and behind the trash cans and finally started banging on the back door of the building to get it opened.

After the security chief gave some instructions over the intercom, they split up, some barging into the building and others heading back down the alley.

When no one was left, Athrun, still cradling Cagalli, jumped down to the other side of the fence.

It seemed to be the courtyard of a building. Trees cast quiet shadows, and tomatoes in the home garden were ripening red.

Athrun took Cagalli's hand and cut across the courtyard, their footsteps stealthy. At the far end of the fence was a wooden gate with peeling white paint. Athrun opened the gate and went outside.

Outside the gate were narrow stairs. Descending them, the sea spread out before them.

Stepping onto the white sandy beach, Cagalli took a deep breath.

It was vast. As far as the eye could see, the blue of the sky and sea stretched out, with nothing obstructing the view. The space without walls or ceilings pressing down on her head cheerfully freed her shrunken mind and heart.

It had been a long time since she had heard the sound of the waves lapping and receding this close.

Breathing in, the scent of the tide filled her chest.

Cagalli let out a small laugh and trotted toward the sea.

Entering the captain's room, Murrue was just putting down the communicator. She had an indescribable, strange expression, so Mu asked,

"What's the matter?"

"Just got a message from Cagalli's detail. They say she's missing."

"What?!"

Mu's face changed color, prompting Murrue to elaborate quickly, "And she's with Athrun."

A smirk crept onto his face.

"Really now?"

A head of state going missing would be a major incident, but Athrun's involvement changed the entire narrative, painting Cagalli not as a mere victim but rather as a willing participant in her disappearance.

He understood the perplexing look on Murrue's face. She was simultaneously bewildered and struggling to suppress her laughter.

"So, they asked if we had any idea where they might have gone."

The fact that the security detail was reaching out to Murrue spoke volumes of their desperation. Yet, their willingness to seek help without obsessing over pride was commendable.

Trying to hold back his laughter, Mu responded, "Let them be. They're not kids anymore."

Murrue chuckled.

"I should have told them that."

"What did you tell them?"

"Not to worry. If she's with Athrun Zala, Cagalli is in safe hands."

Mu nodded, then paused, pondering, "Safe, huh?" as Murrue fixed him with a stern look.

As Athrun watched over Cagalli, strolling along the edge of the sea, there was a sense of unhurried grace in her movements—neither rushing nor playful. Yet, it was clear she was savoring the moment.

She's grown up, Athrun found himself thinking. No longer was she the child who played in the waves.

Nor was he.

Cagalli turned, offering him a smile. Side by side, they walked on the beach, passing a playful dog and a laughing child in pursuit. The distant barks and laughter danced on the wind, mingling with the shimmering sea and the distant

sails of windsurfers. It was a serene afternoon tableau, with themselves as part of the canvas.

After a while, Athrun asked,

"So... what now?"

"Hm?"

Cagalli looked at him, holding back her wind-tousled hair with one hand.

"If there's somewhere you want to go. I'll be your guard. In their place."

At Athrun's words, Cagalli looked up at the sky with a thoughtful "Hmm."

After a bit, she looked at him and suddenly grinned.

"What?"

"You know, I'd almost forgotten how useful you can be."

"Huh?"

"I forgot. Haaaah, that felt good! Anyway..."

Cagalli stretched both hands heavenward with a satisfied groan, then spun on her heel, laughing.

"'Anyway' what?"

Athrun hurried after Cagalli, who had started walking briskly, in surprise.

"I just feel satisfied! So, I'm good now," she replied in an almost refreshed voice.

"Wha... h-hey..."

Despite all the trouble he went through to shake off the security detail, and now they could freely go anywhere?

As Athrun gaped, Cagalli turned around as if remembering something and patted the pocket with the disc.

"Oh, thanks for this. Keep digging, 'kay?"

"O-Oh, sure..."

"Say hi to Meyrin for me!"

Waving exuberantly, Cagalli walked away with quick steps. Athrun watched her go, feeling utterly befuddled.

Glancing over, a car had stopped on the embankment road at some point. Standing beside it was the detail who had been disguised as the restaurant server. She had taken off her apron and was now wearing a black jacket.

As Cagalli approached, she bowed respectfully.

Cagalli got into the car without hesitation.

The detail seemed to glance at Athrun one last time and give a small nod.

It seemed he wouldn't be arrested as a kidnapper.

Well, if that little adventure had "satisfied" Cagalli, he supposed it was all right, even if it didn't sit quite right with him.

The sun was setting. Athrun too started walking back toward the city.

Recalling today's commotion, he couldn't help but smile.

He glanced in the direction the car had driven off and murmured to himself, "Hang in there... Representative."



MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED FREEDOM

Week 1 Attendee Special Gift A

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