

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED  
**GUNDAM** **DESTINY**  
シード アスティー



# ANGRY EYES

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MOBILE SUIT **GUNDAM SEED**

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# Prologue

In the inky void of space, a glint of light reflected off the sun like a flake of mica. The object dancing in the vacuum was a white machine with two wings spread wide.

The small craft, primarily white with blue and yellow accents, was likely a fighter. Through the polarized glass of the canopy, a pilot's red suit was visible.

Beneath his helmet, the pilot—a boy with lingering childlike petulance—operated the control stick, his eyes scanning the console's data. Black bangs fell across his face, framing his deep crimson eyes, which glinted like fresh blood.

Those red eyes fixed on a colossal hourglass-shaped structure shimmering silver in the distance. It was one of the new-generation colonies built at Lagrange 4—a PLANT called Armory One.

The first time he had ventured into space, he had struggled with his sense of distance from objects. In the airless expanse, even faraway things appeared startlingly clear, making the enormous PLANTs seem like a model placed right before his eyes.

He maneuvered around the slowly rotating artificial land.

A vast, cerulean expanse overwhelmed his vision.

Earth—the mother planet, a blue orb. Each glimpse of its beautiful form filled him with a suffocating anguish and longing.

Instinctively, his eyes searched the equatorial region for the tiny crown floating in the glass-like blue sea.

The Orb Union.

That was the name of the nation where he—Shinn Asuka—had been born and raised as a Coordinator. This archipelago nation, nestled directly beneath the equator, was the last earthly paradise for Coordinators during the Great War.

Coordinators were the ultimate new humans, created by maximizing human genetic traits such as intelligence, physical ability, and appearance through genetic manipulation—a dream come true.

However, for that very reason, they were rejected by those who possessed only conventional abilities, the unmodified people called Naturals, and many sought refuge in space.

As the rift between the two grew decisively wider and hostilities erupted between Coordinators and Naturals, only the neutral nation of Orb had refrained from discriminating against Coordinators, allowing them to reside within its borders.

Yet, that very stance provoked an invasion by Earth Alliance Forces.

Even now, the sounds were seared into Shinn's ears: the shrill noise of missiles tearing through the air, the distant, gut-wrenching explosions, the incessant wail of sirens.

"Hurry, Shinn!"

"Mayu! Come on!"

Panting, his father shouted, his voice mingling with his mother's choked cries—both drowned out by a thunderous roar.

Descending from above was a colossal angel of death, a chalk-white behemoth with ten wings, whirling at incredible speeds and dodging streams of gunfire, its five cannons belching flames.

For an instant, Shinn was blinded by the light.

They were heading for the port in a desperate attempt to escape. Onogoro Island, where Shinn's family resided, was home to Orb's military industry, Morgenroete, and other military facilities, making it a primary target in the invasion of Orb.

The sky, filled with massive machines and crisscrossed by beams and missiles, was already streaked with plumes of black smoke.

As Shinn ran along the path through the woods, he caught a glimpse of the port through the trees. Evacuation ships were moored there, with military personnel guiding the evacuees.

Just a little further, Shinn thought, beginning to feel relief wash over him.

At that moment, Mayu, tears streaming down her face as she clung to their mother's hand, cried out and nearly stopped.

"Ah! My phone!"

A pink cellphone had flown out of her bag, skidding off the path and tumbling down the slope.

"Never mind that!"

Their mother pulled Mayu back as she tried to retrieve it. But she still couldn't let go, her eyes following the phone down the slope. She had cherished that phone, clinging to it even after its use became nearly impossible due to the war.

Knowing this, Shinn couldn't resist; he dashed down the slope to retrieve it. He was agile; he could grab it and catch up quickly.

The pink cell phone struck a tree root and stopped. As Shinn stooped to snatch it up, a deafening explosion rocked the ground beneath him, pummeling his entire body.

The world spun.

When his senses returned, Shinn lay crumpled at the bottom of the slope, his body bruised against the cold asphalt near the port.

He looked around in a daze.

As if the backdrop had been swapped on a stage, the surroundings had changed in an instant.

The slope was gouged out, exposing reddish-brown earth. Trees toppled, and some were charred and smoldering.

At that moment, Shinn couldn't comprehend that it had been a direct hit from a beam cannon. As he struggled to his feet, bewildered, a soldier who had been guiding the evacuees ran over and called out to him with concern. But to his ears, which had taken the full brunt of the blast, even that voice sounded muffled, like cotton in his ears.

In a daze, he was about to be led away from the spot by the soldier when he finally came to his senses.

Where were Mayu... and his parents?!

Only then did Shinn realize the meaning of what he was seeing. The road he and his family had been desperately following just moments ago had been torn away by the bombardment, and even now, rubble continued to crumble from the overhanging asphalt. The center of the gaping hole, where trees had been mowed down, was where he himself had been standing just moments before.

Having strayed from the path, the force of the explosion had only blown him down to the bottom of the slope.

A chill seized his entire body, his blood turning to ice. Jerking away from the soldier's grasp, he staggered to his feet.

"Dad? Mom? Mayu, where are you?!"

There were no moving shadows around the hole. Shinn spotted a limply discarded hand beyond the mound of earth and cried out.

"Mayu!"

He ran over, seeking his sister's figure, but then he froze in place.

A small hand peeked out from the familiar sleeve of her clothing.

But that was all.

The arm that should have been attached to his sister's body was severed midway, and there was nothing beyond it.

Shinn jerkily turned his gaze forward. Then he noticed lumps scattered here and there across the gouged earth as if they were part of the upturned soil. The lumps, carelessly strewn on the ground—clad in the remains of scorched clothing, lying twisted—were the transfigured remains of his family. Those who had touched him, spoken to him, and moved about just moments ago had been reduced to mute masses in an instant.

He sank to his knees beside the small hand, numb.

As if the hand was reaching out to him, he began to extend his own, trembling, then realized he still clutched the pink cell phone.

A raw, indescribable emotion welled in his throat, a tumultuous mix that transcended sorrow, resentment, or indignation—overwhelming and all-consuming.

They were so immense they threatened to devour his small body from within.

He howled at the sky like a beast.

Above, the angels of death soared, their haunting images seared into his crimson eyes, unblinking and tormented.

Faced with their overwhelming power, fourteen-year-old Shinn was utterly powerless.

*"Shinn, it's almost time. Please return to base."*

Lost in bitter memories while gazing at the glowing blue planet, Shinn was jolted back to reality by a voice crackling through the speaker.

"Roger that!"

With a swift shift in mindset, Shinn pivoted the nose of his machine towards Armory One. He felt a quiet satisfaction in the craft that moved as he willed as if it were an extension of his own body.

*—/ve got the power now.*

A fourteen-year-old child who could do nothing but sit there as his family was killed before his eyes.

Two years had passed since then—and he was no longer that powerless child.



# Phase.01

The spaceport bustled with activity, a cacophony of excited voices echoing through the vast chamber.

Athrun Zala stepped out from the shuttle, his eyes narrowed with suspicion and wariness as he surveyed the clamorous scene.

A liaison officer, there to greet them, turned to the person behind Athrun and explained, "Tomorrow's launch ceremony for the new warship includes a scheduled military ceremony..."

The person addressed, Cagalli Yula Athha, wore simple purple garments. As the Chief Representative of the Orb Union, she shook her golden hair and scanned the surroundings with amber eyes clouded by complex emotions.

At only eighteen years of age, the young leader of a nation allowed herself to be guided by a PLANT official down the VIP passageway.

Overhearing snatches of conversation from the people around them, a frustrated expression crossed her face.

Armory One, a PLANT constructed post-war for industrial purposes, housed large-scale military factories.

Located at L4, far from the PLANT homeland, this neutral zone housed both Coordinator and Natural colonies.

And yet, even in a place like this, warships were being openly manufactured for the purpose of fighting. However, the faces of the PLANT citizens invited to the ceremony showed not a hint of guilt. They spoke excitedly about the necessity of military vessels, taking pride in the advanced technological capabilities of their nation.

"In a way," Athrun mused while following Cagalli, "it was understandable."

Even after the peace treaty had been signed, tensions continued to simmer between PLANT and the nations of Earth, particularly the Atlantic Federation.

The great war that erupted in C.E. 70, engulfing the entire Earth Sphere, had its roots in the conflict between Naturals and Coordinators. Ostracized by their superior abilities, the genetically enhanced Coordinators sought refuge in space, escaping the prejudice of old humanity. That was the PLANT of the past—the Productive Location Ally on Nexus Technology.

The Coordinators constructed massive colony satellites at the L5 Lagrange point and engaged in industrial production and energy generation, utilizing their advanced technology and the unique environment of space.

These resources were supplied preferentially to the nations on Earth known as PLANT sponsor nations in exchange for foodstuffs that were difficult to produce self-sufficiently in space.

However, as PLANT found itself in an increasingly unequal position, a growing desire for independence began to take hold. Meanwhile, on Earth, an ideology denouncing Coordinators as "beings who defied the laws of nature and were unforgivable" started to form, spearheaded by an ideological group known as Blue Cosmos.

The growing animosity between the two sides eventually reached a breaking point.

On February 14, C.E. 70, in an event that would later be etched into the memories of the people as the "Bloody Valentine," the Earth Alliance forces fired a nuclear warhead at the agricultural PLANT Junius Seven. In an instant, a single missile claimed the lives of over 200,000 civilians.

In response, on April 1, PLANT finally launched a large-scale descent operation on Earth, led by the Zodiac Alliance of Freedom Treaty (ZAFT) military. They first fired devices called Neutron Jammers deep into the Earth at various locations, which suppressed nuclear fission reactions.

The deployment of these devices not only rendered nuclear weapons useless but also crippled many other weapons that relied on nuclear fission for power. At the same time, the energy situation on Earth was plunged into a crisis, as nuclear power had been the primary means of energy production in an era where fossil fuels had been depleted. As a side effect, the Neutron Jammers interfered with specific electromagnetic bands, disrupting devices from wireless communications to radar equipment.

Under these conditions, the mobile suits—giant humanoid weapons developed by ZAFT—demonstrated remarkable capabilities. Powered by batteries, these weapons exhibited astonishing versatility and high mobility. The introduction of this new weapon allowed ZAFT to fight on equal footing against the numerically superior Earth Alliance forces.

Thus, the war reached a stalemate. The Earth forces also began developing their own mobile suits, and the flames of war seemed poised to expand endlessly. Hatred begot hatred, and each victory was overturned by new retaliation.

Athrun himself had been caught up in that vicious cycle, finding himself embroiled in the fires of war. After losing his mother at Junius Seven, he joined ZAFT, driven by a desire to spare others from similar pain.

Believing that following the orders of the leaders, as directed by his father, Patrick Zala, the Chairman of the PLANT Supreme Council, was the means to end the war, he eventually lost even more loved ones and nearly took the life of a friend with his own hands for no good reason.

Fighting only led to more fighting, consuming new victims and further fanning the flames of conflict. It was a negative cycle that repeated itself throughout history.

The person who had questioned his way of life was the blonde girl walking ahead of him now.

Leaning closer, Athrun whispered to Cagalli, "Are you sure that attire will do? You did bring at least one dress, didn't you?"

"Wh-Why should it matter what I wear? This'll do, won't it?" Cagalli retorted, her lips pursed in indignation.

She was as strong-willed as when they first met. Athrun found her reaction endearing but advised calmly, "It's important to do a little acting at times. You understand, don't you? There's no need to try to be something you're not. But at the same time, you don't want to be taken too lightly. Although this is an unofficial visit, you are still the current leader of Orb."

At his words, Cagalli fell silent, a somber expression uncharacteristic of her clouding her features. She had been wearing that expression more often lately. Athrun figured he probably looked the same.

During the last war, they had both been desperate. Those who had encountered the same doubts as them had gradually gathered together, earnestly seeking a way to "fight to end the fighting."

Although their force was small, like-minded individuals had come together from PLANT, the Earth Alliance, and Orb, which had tried to maintain its neutrality only to be consumed by the fires of war. Transcending the distinctions between Naturals and Coordinators, they had devoted their efforts toward a single goal.

Back then, Cagalli had been by his side, sharing in their anguish and uncertainty, empathizing with each other's pain, and running at the same pace. At times, it had felt unbearably painful, but looking back, perhaps it had been a fulfilling time in its own way precisely because they had been so desperate.

When they had first met, the war had taken a turn for the worse. The Earth Alliance's Alaska Base and the Panama Spaceport had been annihilated, while ZAFT had lost the Victoria Spaceport.

When the technology for the Neutron Jammer Canceller, which neutralized the effects of the Neutron Jammers, leaked from PLANT, the Earth forces had finally resorted to using nuclear weapons once more.

As a result, PLANT's military satellite Boaz was incinerated, and driven by the terror of nuclear weapons, they activated the ultimate weapon, GENESIS. If either the nuclear weapons capable of destroying all of PLANT or GENESIS, which had the power to wipe out all life on Earth, were fired, all of humanity would perish, regardless of whether they were Naturals or Coordinators.

They had managed to stop this folly but at a tremendous cost.

After the end of the Second Battle of Jachin Due, PLANT had proposed a ceasefire. With the death of Athrun's father, Patrick Zala, during the battle, a provisional government led by Eileen Canaver had been established.

After lengthy negotiations with the Earth Alliance, which had already begun to disintegrate as a unified entity, they had finally reached a truce agreement.

The signing had taken place on March 10, C.E. 72, at Junius Seven, the site of the former tragedy, now located in the debris belt surrounding Earth. The agreement came to be known as the Junius Treaty.

Although various issues remained unresolved, PLANT and the nations of Earth had sworn to work toward mutual understanding and peace, and the world should have begun to move toward stability.

However, reality was far different.

Athrun let out a small sigh as he followed the people who seemed to have forgotten the horrors of war, stepping into the elevator.

Built at the pivot of the hourglass-shaped PLANT, the spaceport was linked to the residential areas below by high-speed elevators.

Cagalli sat down on a sofa inside the elevator and looked up at the attendant standing beside her.

"I understand there's a warship launching ceremony tomorrow," she said.

"Yes, it may be a bit noisy due to the ceremony, and we apologize for any inconvenience it may cause you, Representative," the attendant replied with a polite smile.

Cagalli's look was bitter as she addressed the attendant, "You already know why we're here, and yet you dare to hold such an event on a day like this."

Startled by her open display of displeasure, the attendant's expression stiffened. Athrun, standing protectively beside Cagalli, intervened in a modest tone.

"But we're the ones who requested to see them on short notice, Representative Athha."

In front of a third party, they could no longer speak as equals like they once had. Publicly, Athrun was now merely Cagalli's personal bodyguard.

"I believe Chairman Durandal suggested meeting here rather than the PLANT homeland so that we could keep a low profile."

Cagalli glanced briefly at Athrun, falling silent with a dissatisfied expression.

Suddenly, a bright light flooded the space, drawing Cagalli's gaze to the transparent wall. Through the clear shaft, a sprawling blue sea and scattered green islands unfolded below.

It was a scene reminiscent of the Mediterranean.

However, everything in this landscape was man-made, and beyond the self-repairing glass of the outer shell, the vacuum of space pressed in. Every time he was reminded of this fact, Athrun couldn't help but feel a sense of awe.

Gazing down at the beautiful scenery drawing near, his expression was tinged with nostalgia.

"No, no! The Rondo Team's GINNs are to be equipped with ceremonial attachments! I told you, Hangar Three!"

"That's McKellar's GAZuOOT?! Move it at once!"

Rough shouts echoed across the sprawling site, heightening the chaotic scene.

The spectacle of 20-meter-tall mobile suits maneuvering under strict direction was a sight to behold. On the eve of the ceremony, the ZAFT military factory was filled with an unusual energy. It was rare for the place to be this lively unless they were under enemy attack.

A buggy sped through the hectic grounds, narrowly avoiding a collision with a GINN that stepped out from behind a building.

The driver swerved desperately, threading the buggy narrowly between the giant feet. Lunamaria Hawke, in the passenger seat, slumped back, her face a picture of alarm.

"Everything seems to be in one big mess!"

The lively red-haired girl in the red uniform—marking her as an ace pilot—belied her youthful appearance. Vino Dupre, in the driver's seat, a boy with orange hair peeking out from under his cap, still had a childlike face. They were both 17 - an age already considered adult in the PLANTs where individual abilities were high.

"It can't be helped. It's been a while since we've done something like this. Like us, many of the guys are doing this for the first time." Vino said, his expression buoyant in contrast to Lunamaria's fed-up look.

"But this means that the Minerva will finally launch. I wonder if the rumors are true about being assigned to lunar orbit?"

He spoke the name of the ship set to be launched tomorrow. There was an unconscious pride in his tone. Vino and Lunamaria had already been assigned to the new battleship that was the talk of the PLANTs.

Lunamaria, who had been listlessly surveying her surroundings, waved at a fellow red coat she spotted - a sharp-looking boy with long blond hair spilling down his neck.

"Rey!"

Rey Za Burrel turned at her call with a face that remained impassive, far from the friendly wave one might expect. This wasn't because he was in a bad mood or ignoring Lunamaria, but simply his stoic personality. After seeing off their buggy, he noticed the roar of engines approaching overhead and looked up.

The moment he saw the jet fan helicopter trying to land, his face softened in a rare show of emotion, and he ran over.

A black-haired man in his thirties descended the helicopter ramp, his long coat billowing elegantly with each step. His handsome, composed face radiated a gentle presence, yet his slender frame exuded a commanding aura that drew those around him.

The man exchanged rapid words with his aides even as he walked toward the command center. His almond-shaped eyes swept the surroundings before resting on Rey's salute, rewarding it with a brief, warm smile.

This man was none other than the current Supreme Council Chairman, Gilbert Durandal.

"Chairman..." Rey watched as one of the aides hurried up to Durandal and hastily reported something. For an instant, a keen light flickered in Durandal's eyes. With his coat tails flapping, he briskly strode toward the command center, his entourage following closely.

—*This may be the first time I've ever seen so many people.*

Stella Loussier pondered as she surveyed the bustling crowd. Had she seen these faces before?

She pondered briefly, her interest fading as quickly as it sparked.

A few steps ahead, her companions, Sting Oakley and Auel Neider, strolled along casually.

This was likely the first time just the three of them had mixed in with "normal people" and wandered a busy street like this. The PLANTs elite invited to the military ceremony were dressed up like Stella and the others as they walked.

But their purpose was different.

The three of them had infiltrated Armory One using fake IDs and were heading to a designated rendezvous point.

"Stella, quit dawdling. We'll leave you behind," Sting called back, his spiky hair a stark contrast to his stern tone. His eyes, sharp as knives, lent him a striking presence in his white jacket.

"We ain't gonna look for you if you get lost," Auel teased, spinning around with a playful grin.

Despite his pretty, almost girlish face, Auel's personality was strikingly different. Auel, too, was dressed up in a sleeveless jacket with a belt, looking even cuter than usual.

The two boys had taken to being the taciturn and sometimes spacey Stella's big brothers since meeting her.

Urged on, Stella quickened her pace, but suddenly, her gaze was caught by her own figure reflected in a shop window.

Reflected in the glass was a doll-like girl with soft, wavy blond hair framing her large, expressive eyes. Her halter-neck dress had an elaborate design, with veil-like sleeves draping over slender arms and a fluffy white skirt covering her knees.

The long hem of her dress clung to her legs as she swayed slightly. Experimentally, she spun around, and the white skirt flared out. It was like a princess dress. Stella became giddy and twirled around and around, the wide sleeves fluttering. This was the first time she had worn such beautiful clothes.

Ahead, Auel glanced back, saw Stella twirling, and asked Sting, baffled, "What's she doing?"

"Acting like a fool in a merry mood," Sting replied, making Auel look even more confused. With a frivolous-looking smile, Sting shrugged.

"That's my guess. Why don't you give it a try? Go on and be a fool."

Perhaps Sting was also in an unusually "buoyant mood." Only Auel looked at the two of them with disdain and walked on.

Elated, Stella followed with buoyant steps, her spirits as light as her fluttering dress. Oblivious to the gazes of passersby, she twirled around a corner and bumped into someone.

"Whoa... gotcha!"

Shopping bags scattered across the pavement. As Stella nearly stumbled from the impact, strong arms caught and steadied her.

"Are you all right?"

Stella looked up at the voice coming casually from above her head.

Right above her eyes were a pair of vivid, crimson orbs. It was a boy around the same age as Stella and the others. His surprised, wide-eyed face had an innocence to it. But the color of those eyes was different.

"Who are you?"

That color resembled a word Stella hated.

Shinn Asuka and Youlan Kent, a fellow technician, were out on the town for the first time in a long while. Although the factory was likely in an uproar preparing for the ceremony, it was their day off and far from their minds.

While chatting with him, Shinn was about to step from an alley onto the main street when it happened. Suddenly, a girl leapt out right in front of him, and, caught off guard, collided with her at full force.

She also seemed completely unaware of his presence. As she started to fall, Shinn hurriedly reached out and caught her in his arms.

"You okay?"

A sweet scent tickled his nose as he noticed a head of soft-looking blond hair just below his eyes. Startled, the girl looked up at Shin's face. She had an ethereal aura, with striking wide eyes that gave her an absent look. Her white dress further deepened the surreal impression. Perhaps she was one of the guests invited to the ceremony.

"Who are you?" the girl murmured.

Shinn was momentarily captivated by her deep violet eyes, only for her dazed expression to sharply transform the next instant. She glared sharply back at Shinn and shook off his hands with a fierce, feline motion.

Stunned by her abrupt change, Shinn watched as she dashed away, white dress hem flapping energetically.

A bit belatedly, Shinn felt a vague sense of unreasonableness. She had been looking elsewhere, too, but this made it seem like he alone was the villain.

Then, peering from behind him, Youlan blurted out, "You grabbed her breast, didn't you?"

"Wha-...!?"

Only when it was pointed out did Shinn notice, and he looked down at his hands, aghast at the lingering soft sensation.

Rather than just seeming so, he apparently was the complete villain.

No wonder the girl got angry. Not that he had done it on purpose, but still...

Youlan, with his dark skin and black hair, gave Shinn a chilly look, then declared in a thoroughly scornful tone, "You damn lucky pervert!"

"N-No, that's not...!"

Shinn tried to protest, his face bright red, but Youlan had already turned away. Hastily gathering up the dropped shopping bags scattered on the ground, Shinn chased after his friend.

"Hey, come on! Youlant!"

It would be a disaster if word of this spread, especially over something so fleeting he barely remembered it.

A wicked thought crossed his mind to have savored the moment had he known the consequences, but he immediately dismissed it in outrage.

No, it was just an accident! Forget it! She was probably a dignitary he'd never meet again. She was cute, but that was beside the point...

With that, he forgot about this brief encounter.

As the office door swung open for Athrun and his companion, Chairman Durandal, in conversation with an aide, likely a secretary, glanced up and recognized Cagalli.

He stepped forward, a gentle smile spreading across his face.

"Hello. Good to see you, Princess. I appreciate you traveling such a long distance to meet here."

"No, I'm quite grateful that you made time to fit us into your busy schedule, Chairman," Cagalli responded, walking straight up to him and extending her hand to shake.

Durandal clasped her hand gently, his touch reverent, then his gaze shifted and lingered on Athrun, who had discreetly scanned the room for threats behind Cagalli.

Athrun's unease grew as his stare lingered uncomfortably long. VIPs usually don't pay attention to attendants. Though he was currently using an alias and hiding his face with dark sunglasses, this was once his place of belonging.

Though Athrun had never met Durandal personally, his own notoriety from media exposure made him recognizable to many.

After the war, he had secretly gone to Orb and was living in hiding under the name Alex Dino. He still believed the path he chose was right, but officially, his actions amounted to treason.

Defying and fleeing one's nation as a military member, doubting the decided course, was considered an unforgivable act. That wasn't all - Athrun's position was even more complex. During the war, his father, Patrick Zala, had gone from National Defense Committee Chairman to Supreme Council Chairman and continued to promote hawkish policies, making him seen as the greatest war criminal after the conflict ended.

Athrun agreed with that assessment.



His father, consumed by vengeance against the Naturals who had killed his mother in the Junius Seven nuclear attack, was responsible for escalating the war relentlessly, driven by deep-seated grudge and hatred.

But the world didn't know that Athrun himself had been unable to go along with his father and took independent action.

Acting Supreme Council Chairwoman Canaver chose not to pursue charges of desertion and treason against Athrun, allowing him to freely leave for Orb.

For her, keeping Athrun in the homeland was likely more trouble than it was worth.

Yet Durandal gave no indication of recognizing him; instead, he turned his attention back to Cagalli and gestured towards the sofa, inviting her to sit.

"How are things in your country? I understand many problems have been resolved since you took over, Princess. As an ally, not only am I very happy to see things going well, but I'm quite envious of you and your achievements as well."

"There is still a lot more that needs to be done," Cagalli replied, her voice tinged with bitterness in response to the Chairman's seemingly casual remarks.

To an outside observer, Orb's recovery was remarkable. In the last great war, Orb was once invaded by the Earth Alliance Forces, its land scorched, and treated as a vassal state.

Following ZAFT's attacks, the Earth Alliance lost all its mass driver facilities, essential for launching shuttles and such into space. Without a foothold to space, they couldn't attack the PLANTs. So, the Alliance set its sights on the Kaguya mass driver that Orb possessed at the time.

The Alliance made several attempts to seize the Kaguya mass driver, but Chief Representative Uzumi Nara Athha—Cagalli's father—staunchly refused.

Uzumi had consistently maintained a neutral stance, and this time, too, he would not side with the Alliance. The Alliance then judged Orb a "traitor collaborating with the enemy" and resorted to military force. Naturals against a fellow Natural nation.

As a result, Orb suffered invasion, but shortly after the ceasefire, it was able to break free from the rule of the weakened Alliance.

"And? Under those circumstances, what could be so urgent that you'd come here unannounced and so suddenly?"

Durandal inquired, his tone breezy yet superficial, suggesting he was already well aware of their business.

"I hear from our Ambassador that you wish to discuss quite a complex issue with us."

After gazing intently at his well-formed face with strong eyes, Cagalli suddenly murmured softly as if drained.

"I don't see it as something that complicated."

Then, with a tone so defiant it bordered on confrontational, she continued.

"However, so far, I have yet to receive a clear response from your nation regarding this issue. Which begs the question: Is it complex?"

"Oh...?"

The attendants on both sides of the room tensed at her combative language, but Durandal tilted his head with an air of interest, not seeming to take offense.

Meeting his eyes head-on, Cagalli declared, "We, as a nation have requested again and again that you stop putting to military use the technology and human resources that have come your way since the Orb battle."

Even before the great war, Orb had taken a neutral position and was one of the few nations on Earth that did not discriminate against Coordinators.

Because of that, even after most of the Coordinators ostracized on the ground aimed for space, some of them remained in this country. However, with the Earth Alliance invasion, their safe haven was lost, and many of them sought refuge in the PLANTS.

It couldn't be helped. And originally, what citizens who had given up on their country went on to do in another was not something they could interfere with.

Cagalli and Athrun were deeply troubled that, despite the peace treaty, there appeared to be no reduction in the nation's military escalations. Even though they had nearly annihilated themselves in the last great war, people acted as if they had forgotten that terror and still wouldn't release the fire that scorched them.

To hold back that global tide - that was Cagalli's fervent wish.

But it didn't end there. This issue had even more complicating factors.

Durandal listened silently to Cagalli's plea, a noncommittal smile playing on his lips as if to sidestep the issue's gravity. His expression was like that of a teacher generously overlooking the mischief of a naughty child. Athrun secretly predicted the outcome of this meeting and grew disheartened.

Stella and her two companions gathered in front of a towering electronic billboard on the town's outskirts. This was their meeting place. The billboard cycled from a large ZAFT emblem to sweeping images of the PLANTS arrayed in space.

Stella watched the repetitive sequence on the billboard before her attention drifted upwards to the sky.

There was no sun in this sky.

"Man, it's not that different from Earth. Booooring," Auel complained, his tone flat with disappointment.

Stella silently nodded deeply.

"But it's nice that the PLANTS are always sunny. Who needs weather forecasts, right?"

"Idiot, it rains even in the PLANTS."

Sting interjected from the side, and Auel looked indignant.

"What, no way! Why the heck would they bother making it rain?!"

"Well, there's various reasons. If it doesn't rain--"

"Rainy days suck. Your clothes get all wet. Right, Stella?"

Asked to agree with Auel again, Stella nodded.

"Yup."

Sting, who had checked his watch repeatedly, now fixed his gaze on an approaching car.

A buggy pulled up in front of them.

Men in ZAFT uniforms sat in the front seats. Receiving Sting's look, they nodded silently. Apparently, these were the ones they were supposed to "meet." Stella and the others also got into the back of the buggy without a word.

The buggy ventured further from the city, entering the expansive grounds of a secluded military factory. At the entrance gate, the men in the front showed their IDs, acting as if they were officials guiding VIPs. The VIPs seemed to be Stella and company.

Whether they were real ZAFT soldiers or posing under false identities like Stella's group, the girls didn't know. And they didn't need to know.

No one viewed them with suspicion.

The buggy sped past patrolling mobile suits and scattered visitors, halting abruptly before a massive hangar. A key was inserted into the keyhole, and the heavy-looking hatch rose. The men handed weapons to Stella and the others, who dashed inside.

With practiced ease, Sting and Auel snapped magazines into their guns. Simultaneously, Stella unsheathed her knife, its blade glinting sharply. The sight of the gleaming white blade ignited something within her.

With that, the real operation began.

Their eyes, now sharp and alert, contrasted starkly with their earlier peaceful demeanors as they scanned the depths of the building. They could make out mobile suit transport crawlers lined up inside the dim hangar. Around them were twenty or thirty soldiers. They could probably handle this many.

Sting signaled with his eyes, and they all leaped out from cover at once. Before anyone noticed their intrusion, gunshots echoed off the high ceiling, and soldiers hit by Sting's rapid-fire were mowed down. Shouts of "Who goes there?" were drowned out by multiple gunshots.

Auel executed a midair somersault, his submachine guns blazing in both hands. Even the Coordinator soldiers were dazzled by his movements. The guns they finally managed to raise shot futilely at empty space.

Stella leaped into the midst of the soldiers with a cry. While slashing one's throat with the knife in one hand, she spun around and shot down the soldier behind her with the gun gripped in her other hand. Her movements not only rivaled but perhaps even surpassed those of a Coordinator. Each time her white dress fluttered, blood spatter painted mottled patterns.

"Auel, above you!" Sting called out casually while showering the surroundings with bullets unsparingly.

Auel, without a glance, intuitively pointed his guns over his shoulders and took down the soldiers aiming at him from atop the crawlers.

The soldiers crumpled, piling up before they could shoot back or flee. Red suits indicating elite pilots could be seen among them.

Within minutes, the inside of the hangar was suppressed. Even considering it was a surprise attack, the Coordinator soldiers had been defeated by a mere five men and women.

Seeing no one else moving, Stella tossed aside her gun and knife in a disinterested motion. Auel also called out while surveying the surroundings.

"Sting!"

"Okay! Let's go!"

Following Sting's command, each of them agilely leaped onto a separate crawler. Atop them lay giant gray mobile suits. They jumped into the open cockpits and took their seats. Stella powered up the OS. The monitors before her lit up, and the OS name floated into view.

Generation

Unrestricted

Network

Drive

Assault

Module

G.U.N.D.A.M. - Gundam, was it?

"How's it look?" Sting's voice came over the comm.

"Okay. The intel was accurate," Auel responded, and Stella answered while continuing the startup.

"All good."

Her hands danced, flipping switches and going through the startup sequence drilled into her head.

"Starting quantum catalysis. Power flow nominal. All armor active. All weapons accessible. System operating on -combat status.-"

Engine noise shook the crawlers, and lights came on in the eyes of the prone giants. The three mobile suits rose with the crawlers, and their huge limbs slowly began to move with newfound power.

With a series of sharp clicks, locks disengaged, and power cables snapped free. The mobile suits finally left the crawlers and slowly stepped forward. Right about then, a blaring siren started ringing. Soldiers on the brink of death must have mustered their strength to hit the alarm button.

But by now, it was too late to stop them.

The gray armor of the three machines shimmered and took on color. The ZGMF-X24S Chaos that Sting had boarded turned moss green, Auel's ZGMF-X31S Abyss navy blue, and Stella's ZGMF-X88S Gaia black.

The three Gundams stood side by side in the alarm-blaring hangar, boldly displaying their eerie forms.

Athrun and Cagalli, accompanied by Chairman Durandal, left the command center for an impromptu tour of the factory. The Chairman had suddenly suggested a tour of the factory. Hangars lined the surroundings, and mobile suits occasionally stomped across the wide roads, their weight making the ground rumble. Athrun stayed close behind Cagalli. The area was in utter chaos, likely due to the ceremony scheduled for tomorrow.

Amid the hustling soldiers, the scent of oil, and the rowdy atmosphere, Athrun was washed with nostalgia. This had once been the place he belonged. While he scanned the surroundings vigilantly, his eyes continually wandered to the mobile suits.

The GINNs and CGUEs appeared unchanged from his active duty days, whereas the GuAIZ, only recently deployed in combat, now sported railguns instead of hip-mounted anchors. The pale yellow, tank-type transforming machines were likely the next-generation ZuOOTs.

"Princess, you are a very courageous person who has experience piloting a mobile suit in the last war," Durandal said as if using it to justify this behavior while occasionally pointing out passing mobile suits and inside the hangars.

"You are also the successor of Lord Uzumi, the 'Lion of Orb,' who never yielded to pressure and stayed true to his belief in an ideal nation."

Cagalli's expression softened sentimentally at the mention of her father's name.

Uzumi Nara Athha had adamantly fought the Earth Alliance forces until the very end. He entrusted his ideals to Cagalli and others, allowing them to escape before he perished in an explosion alongside the mass driver. His awe-inspiring way of life continues to guide not only her but also Athrun.

"Then in the current global situation, I believe you understand well how we should be..." At Durandal's insinuation, Cagalli replied in a firm voice.

"We will protect and maintain the ideals of our nation. It's as simple as that."

"We will not invade another nation, will not allow another nation to invade us, and will not intervene in the conflicts of other nations."

"That's right."

Durandal looked at the nodding Cagalli with a smile in his eyes and nodded as well. His well-formed face constantly held a gentle smile, somehow reminiscent of a clergyman.

"We believe the same as well. It would be best if that were possible." However, with his soft smile still in place, he continued:

"However, without power, that just isn't possible."

Just then, Athrun peered into a hangar, his breath catching at the sight of the mobile suits lined up inside. One of the attendants called out proudly.

"ZGMF-1000 ZAKU. This is the type called ZAKU Warrior. It's our military's latest machine, rolled out as part of the New Millennium series."

The new model, which mostly had moss green armor, retained some design elements from the GINN lineage. The monoeye in the head and the

overall samurai armor-inspired form. But should they be casually showing them machines like this?

Durandal went on.

"I'm sure, Princess, that you would also... no, you would understand this fact even better. And that's why Orb also maintains full military facilities, am I right?"

Without power, nothing can be realized... Of course, Cagalli understands this. The powerless speak, but no one listens. They saw in the last great war how quickly the powerless can be annihilated...

But as if rebelling against his words, she suddenly retorted bluntly.

"Will you please stop calling me 'Princess.'"

Durandal widened his eyes as if caught off guard, then bowed his head, stifling laughter.

"My apologies. Representative Athha."

Cagalli glared at him with an indignant look but backed down. As they walked on, Durandal continued the interrupted conversation.

"However, I have to wonder... What are you so afraid of?"

Reacting to his discerning words, Cagalli raised her head. Durandal asked with a smile.

"Pressure from the Atlantic Federation? Perhaps they'd accuse Orb of providing us with military assistance in breach of the Treaty Agreement?"

Cagalli's face changed color.

It had hit the mark.

Durandal observed this as he wove reasonable words.

"But, of course, there's no evidence to back that up.

Although it is a fact that after Orb's defensive battle we warmly welcomed refugees from Orb as fellow countrymen."

Some technicians in the factory, likely former Orb citizens, reacted upon seeing Cagalli's face.

"And I should think that it can't be helped if these people took advantage of their technical skills to make a living here."

What Durandal said was fair.

Indeed, there was no truth to the claim that Orb assisted the PLANTs in violating the treaty, making the Atlantic Federation's accusations nearly baseless.

Yet, Orb's position remained delicate. Though independent, the nation, once occupied by the Atlantic Federation on nearly baseless pretexts, had lost its former inviolability. This vulnerability was partly due to the loss of Uzumi, the revered Lion of Orb.

Cagalli had been elevated to Chief Representative, a role granted due to her lineage and her notable efforts in the Second Battle of Jachin Due. She lacked the power to firmly resist pressure from the Atlantic Federation.

To protect a war-ravaged Orb, she could not afford to give the great powers any leverage, regardless of her preferences.

More troubling for Cagalli, however, was the world's ominous direction. Agonized, she turned back to Durandal, clenched her fists, and cried out.

"However! Too much power will lead to another conflict!"

Having witnessed up close the lives stolen by the nuclear fires unleashed on the PLANTS and the light of death from GENESIS, she couldn't silently watch the act of churning out instruments of death one after another.

Athrun shared her sentiments.

Yet Durandal, unswayed, slowly shook his head.

"No, Princess. Power is necessary because there will always be conflict."

Cagalli stood frozen, words caught in her throat. Suddenly, an alarm blared.

"What the...?"

They momentarily forgot their confrontation, looking around as the ominous siren persisted. Soldiers in the factory abruptly began moving with tense expressions to assess the situation. Athrun also drew closer to Cagalli, vigilantly scanning their surroundings.

Suddenly, several beams shot from a hangar, piercing and melting the giant door. The beams struck the opposite hangar, detonating something inside.

"Cagalli!"

Athrun swiftly grabbed Cagalli and dove behind cover. The shockwave raced down the road they had just been on.

"Wha...?!"

Cagalli cried out in blank amazement as she struggled to her feet. Chairman Durandal was also unharmed, shielded by his attendants.

What happened?!

Athrun poked his head out from behind cover and looked toward the explosion. Giant silhouettes emerged from behind the smoke billowing in the wind.

"Chaos... Gaia... Abyss?!"

An attendant crouching beside the Chairman shouted in shock as three mobile suits stepped from the smoke--

One of the Chairman's attendants crouching beside him shouted in shock at the three mobile suits stepping out of the smoke—their distinctive heads with two eyes and two horns, their slender, linear forms stark against the bulkier GINNs. Despite specialized armaments, their design was unmistakable.

"Those are--!"

Athrun blurted out, and Cagalli murmured in dismay.

"Gundams...!"

"First, destroy the hangars! They'll be coming with mobile suits!" Sting in the Chaos shouted in a cheery tone. Auel in the Abyss, following behind, curtly ordered Stella.

"Stella! You take the left!"

"Okay."

Stella responded flatly, steering Gaia leftward as instructed. The black mobile suit transformed midair into a quadruped form, reminiscent of ZAFT's BuCUE.

The Gaia launched off the ground on all four limbs, racing like a black gale between hangars and firing its back-mounted beam cannon. The beam pierced the GINNs lined up inside a hangar, triggering secondary explosions that obliterated the building. The two double-barreled cannons protruding from each of the shell-like shields covering the Abyss' shoulders spat fire, similarly turning another hangar into a sea of flames.

Sting's Chaos sniped ceremonial GINNs one by one with its beam rifle, treating them like extravagant targets. He resembled a child with a new toy. The cylindrical weapon pod mounted on the mobile suit's back opened up and launched dozens of missiles at once. The AGM-141 Firefly guided missiles arced high, crackling like firecrackers, before striking hangar after hangar, blossoming fire. The Chaos, apparently designed for assault missions, seemed perfectly suited for this job.

But the enemy would soon recover from the shock of the surprise attack and begin their counterattack. Aerial combat DINNs spread their wings and ascended as heavily armed GAZuOOTs switched to bipedal mode, raining cannon fire.

Stella kicked off the ground, predicting their lines of fire, and released arrows of beams from the air in return. The bulky GAZuOOTs, skewered by the beams, scattered as their copious munitions detonated.

Flames seared the sunless sky. Commanding the prancing steel beasts, Stella felt her blood heat with excitement.

—This is the ultimate machine. My Gaia!

Recovering from the initial shock, Durandal immediately ordered his staff, "Take the Princess to the shelter!"

Obedying it, one soldier took the lead, saying, "This way!"

Athrun put an arm around the shoulders of the stunned Cagalli and quickly followed after him.

"Stop them at all costs! Contact the Minerva and ask for their assistance!"

As expected, Durandal soon regained his composure and began working to control the situation. Hearing his penetrating voice behind him, Athrun ran.

In a heartbeat, the factory erupted into a voracious inferno. Athrun watched, his jaw set in a hard line, as three new model mobile suits, superior in every way, tore through the defenses. Those were likely next-generation machines inheriting the lineage of his former unit, the Justice. Power that is too strong invites more conflict - Cagalli's fears had been right on the mark. It was clear now that their formidable 'power' had awoken avarice and fear, drawing covetous eyes toward ZAFT.



Who, then, sought to usurp this might? The answer hung unsaid, understood by all.

Guided through a labyrinth of hangars, Athrun and Cagalli dashed for safety. But as they skirted a building, Athrun halted, his senses screaming. Just meters away, a skirmish unfolded. A new model, its armor a haunting green, unsheathed its beam saber with lethal grace, impaling a GINN. The sight snapped Athrun into action; he yanked Cagalli back just as an explosion blossomed, claiming their slow-reacting guide in a fiery embrace.

"This way!"

With no guide, they pushed forward, desperate to distance themselves from the carnage. Yet fate seemed to conspire against them; a black, quadrupedal mobile suit leaped into their path from across the road. From above, a DINN dived, its attack missing the black suit but shattering the asphalt before Athrun and Cagalli. Diving for cover, Athrun shielded Cagalli beneath him as a building wall nearby succumbed to a stray shot, spewing debris like the ash of a violent volcano.

"Why? Why's this happening?!"

Cagalli's voice trembled with raw emotion, her words muffled against Athrun's chest.

Above them, the black machine surged skyward, clashing with the DINN. In a breathtaking display, it unfurled wings that sliced through the air and the DINN alike, its beam blades cleaving the enemy in two. The DINN crashed down, its destruction rippling through a hangar and unleashing another violent explosion.

The blast assailed even the two hiding behind cover, and Athrun reflexively protected Cagalli with his own body. Scattering building debris, something fell onto the nearby road, its impact making the vehicle they were pressed against bounce slightly.

"Athrun!"

Cagalli called out in concern for him.

"I'm fine," he reassured her, offering a smile that belied his internal turmoil. They were fortunate to have escaped direct harm, yet the injustice of their plight gnawed at him. Why here, why now?

But now that it had come to this, he had to safeguard Cagalli no matter what, not just because she was irreplaceable to him personally but as a vital leader for Orb.

Scanning the chaotic scene with wild desperation, Athrun's gaze fixed on an unexpected beacon of hope—the ZAKU, the same model he had seen earlier, now sprawled across the road, cast out from the shattered hangar.

"Come on!" he urged, seizing the moment.

They dashed toward it. Fortunately, the cockpit of the ZAKU lying face-up was open.

"Get in!"

Athrun lifted the hesitating Cagalli and slipped through the open cockpit hatch. Quickly taking a seat, he began powering up the mobile suit with practiced motions. The hatch closed overhead.

"What?!"

Cagalli pressed against him, her presence a silent balm to his frayed nerves.

This was the first time Athrun had touched a mobile suit since the last great war. He had hoped to never do so again. Cagalli knew that which was likely why she was considerate of his feelings. But Athrun spat out curtly.

"I can't let you die in a place like this!"

Inside the ZAKU, it was a sanctuary compared to the madness outside.

Fortunately, the ZAKU didn't seem to be damaged anywhere. The control systems differed from older types, but he could mostly guess. It wouldn't be impossible to operate.

The engine conveyed a smooth driving sound, and light entered the monitors. Athrun raised the ZAKU to get a grasp of the situation. Heated exhaust spewed from the chest vents, and the rubble piled on the mobile suit clattered down.

But that motion seemed to have drawn the enemy's attention. The black mobile suit turned ominously towards them, its intent clear as it filled their fresh field of view.

—*Damn it!*

The black machine loomed ahead, its beam rifle aiming with lethal intent. Athrun's instincts took over; he manipulated the levers and stomped the pedals with a seamless urgency. The ZAKU lunged sideways, thrusters hissing a fierce ballet of evasion as the beam scorched the wall where they had just been. Landing deftly, Athrun harnessed the momentum, charging toward the enemy with a burst of raw power.

The black mobile suit seemed caught off guard by the speed. Athrun capitalized on the surprise, his mobile suit's shoulder connecting with a bone-jarring tackle that sent the black suit reeling backward through the air.

The unexpected agility and strength of the ZAKU left Athrun momentarily in awe, even as he grappled with its controls, overshooting his mark. The machine's power was formidable, exceeding all his expectations—a reminder of the relentless march of war technology.

Undeterred by the setback, the black suit rallied quickly, slicing the air with its beam saber raised in a deadly arc. Athrun's response was swift; his fingers found the beam tomahawk nestled in the ZAKU's shield.

Retreating strategically, he used his shield to catch the enemy's saber, countering with a downward slash of his tomahawk. The enemy's shield met his blade with a clashing force that sent shivers through the ZAKU's frame.

"Ngh!"

His mind raced, desperate for a way out. He hadn't sought the sanctuary of the ZAKU to win a battle but to protect Cagalli and ensure her safety above all else. Yet the black machine persisted, its attacks relentless and seemingly fueled by a raw, unbridled rage.

With no clear chance to disengage, Athrun's options dwindled to one: he must fight, and he must win. His jaw set, eyes narrowing with fierce

determination as he stared into the monitor, the echoes of a haunting truth resounded within the cockpit.

—*Power is necessary because there will always be conflict.*

"Impulse, standby for launch. Pilot, to the Core Splendor."

Docked within the factory, the pale gray battleship—the Minerva—loomed like a dormant beast awaiting its awakening. Set for a ceremonial launch the following day, it sported large triangular wings that jutted aggressively forward from its bow. A catapult could be seen in the center of the hull, with mobile suit hatches also equipped on both sides. The red wing sections and underbelly sharply contrasting against the industrial gray of the surrounding structures. A linear design, more reminiscent of Orb vessels than previous ZAFT ships, marked a clear evolution in their aesthetic and intent.

As the mobile suit control system echoed its commands, Shinn, clad in the red of an ace pilot, darted through the Minerva's metallic veins. He reached the hangar and leaped into his machine—the Core Splendor—a sleek white and blue new model fighter that awaited his command like a faithful steed.

"Sword Module selected. Opening Silhouette Hangar Two. Silhouette Flyer, standby for launch..."

Summoned abruptly upon his return, Shinn was barely briefed. A new model meant to debut from this very factory, had been stolen. The gravity of the situation unwound slowly within him as he sealed his helmet.

"Just what were they doing?!"

His thoughts churned with contempt for the oversight that had allowed such a breach.

The canopy sealed with a hiss, and he ignited the mobile suit's systems.

Following the launch sequence, the lift carrying the mobile suit from the hangar rose to the upper level. The catapult deck floor slowly sank out of view overhead. At the same time, the front hatch began to open, revealing a pale blue sky through the gap.

"Hatch opened. Linear launch system engaged. Catapult power levels normal. Course clear. Core Splendor, you are clear for launch!"

Shinn slammed the left-hand throttle; the catapult flung him forward, pressing him deep into his seat. The world beyond expanded rapidly, and as he adjusted his trajectory, the dark plumes rising from the factory obscured his view. The sight of devastation was more extensive than he'd imagined—hangars crushed, fires rampant. The faces of his colleagues, who might still be amidst the chaos, flashed in his mind, igniting a fiery rage within.

"Doing as they please in someone else's base!"

Behind the Core Splendor, the Minerva's catapult launched three objects, not fighters but something else entirely.

In the meantime, Shinn's eyes traced over the destroyed factory and soon captured his target. The slender black mobile suit, the ZGMF-X88S Gaia, clashed with a ZAKU Warrior. The ZAKU, on the defensive, was unaware of another threat—the ZGMF-X24S Chaos—slinking up behind.

This was likely also in enemy hands.

"Watch out!"

The Chaos pounced on the ZAKU from its blind spot. The ZAKU tried to take a defensive stance at the last second but didn't make it in time, losing its left arm to the beam saber. The Chaos attempted to finish off the staggering ZAKU. But before it could, missiles fired by Shinn exploded on the Chaos' back.

"Hmph! Now we're even!"

Dodging the dazed enemy, Shinn soared higher, meeting the units that had launched from the Minerva.

Shinn matched relative speeds with them and activated this mobile suit's unique system. The Core Splendor's nose rotated and folded under along with the wingtips. A beacon was emitted to the units lined up on the same axis, and Shinn reduced throttle.

The transformed Core Splendor was pulled in as if sucked toward the rear unit, making contact. No, the joints of both locked together as if they had always been one. The mobile suit then accelerated and docked with the front unit as well. The lower part of the rear unit slid out to form the legs, and a head sprouted from the front unit's tip.

Finally, a drone called the Silhouette Flyer released the module it carried, attaching it to the mobile suit's back.

That's right, the mobile suit Shinn piloted wasn't a mere fighter. It was one part of a mobile suit.

The instant they combined, the gray mobile suit took on color as if shedding a veil. The lower body and arms stark white, shoulders and chest a vivid red. Power surged through the newly combined unit as the Phase Shift system activated.

Shinn drew the two large swords mounted on the back—the MMI-710 Excalibur—and as he touched down, the ground beneath him charred. Standing amidst the scorched earth, the mobile suit—ZGMF-X56S Impulse—gleamed in fiery red and pure white. He connected the hilts of his massive swords, lifting them overhead.

"Why is this happening?"

Faced with the Chaos and Gaia, both units from the same series, Shinn shouted with hatred.

"Do you guys wanna start another war?!"

"This guy...?!"

Sting gasped, his eyes widening as the white mobile suit materialized before him. It was unmistakably from the same series as their stolen units—

similar frame, distinctive head—but this one had just assembled itself in a breathtaking display of mechanical synergy.

Caught off guard, Sting and his team watched in shock as the newly-formed white mobile suit brandished its colossal laser swords and lunged toward Stella's Gaia.

"What the hell is this?!"

Stella's voice crackled over the comm as she narrowly dodged the gleaming blades, her suit unleashing a barrage from its head-mounted vulcan guns in retreat. But her efforts were futile; the bullets pinged harmlessly off the white suit's armor. They knew all too well the resilience of Phase Shift armor, which they had on their own units. Charged, it could render a suit nearly invulnerable to physical projectiles. To defeat such a suit, they had no choice but to resort to beam or laser weaponry.

As the enemy pulled a beam rifle from behind its waist, targeting the airborne Gaia, frustration surged through Sting.

"Damn it! Is that a new model too?!" he cursed, his rifle raised, firing in desperation to cover Stella. "UNKNOWN," the monitor taunted him with its display.

"What's going on?! We have no data on this thing! Aue!"

His voice was urgent, sharp with confusion. They had been briefed on only three new mobile suits at this factory—not four. Steal them and bring them back. A fourth unit was not part of the deal. Frantically, he reached out to his other comrade, needing eyes everywhere.

In the thick of combat, the white suit and Gaia clashed with ferocity. Gaia, transforming into its beast mode, lunged, but the white suit met its charge head-on, swords slicing through the air in a deadly dance. Gaia nimbly dodged, weaving through the blades, and retaliated with a shot from its back-mounted beam cannon.

But the white suit was prepared; it deflected the sniper shot with an anti-beam shield mounted on its arm and, in a swift, fluid motion, hurled its elongated sword at Gaia. Stella, reacting just in time, shifted back to mobile suit mode. Her shield caught the laser blade, but the force knocked her suit backward, tumbling through the air.

Observing the enemy's combat tactics, Sting clenched his jaw.

"It's not just the mobile suit. The pilot is pretty good too!"

This realization tightened his focus; underestimating this adversary could be fatal.

"Shinn! Your orders are to capture them!"

Arthur Trine's voice erupted through the comm system, laden with urgency. As deputy captain of the Minerva, his tone bore the weight of command.

"You do understand that, right?! Those belong to us!"

The directive seemed to tighten the already taut atmosphere. Shinn's brow furrowed in frustration, a scowl crossing his face as he maneuvered his mobile suit.

"I know that! I don't know if I can take them, though!" he retorted, his voice rough with the strain of battle. The importance of the stolen units to ZAFT was clear, and he was acutely aware of it. But the precarious balance of capturing them without causing damage—a near-impossible task amidst such chaos—was not lost on him.

He had been fighting desperately all this time - did the higher-ups not even get that?!

"How did this happen in the first place?!"

Shinn dodged a lethal thrust from Gaia's blade, countering with a slash of his own, his frustration spilling into every maneuver.

"How could we let the enemy steal them so easily?!"

A sharp, commanding voice cut through the commotion.

"This isn't the time to be chatting about such things! This isn't a drill! Focus!"

Captain Talia Gladys' reprimand struck like a whip, snapping the focus back to the immediate danger. Her voice, stern and unyielding, was a clear call to discipline, silencing any further debate between Shinn and Arthur.

Shinn had no time for that. He deflected a vicious strike from Gaia's beam saber with his shield. The deadly energy sizzled mere inches from his cockpit, a stark reminder of the lethal stakes of their engagement. He didn't need a reminder—this was certainly no drill.

Right before the comm cut off, Captain Gladys' voice pierced through once more, directed elsewhere.

"If they're here on a capture mission, there should be a carrier waiting outside. See anything?"

"All right, let's go!"

The command echoed with a hint of mischief across the bridge of the special operations ship *Girty Lue*. The man giving the orders, a wry smile playing on his lips, glanced at his watch before adding, "Inconspicuously, though."

With that, the bridge hummed into focused activity.

"Aim Gottfrieds one and two! Load missile launchers one through eight with Korinthos!"

"Izawa unit, Bart unit, proceed to catapult."

The crew, clad in crisp Earth Alliance uniforms, operated with precision, accustomed to the brisk pace of command. Beside the captain's chair, the man who had issued the orders watched the developments on the monitor intently.

An inorganic mask obscured the upper half of his face, lending him an almost spectral presence among his crew. Only his blond hair, cascading over his shoulders, hinted at the man beneath the mask. This was Neo

Roanoke, a captain whose enigmatic aura was as well known as his tactical genius.

The center screen displayed a ZAFT Nazca-class ship, seemingly oblivious to the Girty Lue's presence. The reason was clear: where the Girty Lue should have been visible, both to the naked eye and on radar, there was nothing but the void of space.

With a cheery contradiction to his stoic mask, Neo commanded, "Main cannons, target the Nazca-class off the port bow. Disengage Mirage Colloid upon firing. Engines to maximum. Now, things are finally gonna get more interesting, gentlemen."

At his side, Captain Ian Lee, a man whose usual solemnity contrasted with Neo's lighter tone, nodded slightly, a faint smile breaking through.

"Gottfrieds, fire!"

The Girty Lue's 225cm dual high-energy focused beam cannons Gottfried Mk.71 spat fire. To the unsuspecting crew of the Nazca-class, it must have appeared as though the deadly beams materialized from thin air.

No, perhaps no one even saw that much. The thick thermal rays were sucked straight into the Nazca-class' engine section, and an instant later, the ship exploded violently and scattered.

The roar of the engines filled the bridge as the ship surged forward. The stealth technology that had cloaked their approach, the Mirage Colloid, faded like a specter at dawn, a blue-gray ship silhouette emerging from the void. Developed during the last great war for mobile suit camouflage, the Mirage Colloid warped visible light and absorbed radar waves. By stabilizing it in gas form with a magnetic field, the target could be completely hidden from the enemy's sight. This ship was equipped with that Mirage Colloid.

However, even Mirage Colloid couldn't cover a battleship's heat. That's why Neo and the others had approached this far while holding their breath, engines stopped and venting gas from added propulsion devices on both sides for thrust alone.

Now that the engines were running, the stealth had lost meaning, and besides, it had already been sufficiently effective.

There was no doubt the first Nazca-class, the nearby patrolling ZAFT ships, and even the Armory One control had been completely caught off guard by the Girty Lue suddenly appearing and charging forward while firing its main guns and missiles wildly.

But the second Nazca-class managed to intercept most of the raining missiles and turned to counterattack.

"Here they come!"

Neo exclaimed, his voice devoid of panic, his commands snapping out with rapid precision.

"After the mobile suit launch, come about to course 20! Main guns, target indigo, Nazca-class! Don't get hit by their cannons!"

His crew faces alight with the thrill of battle, responded with grins and hurried movements.

GAT-02L2 Dagger Ls took off from the open hatch. They were the current mainstay mass-production mobile suits of the Earth Alliance forces. As the successor to the GAT-01 Strike Dagger, their armament was enhanced with two beam sabers at the waist instead of one and added chest vulcans. CGUEs and GINNs also flew out one after another from the approaching Nazca-class, but struck by the preemptive attack, they were shot down by the Dagger Ls in quick succession.

The tide of battle overwhelmingly favored the Girty Lue.

But Neo's objective was not to seize control of this local battle. His gaze was fixed on Armory One slowly rotating in the distance.

The Dagger Ls he had sent ahead in secret should be setting off fireworks at the port any time now.

Pandemonium reigned in the command booth at Armory One military port. Moments earlier, an urgent alert had shattered the routine: their military factory was under attack. In response, they had dispatched patrol ships to scout for the enemy mothership they presumed must be lurking nearby. Yet, what followed was beyond their gravest predictions—a battleship materialized seemingly out of thin air, annihilating one of their own with a devastating strike.

"Unidentified vessel located! One vessel! Location Orange 25, Mark 8, Bravo, distance 2300!"

The operator's voice was tense, the coordinates painting a chilling picture.

"That close?!" The senior officer couldn't mask his disbelief. The enemy was practically looming over Armory One.

"Mirage Colloid?"

Another officer suggested the unthinkable, his words casting a shadow of dread across the room. Indeed, the invisible assailant could only be cloaked by Mirage Colloid, a technology forbidden under the Junius Treaty. The implications were alarming.

"Are they Earth Forces?!"

The question hung heavy in the air, charged with accusation and fear.

"Searching heat signature library. No matching ships!"

The operator's reply only deepened the mystery, confirming the vessel was an unknown entity, unregistered and unprecedented. The commander's voice cracked the tense atmosphere like a whip.

"Intercept them! Send out ships! Mobile suits, too!"

Orders flew, and the docked Laurasia-class ships sprang into action, their massive forms casting long shadows across the command booth. As the lead ship edged toward the port entrance, a sudden and violent interruption shattered any semblance of order—two black mobile suits, Earth Alliance Dark Dagger Ls armed with bazookas, burst forth.

By the time the lead ship identified the units, those bazookas were already spewing fire. The shells pierced the bridge with terrifying precision,



leaving no time for evasion or countermeasures. The Dagger Ls, relentless and precise, swiftly turned their deadly attention to the next warship, unleashing a barrage of fire.

One ship, struck at its engine, erupted into a fiery inferno. The blast was catastrophic, hurling the crippled vessel into the command booth, the impact resonating like the toll of doom. As one ship exploded, another collided, triggering a chain reaction of destruction. The confined space of the launch route became a deadly trap, ensnaring the ships in a maelstrom of fire and metal.

The port entrance was now an apocalyptic tableau of explosions and wreckage—a grim testament to the meticulous and ruthless strategy of the man named Neo Roanoke.

The ground beneath Sting's feet transmitted a faint yet unmistakable tremor, a clear signal that their window of opportunity was closing fast. The white new model still blocked their path, a formidable barrier. As the Gaia, in its beast mode with beam blades glittering on its wings, charged, it was skillfully dodged by the white suit. Seizing the brief moment when Gaia landed, Sting launched his own attack, his weapon slashing through the air. Yet, the enemy was quicker, parrying the dual assault with agile movements. It caught the Chaos' beam saber on its shield and counterattacked with a horizontal sweep of its laser sword, aiming directly at the cockpit. Sting was forced to pull back hastily.

Above them, shells rained down on Gaia as it tried to spring forward, but two DINNs supporting the white mobile suit were suddenly blasted from the sky by incoming beams. The attacker was a navy blue mobile suit—the Abyss.

"Sting! That's our cue!"

Auel seemed to have noticed the tremor from before, too.

"I know! Our ride's here, right?!" Sting snapped back, irritation bleeding into his voice as the reality of their situation dawned on him.

"We're late! Our bus will leave without us!"

"I said I know!"

Sting's response was terse as he aimed his beam rifle at the white suit and the now-separated Gaia. Despite his efforts, the enemy dodged again, its shield and agile leaps frustrating every shot.

"What is that thing?! We were told there were only three new models!"

Auel's accusations echoed in Sting's cockpit.

"How should I know?!"

Sting retorted, his tone sullen and tense.

"What do we do? That thing's not in our plans. Tch! Neo messed up!"

Auel grumbled, discontent with their absent commander's oversight.

Sting couldn't help but agree. If Neo had gotten intel on these three units, how had this one eluded them? Half-assed!

"But we can't exactly ignore it! It'll be a pain if it decides to come after us!"

As he spoke, Sting swiveled his gun to target a CGUE approaching from behind. A single beam shot took it down. ZAFT was still reeling from the initial surprise attack, and Sting knew they should withdraw while they had the chance. Yet, the allure of victory, or perhaps the pride of a warrior, spurred him on. He drove the Chaos forward to engage the white mobile suit again.

"Thinking of bringing its head along as a souvenir?!"

Auel teased, following close behind.

"Isn't that the sort of thing lame people do?!"

"Athrun!"

Cagalli's voice trembled as she sensed the unsettling tremors rippling through the horizon. This disturbance wasn't from an internal explosion—it was external, aggressive.

Athrun's response was strained, a groan carrying the weight of realization.

"We're being attacked from the outside. The harbor?"

If there was some organization behind the group that stole the three new model mobile suits, there should be a ship waiting outside Armory One to transport the escaped units. They were likely the ones attacking.

As they pieced together the situation, a bitter memory resurfaced for Athrun. The haunting image of the Orb colony Heliopolis crumbling under ZAFT's assault—once he had been part of that destructive force, seizing the Earth Alliance's secretly developed mobile suits there without a thought of the fallout.

Now, history seemed to echo that dread as fearsome mobile suits clashed before him, each blow reverberating with the chaos of the past.

The battle escalated as the stolen third unit joined the fray. The remaining two ambushed the lone white ZAFT machine, expertly timing their strikes. The green unit feigned an attack, soaring upward, while the blue one unleashed a devastating beam from its chest. The black unit narrowly evaded, and the white one dodged sideways, but the green unit anticipated this, diving down with its beam blades slicing close to the ZAFT machine, scarring the earth.

Athrun and Cagalli watched the battle unfolding before their eyes in blank amazement. These units displayed capabilities in firepower and mobility far beyond conventional models. But even more astonishing were the pilots operating them. Putting aside the white ZAFT unit, the pilots of the other three should have been outsiders touching the machines for the first time today.

As the green unit landed, it fired again, targeting relentlessly. The white unit parried with its shield, narrowly avoiding a direct hit. But as it dodged, the black unit's saber swung perilously close. The blade of light mowed

down right above the crouching white unit's head. The ZAFT machine somehow tried to gain distance but lost balance, parrying the following saber. At this rate, it would be finished!

Cagalli let out an involuntary scream.

"Athrun!"

"Hold on tight!"

Athrun ordered curtly and stomped on the pedal.

Just then, the blue unit, its lance poised, advanced on the faltering ZAFT machine. Athrun's ZAKU intervened with a shoulder tackle, sending the attacker reeling. Athrun swiftly spun around and hurled his beam tomahawk at the black unit charging from the opposite direction. The heavy battleaxe flew with a howl and impaled the shield the black unit barely raised.

But at that moment, the blue unit that had sunk into the ground from the shoulder attack rose up and fired a powerful beam from its chest cannon. Athrun turned his shield to it but the high output beam blew even that away. The recoil slammed the ZAKU against the building behind it. The cockpit shook violently, Cagalli's body flying off as if ripped away from the seat she had been clinging to.

"Agh!"

Cagalli bounced off something and fell onto his lap. Athrun hurriedly scooped her up. But his hand slipped - blood. Athrun called out to her, aghast.

"Cagalli!"

Cagalli, who seemed to have hit her head hard, was unresponsive.

His focus split between her and the enemy on his monitor, and he saw another beam scorch the wall where they'd just been.

Caught in an untenable situation, Athrun realized the grave mistake of entering the fray in such a state. With Cagalli unresponsive in his arms, he knew they had to retreat—there was no other choice.

"Hurry! Just open it enough so that I can get in!" Lunamaria Hawke's voice cut through the cacophony of the hangar with sharp impatience. Around her, the hangar was a scene of frantic activity as workers and soldiers struggled to clear the debris from the bombing that had buried the usable mobile suits.

Beside his own unit, Rey Za Burrel stood in stoic silence, his gaze fixed on the slowly emerging cockpit of his mobile suit.

The missile attack that had targeted their hangar had erupted just as he and Lunamaria were dashing toward their machines. By sheer fortune, they had been delayed—if they had been a minute earlier, they would now be part of the wreckage.

"Rey!"

At the sound of his name, Rey sprang into action, climbing onto his mobile suit with agile ease. The ground crew rushed around him, their voices laden with urgency as they pried open the cockpit hatch.

"I don't know what damage it may have sustained! Don't expect it to operate normally!"

Rey settled into the pilot's seat and initiated the startup sequence, the familiar hum of the machine's systems bringing a brief sense of normalcy amidst the chaos.

"If you think there's a problem, fall back immediately!"

Rey nodded sharply, then sealed the hatch. Through the cockpit's monitors, he watched the last of the staff descend from the mobile suit. With a deep breath, he commanded the machine to stand, feeling the vibrations as chunks of rubble slid off the armor.

What emerged was a ZGMF-1001 ZAKU Phantom sporting a single horn like a feather ornament on its head and shields equipped on both shoulders. It was the higher-spec version of the ZAKU Warrior. Its purplish gray body contrasted starkly with the white of its head and limbs—Rey's personal colors. As the mobile suit rose to its full height, it turned towards another ZAKU buried nearby.

"Move over, Lunamaria."

His voice, calm and detached, carried clearly through the comms. Lunamaria, along with the workers grappling with the massive debris, caught the warning in time. They scrambled clear as the ZAKU Phantom's hand swept through the concrete and steel with ease, clearing the path with a power that human efforts could not match.

The red machine, now accessible, beckoned, and Lunamaria wasted no time. With a leap fueled by adrenaline, she climbed into the cockpit.

Reinforcement DINNs swooped in from above, their presence a boon to Shinn as they commenced covering fire. With the battlefield set, the Abyss revealed its arsenal, its massive shoulder shields parting to expose rows of MA-X223E triple-beam cannons. In a breathtaking spectacle, beams erupted from the cannons, transforming the DINNs into blossoming fireballs, their wreckage spiraling down in smoky tendrils. Watching the carnage, Shinn gritted his teeth and surged forward, his anti-ship swords gleaming menacingly.

"I won't let you..."

he vowed, the laser blades carving brilliant white arcs through the air. But the Abyss nimbly dodged the lethal dance of Shinn's swords and leaped away. Simultaneously, the Gaia pounced from behind. Shinn reacted instinctively, parrying the attack with his shield and shouting, "...have things your way!"

His resolve steeled in the clash of laser and beam blades, the two machines locked in a fierce skirmish. Despite the intensity, Shinn's spirit seemed to push the Gaia back, forcing it to retreat skyward with its verniers blazing.

The Impulse took off in hot pursuit, the sky now a vertical battlefield. The Chaos joined the fray, firing its beam rifle. Shinn executed a sharp turn,

evading the shot, only for the Gaia to attack from the side. Shinn ascended sharply, dodging the Gaia's saber with agile grace.

"Chaos, Gaia, and Abyss... How could something like this be allowed to happen?!"

In a swift motion, Shinn's Impulse retrieved the wing-like equipment from its back, transforming it into a beam boomerang that sliced through the air toward the enemy. The Gaia countered at the last second, its shield deflecting the spinning beam, which then arced back to Shinn's waiting hand.

Above, as the Gaia reeled from the impact, the Abyss spread its shoulder shields anew. Shinn quickly took cover behind his shield as six thermal rays sliced through the sky, narrowly missing the Impulse and decimating the GAZuOOTs and GuAIZ Rs below.

Anger flared in Shinn's red eyes as he witnessed the destruction of his allies.

At that critical moment, arrows of beams launched from Shinn's left and burst against the Abyss' shields.

Surprised, Shinn turned to see the familiar silhouettes of the white ZAKU Phantom and the red ZAKU Warrior—Rey and Lunamaria were both safe!

Rey, with his characteristic precision, controlled his beam assault rifle, each shot calculated and lethal. Beside him, Lunamaria unleashed a barrage, her voice echoing across the battlefield, "Damn you! How dare you try to trick us!"

Bombarded by beams from the two ZAKUs, the trio of stolen units found themselves thrown into disarray, their formation shattered under the relentless assault.

"Dammit... Why won't he go down?!"

Stella's voice was laced with frustration and loathing. Her entire field of vision narrowed to that relentless white unit, an adversary unlike any she had faced before. Despite the numerical advantage of three units on their side, she was pushed to her limits, her usual dominance on the battlefield slipping away. She wouldn't pull back until she downed it!

"Sting! There's no end to this! My machine's running out of power!"

Auel's impatient voice leaked through the comm, and Sting made a decision.

"We're withdrawing! Stella, can you shake that one off?!"

Sting commanded, but his words barely registered in Stella's mind, consumed as she was with the heat of the battle. She declared in a murderous voice, "I'll destroy him in no time!"

Stella, her head completely boiling, accelerated toward the enemy, her beam cannon firing wildly, a chaotic symphony of light and fury.

"This can't be... I...! I...!"

The white enemy matched her intensity, its laser swords poised to clash against hers. Their paths crossed in a blinding flash.

Why won't it go down?!

She had never faced an enemy like this before. Stella's mind screamed, unable to fathom retreat or defeat. She was the greatest warrior—she had to be. The thought of leaving the battlefield without victory was intolerable.

"Retreat! Stop it, Stella!"

Sting shouted at her, but Stella still rushed the enemy with her saber held high.

"I can't give in to this guy!"

Then Auel's words sliced through her focus, cold and taunting.

"Then you'll just hafta die here!"

Die...?! Die?!

The word echoed like a death knell in her mind, sending a shiver of ice through her veins. The confidence that had filled her being shattered and fell away in pieces.

"Auel!"

Sting's voice cracked with alarm, but Auel's bitterness cut deeper.

"I'll give Neo a message on your behalf! That you said Goodbye!"

Stella's body trembled uncontrollably. Die...? Me? Her mobile suit drifted aimlessly, its movements listless, as the reality of her vulnerability washed over her.

"Goodbye...?"

Just then, the white mobile suit advanced, its beam boomerang spinning menacingly toward her. In a blur, Sting intervened, his machine deflecting the lethal projectile at the last second.

"Auel! Why'd you hafta...!"

"She wouldn't stop! I had no choice!"

"Shut up, idiot! That was uncalled for!"

Their voices felt distant to Stella, whose mind was still reeling. If not for Sting, she realized with chilling clarity, she would likely be dead.

Death - that forgotten emotion suddenly bore down on her with overwhelming force. It was fear.

"Nooo!"

She screamed and desperately turned her mobile suit around.

I have to run! I'll be killed! I'll die!

Stella was no longer a warrior but a small, frightened, and bewildered girl.

The Gaia broke away from its position with sudden acceleration, aiming for the zenith. Clicking his tongue, Sting chased after it.

"See? All's well that ends well!"

Following his comrades, Auel declared as if thrilled with himself.

"You're not getting away!"

Shinn's voice was a mix of frustration and determination, his response slightly delayed by the suddenness of the enemy's retreat. Compensating for his initial hesitation, he slammed the throttle to full, his machine surging

forward in hot pursuit. Behind him, Rey's ZAKU Phantom and Lunamaria's ZAKU Warrior fell into formation, their engines roaring in unison.

As they chased the retreating figures, Shinn found his thoughts snagged on the behavior of the Gaia just moments before. The once relentless aggressor had inexplicably dropped its guard, its movements hesitating mere seconds before it turned to flee. Was there trouble with the pilot? Shinn wondered, his brow furrowing as he considered the possibilities.

He glanced ahead at the three enemy units, each retreating figure a blur against the horizon. Ever since this confrontation began, a nagging doubt had unsettled him. Who was piloting them? Initially, he was convinced they were Earth Alliance operatives or similar foes. Yet, the way they expertly maneuvered those freshly stolen machines suggested a level of skill that seemed impossible for Naturals. Their reaction speed, their tactical decisions—could they really surpass Coordinators?

"Huh?!"

Shinn's train of thought was abruptly shattered by Lunamaria's yelp over the comm. Turning his attention to the side monitor, he saw her ZAKU Warrior trailing black smoke from its verniers, visibly struggling to maintain pace.

"Luna, fall back!"

Shinn called out, his voice tense with concern.

"But...!" Lunamaria's protest came through the comm, her tone mixing defiance with frustration.

"Don't overdo it, Lunamaria."

Rey intervened, his voice steady and authoritative. Lunamaria reluctantly turned back.

"Nazca-class, sunk!"

The report confirmed the demise of the second Nazca-class ship, which had valiantly continued to fight despite severe damage. It finally succumbed to a direct hit from the Girty Lue's main guns.

"Three more GuAIZ Rs approaching from aft portside!"

The battle was unfolding as planned—no additional ships were sortieing from the enemy port. However, the relentless wave of mobile suits remained a concern.

Ian Lee, maintaining his composure, issued his commands with clinical precision.

"Launch anti-beam depth charges and accelerate by 20 percent for 10 seconds. Load Sledgehammers into tubes one through four! Recall our mobile suits!"

At his side, Neo Roanoke appeared detached, an elbow resting casually on the console as he surveyed the fray. He turned to the operator, his tone nonchalant.

"Have they returned?"

The operator, understanding the brevity of the question, responded with a simple shake of his head.

"Not yet."

Lee, picking up on Neo's slight sigh of perplexity, pressed for clarity.

"Did they fail?"

He referred to the unit that had infiltrated Armory One, which is now well past the scheduled time for return.

"They may have crushed the harbor, but it's also a weapons factory. If this drags on, we can't maintain this position."

Lee's tone was factual, underscoring the tactical necessity of a swift operation.

It may sound cold, but lingering in this space any longer was not desirable. The mobile suits assaulting them were only increasing, and there was no guarantee the blocked port wouldn't be restored sooner than expected.

"I know that. But if they were likely to fail, I wouldn't have allowed them to take on the mission."

Standing, he caught Lee's questioning gaze and made a decisive move towards the elevator.

"I'll go out and buy us some time. Take command of the ship."

"Yes, sir."

Lee acknowledged, his voice betraying no objection, though internally, he recognized the risk of a commander entering the fray. He picked up the intercom at hand and reported.

"Hangar deck! The Exus is launching! Get ready!"

Soon after, the portside hatch opened, ejecting the red-violet mobile armor, the TS-MA4F Exus. Its sleek, shark-like design boasted railguns underneath and four special weapons modules around the fuselage.

Neo's Exus shot towards the three approaching GuAIZ Rs like a meteor. The enemy units, which had just downed allied Dagger Ls, redirected their fire toward the new threat. Skillfully anticipating their attacks, Neo maneuvered through beams and shells. The weapon modules surrounding his craft dispersed in all directions, launching a barrage from multiple angles.

These were beam gun barrels, an evolved version of those equipped on the Moebius Zero during the last great war. Their small, agile forms were difficult to target, and soon, the GuAIZ Rs were overwhelmed, erupting into flames under the relentless assault.

With this all-direction simultaneous attack capability, even mobile suits weren't necessarily a threat. However, it required outstanding spatial awareness to handle, making it a machine that chose its pilots.

Watching from the bridge as Neo decimated the enemy units with astonishing efficiency, Lee couldn't help but smile wryly to himself. It was clear why Neo couldn't stay confined to the commander's seat—a restless warrior spirit was part of his command style, as much a weapon as the ship and suits under his charge.



Rey could almost feel the heat of Shinn's fury emanating from the white mobile suit ahead. He knew his comrade well—Shinn was instinctive, often reacting physically before mentally, driven by raw emotion rather than calculated response. Witnessing the havoc wreaked by the three stolen units, their blatant display of power seemed designed to provoke and flaunt their dominance. Even the most stoic pilot would be incensed by such brazen aggression.

But Rey's analytical mind wrestled with a deeper question: Why provoke at such a crucial juncture? This blatant challenge couldn't be mere coincidence; it suggested a darker, more strategic intention.

As they pursued, the Chaos abruptly jettisoned a cylindrical unit—the EQFU-15X Flight Unit—directly in their path. Almost synchronously, the Abyss maneuvered into position, its chest opening to reveal a massive cannon complemented by shoulder-mounted railguns. The firepower was staggering, each shot potent enough to obliterate a ZAKU instantly.

This was no time for idle speculation.

Rey and the others quickly scattered, evading the barrage. Meanwhile, the jettisoned flight unit, now behind them and seemingly sentient, darted around in zero-G. It unleashed precise, rapid beams, harrying them relentlessly. This unit was equipped with the DRAGOON system, a sophisticated wartime technology allowing for autonomous, detached operation—a formidable challenge even under normal circumstances.

"These guys are incredible, operating stolen machines so well!"

Shinn's voice crackled through the comm, a mix of awe and frustration. Mastery of the DRAGOON system typically eluded even seasoned pilots; the implications of enemies wielding it were dire.

The machines and their pilots would likely become a fearsome threat to ZAFT in the future.

"If they escape, it's over! We've gotta stop them from getting away!"

Rey declared, his voice steady but tinged with urgency.

"I know that, but...!"

Shinn's reply was cut short as their focus snapped back to the task at hand.

It seemed the enemy's recent flurry was a diversion. Gaining distance, the three units sped toward the PLANT's outer wall. Shinn's Impulse surged forward, with Rey tight on his heels, their machines slicing through space with renewed determination.

"...?!"

Suddenly, Rey tensed. An inexplicable shiver raced down his spine—a fleeting, electric sensation that left him momentarily disoriented.

What was that...?

Checking his controls, he found no mechanical faults; the sensation had vanished as quickly as it appeared, yet a subtle, almost imperceptible pressure lingered, pressing down on him like an unseen weight.

Could it be a physical reaction to the battle's intensity? For both him and Shinn, this was their first real taste of combat. Despite the unnerving experience, Rey recognized there was no room for hesitation or weakness. It was just him and Shinn now—alone, they were the last line of defense against the formidable threat escaping with stolen ZAFT technology.

"It's no use! I'm getting nothing from the control room!"

Bart Heim's strained voice cracked, his failed attempts to reach the factory command center casting a pall over the bridge. Captain Talia Gladys, her dignified presence underscored by her flowing honey-colored hair, frowned deeply at the report.

Communication with the port had been severed following the earlier tremor—likely an external attack. The situation was deteriorating rapidly.

"Gasses have been released from within the factory. There's a level four evacuation warning for all districts from Espace to Ronal," reported Meyrin Hawke, her voice steady despite the grim news. She was working with a separate information system, trying to piece together a broader picture of the chaos unfolding.

Deputy Captain Arthur Trine's voice trembled slightly with urgency.

"Captain... This isn't good, is it? Should they end up getting away..."

Talia's expression soured further. Arthur, though well-meaning, often voiced the painfully obvious, a trait that was becoming increasingly grating under the current stress.

"Heads will roll up top."

Arthur's face fell, his concern palpable. Did he not realize their own positions might also be on the line? Talia made a mental note to push him harder once this crisis was resolved—his mettle needed testing.

Meanwhile, Lunamaria's ZAKU Warrior, plagued by a vernier malfunction, made an emergency landing aboard their ship. Originally assigned to this very vessel, its return felt almost like a premature delivery. On the bridge, Meyrin confirmed the pilot's safety with an anxious edge to her voice—understandable, given Lunamaria was her older sister.

"Still..." Talia murmured, her hand thoughtfully brushing her chin.

"I wonder which unit of theirs executed this daring plan."

On the monitor, the three Second Stage units were seen shaking off Shinn and the others, darting towards the PLANT's outer wall. Common sense pointed to the Earth Alliance as the perpetrators, given the scale and audacity of the operation—stealing new models amidst pre-ceremony chaos, inciting havoc inside the PLANT, and simultaneously assaulting the port. Yet, the skill level displayed by the pilots suggested something more than ordinary Naturals at the controls.

Just then, the elevator doors slid open behind her. Turning sharply, Talia was taken aback to see Chairman Durandal stepping onto the bridge, flanked by his attendants.

"Mr. Chairman?" Her surprise was evident; his presence here was unexpected, to say the least.

She knew he was visiting to attend the launching ceremony and military event, but why come here instead of evacuating?

"What's the situation?! What's going on?!"

Durandal demanded immediately, his handsome features etched with concern.

"As you can see."

Talia gestured towards the chaos displayed on the monitor and quickly briefed him on their current understanding. Inwardly, she braced herself for complications. Durandal had been advised to evacuate due to the gas leak on the surface, yet here he was, defying safety protocols to stand with his crew. As a leader, he insisted on facing the crisis head-on, not from the safety of a shelter.

Chairman Durandal, who had succeeded Siegel Clyne and Eileen Canaver, was a moderate yet pragmatic leader in the council. His background in DNA profile analysis might have seemed removed from the political arena, but his approach to Earth relations and military readiness reflected a deep understanding of both. Talia admired his refusal to flee alone during crises, seeing it as a testament to his leadership—a sentiment that was both public and somewhat personal.

However, the bridge during combat was not the place for political figures, regardless of their virtues. The presence of high-ranking officials, particularly those with irresistible authority, could complicate command decisions, especially when personal nuances were intertwined.

As these thoughts crossed Talia's mind, the monitor flared to life with a sudden bright display. The Gaia unleashed a fierce salvo from its back-mounted cannons and rifles at the outer wall. Shinn's Impulse responded swiftly, launching its beam boomerangs in a desperate intercept attempt, only to see them vaporized by a secondary attack from the Abyss.

"This is bad..."

Durandal's voice, usually composed, carried a note of grim realization.

The Gaia continued its bombardment, and despite Shinn and Rey's efforts, they were thwarted by the strategic maneuvers of the Abyss and Chaos, blocked from effectively countering the assault.

Just then, an urgent transmission broke through from the Impulse.

"Minerva! Send out the Force Silhouette!"

The pilot's voice was tense, underscored by the gravity of the situation.

Deputy Captain Arthur turned to Talia with a look of uncertainty.

"Captain?"

This was their critical moment, a turning point that demanded decisive action. The urgency of the situation weighed heavily on Talia as she assessed their dwindling options. With a firm nod, she responded, "Permission granted. Send it out!"

Arthur, momentarily taken aback by her decisiveness, turned to assess their tactical situation. Talia's gaze shifted to Durandal, her expression serious.

"There's no longer any reason to keep it a secret, is there?"

Durandal, understanding the stakes, shrugged resignedly.

"No..."

With that, Meyrin's voice, slightly flustered but clear, rang out across the bridge.

"Force Silhouette, standby for launch!"

Cagalli stirred gently in Athrun's arm, bringing his attention back to the immediate concern. Inside the ZAKU's cockpit, her eyelashes fluttered open to reveal golden eyes, and Athrun released a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

"Cagalli..."

"A...thrun...?"

Her voice was faint, and a wince crossed her face as she attempted to move.

"Are you okay?"

Athrun's voice was thick with concern.

"Yeah... I'm fine..." she replied with a weak smile, trying to reassure him.

"I'm sorry, I..."

Athrun began, his voice laden with regret for the risks he had taken.

"It's okay. If you hadn't done that, that white Gundam would've been taken out, right?"

Athrun smiled softly, touched by her understanding, and turned his gaze to the monitor, which displayed the grim scene outside. The landscape was littered with the debris of warfare; destroyed GINNs slumped against buildings, their metallic forms eerily still in the aftermath of the battle. This devastation was the work of just three mobile suits, a stark testament to the destructive power they wielded.

Cagalli's expression darkened as she, too, observed the ruin.

"Too much power will lead to another conflict," she murmured, echoing her earlier warnings.

Durandal had countered with, "Power is necessary because there will always be conflict."

The contrasting views haunted Athrun as he considered their current reality. Even he had reclaimed the power he once renounced—not for the sake of conflict, but from the necessity to protect and survive within it. Yet, could this very act invite greater turmoil?

"Athrun... where are we going?"

Cagalli's question pulled him from his reflections.

"The dock area seems safe. Where that new ship is... I saw Chairman Durandal heading there earlier. Let's go there for now, too."

"The Chairman..." Cagalli murmured, recognizing the political complexities their presence entailed.

Amidst the toxic aftermath and the confusion, seeking refuge with Durandal seemed their best option. Durandal could indeed vouch for them, providing a semblance of stability. With the toxic gas leak from the fires, they couldn't thoughtlessly disembark either.

Going a bit further, the bridge section of a battleship moored at the dock came into view above an intact building. That was probably it. The shape of the bridge and the hatches visible on its wings reminded Athrun of a certain ship he had seen before, making him furrow his brow slightly.

Right then, a hatch below the bridge opened, and something was forcefully ejected.

A fighter craft?

"What's that?"

The craft, marked with a distinctive white nose and red wings, streaked toward the sky, its unique rear fuselage a blur. Before Athrun could fully process it, the craft was gone, climbing swiftly into the zenith.

With the situation still unclear, Athrun and Cagalli watched the craft's trajectory fade into the distance, each lost in their thoughts about what lay ahead.

"Damn them...!"

Sting's frustration boiled over as he popped open his weapon pod, targeting the elusive white mobile suit. Missiles streaked through the air, but the enemy dodged effortlessly, laying down a withering barrage from its chest-mounted cannons. The incoming missiles disintegrated before even nearing their target shot down in a futile display.

Auel grunted as he narrowly avoided the white ZAKU Phantom's precise shots.

"Give it a rest...!" he barked, clearly agitated.

"You're being a damn pest!" Sting spat, frustration mounting. They were so close to breaking out.

Behind them, Stella's Gaia continued to hammer the outer wall with her beam cannons, but the thick self-repairing glass of the PLANT's barrier held firm, refusing to yield. As Stella furiously worked to escape, the white mobile suit made a determined advance towards her.

"I won't let you!"

In a desperate bid to protect Stella, Sting detached his weapon pod, coordinating an attack from both flanks. The white suit's response was lightning-fast, its shield up in an instant to block the near-simultaneous beams.

Seizing the moment, Sting charged, using the momentum to swat aside the white suit's enormous laser sword with his shield. The blade snapped, fragments scattering like glass.

Now's my chance!

His beam rifle blazed, firing shot after rapid shot, pressing the attack. But suddenly, the ZAKU Phantom swooped in, shielding the white mobile suit, which seized the moment to pull back.

Just then, something caught Sting's eye—a fighter craft? His focus shifted for a split second, and at that moment, the white suit detached the equipment on its back. The flying object from before swung around, jettisoning a unit onto the machine's rear. It grazed over the white suit's head and sped off, leaving a newly transformed adversary.

"Wha...?!" Sting gasped in disbelief.

The unit unfurled four red wings from the white suit's back, transforming its silhouette. The machine's chest shifted from red to vivid blue, its abdomen to red, as if reborn into an entirely new entity.

The transformed mobile suit surged forward, its verniers blasting. Sting, snapping back to the moment, aimed his beam rifle. But the newly colored suit dodged each shot with an agility that was leagues beyond its previous capabilities, closing the distance with terrifying speed. Sting barely sidestepped the beam saber drawn from its back, groaning in frustration.

"This guy...!"

Auel echoed the sentiment, overwhelmed.

"It swapped equipment?!"

He unleashed the triple beam cannon from his shield in a desperate cover for Sting. But the tricolored mobile suit danced through the barrage effortlessly and charged at the Abyss, shield first, sending it reeling backward with sheer force.

The previous equipment was likely designed for close-quarters combat, while the new gear was premised on high mobility. The concept of swapping equipment to adapt to the situation wasn't unusual in itself. The Dagger L and ZAFT's ZAKU also responded to various battle conditions with additional equipment.

In a sense, that adaptability was the strength of humanoid mobile suits. But they had never seen that change executed in such a refined form.

The reconfigured suit dismissed their coordinated assault and closed in on the Gaia instantly. Stella's voice pierced the chaos, her terror unmistakable.

"Stooooop! Go awaaaaay!" she screamed, her plea echoing amidst the cacophony of battle.

"You're going dooown!"

Shinn bellowed, his Force Silhouette-equipped Impulse surging toward the Gaia with relentless determination. But just as he prepared to strike, the air behind him seared with the heat of intense thermal rays.

The Chaos, now transformed into its mobile armor form, unleashed a devastating barrage from its back-mounted beam cannons and weapon pod beam guns. Shinn braced for impact, but to his surprise, the beams veered away, targeting not him but a crucial point on the outer wall.

The self-repairing glass, already strained under the relentless assault from Gaia, succumbed to the concentrated firepower. It melted and gave way, shattering under the intense heat.

The void of space ripped open before them, the sudden decompression sending everything nearby into chaotic turbulence. Through the gaping hole, he saw the black mobile suit—the Gaia—slip through, seizing the opportunity to escape with the outflowing air. The Chaos and Abyss were quick to follow, their forms blurring past Shin as they darted through the breach.

"Dammit!"

Shinn gnashed his teeth in frustration, the bitter taste of defeat sharp in his mouth. They had finally cornered the enemy, only to watch them slip away through the cracks.

Driven by a mix of rage and desperation rather than pure duty, Shin refused to give up. The power he had just harnessed was not yet spent, and he would not stand to watch it wasted. Tossed about by the violent depressurization, he struggled to stabilize his Impulse.

I absolutely won't let them get away!

With a fierce resolve, Shinn propelled his mobile suit toward the hole in the outer wall.

"Captain!"

Arthur's voice cracked through the tension-filled bridge as he watched Rey's ZAKU Phantom follow the Impulse out of the PLANT.

"They're heading out on their own! The enemy vessel is still outside!"

Before Talia could respond, Meyrin interjected with urgency, "The Impulse's power is getting critically low! 300 left at the most!"

"What?!"

Arthur's complexion drained.

Captain Talia Gladys sighed deeply, feeling the weight of command heavy upon her shoulders. She rose, her posture resolute.

"We can't afford to lose the Impulse too..."

The recklessness of the boys was undeniable yet understandable, given the stakes. They had already sustained significant damage; abandoning them now was not an option.

Her decision was immediate and decisive.

"Launch the Minerva!"

The command reverberated across the bridge, galvanizing the crew into action. With the port destroyed and no reinforcements possible, their only choice was to sortie as an escort.

Chairman Durandal, observing the unfolding drama, exchanged a significant look with Talia. His nod was filled with a mix of approval and sorrow, acknowledging the necessity of her decision.

"I'm counting on you, Talia."

Talia returned the nod with firm resolve and reassumed her seat.

"Commencing Minerva launch sequence. This ship is now switching over to combat status!"

As the launch sequence buzzed to life, Talia turned to Durandal.

"Mr. Chairman, please prepare to disembark."

However, Durandal's response was unexpectedly defiant.

"Talia, under the circumstances, I can't exactly stay behind and wait for a report."

His intention to accompany them was clear, leaving Arthur and others on the bridge visibly stunned. Talia fixed Durandal with a stern glare, her frustration mounting.

"But!"

Durandal's voice was gentle yet firm, his authority resonating even in his calm delivery.

"I have a duty, and I also have the authority. I will go with you. Please permit it."

The implication was clear: even the Chairman's authority did not override the captain's on her ship. While Talia had the power to dismiss him outright, her situation made such a decision complex. She turned back to the controls, releasing a barely audible sigh.

This was exactly why she had reservations about allowing Durandal on the bridge.

"This must be the warship scheduled to launch tomorrow. The Minerva, was it?"

Athrun murmured, guiding the ZAKU into a gentle landing. The hangar around them buzzed with activity as mobile suits and personnel hurried about, too preoccupied to notice their arrival. Cagalli's injury remained Athrun's immediate concern; he had managed to stop the bleeding, but she urgently needed medical attention. After securing care for her, finding Chairman Durandal was next on his list.

He maneuvered the ZAKU inside, popped open the hatch, and helped Cagalli disembark. She winced, her balance faltering as she touched down onto the hangar floor.

"Are you okay? We'll get you-"

Athrun began, his attention fixed on supporting her.

"You two, don't move!" A sharp command cut through the din, freezing Athrun in his tracks.

Spinning around, he was met with the sight of a red-haired girl in an equally red ZAFT uniform, her pistol trained on them. Armed soldiers quickly flanked her, their weapons also aimed at Athrun and Cagalli. Instinctively, Athrun stepped in front of Cagalli, shielding her with his body as an announcement reverberated through the ship.

"This ship is about to take off. All units, please proceed to your stations."

Launch? - Amid the stir, even Athrun couldn't help but react to those words. Wasn't this ship still pre-launch?



"Don't move!"

The red-uniformed girl reiterated, her focus snapping back to Athrun, her voice betraying a flicker of uncertainty amidst the sudden shipwide alert.

Athrun and the others, literal outsiders, had brazenly boarded a ZAKU and entered a military vessel.

"Who are you people? You're not with the military, are you? What were you doing in that machine?!"

The girl fired off questions in quick succession. She seemed quite agitated - and as Athrun thought that, he realized another reason for their wariness of him and the others. It was right after outsiders like them had hijacked ZAFT's mobile suits.

"Uh..." Cagalli attempted to speak, visibly flustered.

Athrun quickly interjected, his voice calm yet commanding as he addressed the encircling soldiers.

"Lower your guns. This is Cagalli Yula Athha, Chief Representative of the Orb Union."

The declaration caused a stir. The red-haired girl hesitated, her weapon lowering slightly as murmurs rippled through the ranks.

"I'm her attendant, Alex Dino. We were caught up in the commotion during a meeting with Chairman Durandal and unable to escape, had no choice but to borrow the machine to defend ourselves."

"Athha... of Orb?" The girl echoed, skepticism lining her voice as she weighed his words.

If they were indeed VIPs, it placed the soldiers in a delicate position—having to balance caution with protocol until the veracity of Athrun's claims could be verified. Seizing the moment, Athrun pressed on, his tone firm.

"The Representative has been injured! I understand that the Chairman has also boarded this ship. I'd like to see him!"

The soldiers exchanged uneasy glances, the weight of Athrun's demands and their potential implications hanging heavily in the air.

After driving back the enemy mobile suits, Neo Roanoke steered the Exus toward Armory One. Officially, his mission was to ascertain the outcome of the infiltration team he had dispatched. Knowing his subordinates' capabilities well, Neo doubted they had failed; rather, he suspected some unforeseen complication had arisen.

Approaching the PLANT's outer wall, he synchronized the Exus' speed with that of the massive structure and shut down the engines. The mobile armor settled against the wall silently, resembling a colossal remora attached to the vast body of the PLANT.

From his vantage point, Neo observed intense activity: beams erupted from a section of the PLANT, and a black mobile suit burst through the newly formed breach, quickly followed by two others.

"That must be the team," he thought with a mix of relief and anticipation. Although delayed, it appeared they had ultimately fulfilled their objective.

However, as he continued to watch, another figure emerged from the same hole—a striking mobile suit with four expansive wings unfolding from its back, its chassis predominantly white.

A fourth new model!

The realization struck Neo with both surprise and a twinge of self-reproach.

"I see. I guess this was a mistake on my part."

His fingers moved swiftly over a keyboard, setting up a laser communication link to the Girty Lue. In the battlefield environment, hampered by N-Jammers that disrupted wireless communications, laser links were the most reliable means of sending secure messages.

Neo reactivated the Exus' engines. He skillfully manipulated the thrusters, causing the mobile armor to detach smoothly from the PLANT's wall. The Exus gained momentum swiftly, its engines humming as it accelerated directly towards the new, white mobile suit.

The moment Shinn's Impulse shot out of Armory One, the vast abyss of space swallowed him whole. Disoriented, he briefly lost his bearings as the forceful outflow of air swept his machine into the void. Frantically toggling through his monitors, Shinn searched in vain for any sign of the enemy units.

"Damn! Where'd they go?!"

His frustration mounted as he fired his verniers, darting through space in a desperate attempt to pick up their trail.

"Shinn! Retreat for now. This is just reckless!"

Rey's calm voice crackled through the comm, his white ZAKU Phantom drawing closer after having followed Shinn into the fray.

"Ngh...!"

Shinn gritted his teeth, hating to admit it but knowing Rey was right. Aimlessly flying through the vast, dark expanse of space, especially with radar compromised by N-Jammers, was futile.

Just as he was about to concede and pull back, Rey's ZAKU Phantom abruptly accelerated.

"Shinn!"

"Huh?"

Shinn turned, startled by his comrade's sudden movement. A flicker of white light at the periphery of his vision made him whip his head around just in time to see Rey interposing his ZAKU, shielding Shinn from a lethal beam cannon shot. Another beam grazed the Impulse, a near miss that would have been fatal had Rey not intervened.

Adrenaline surged through Shinn as he scanned the area; his senses heightened. The beams had seemed to come from nowhere, fired from different directions simultaneously.

"From where?!" Shinn exclaimed, bewildered, as a red-violet mobile armor streaked towards him like an arrow.

A mobile armor?!

This unknown attacker unleashed railgun fire from its underside as it zoomed past the Impulse. Shinn wheeled around to return fire with his beam rifle, only to be met with another barrage from a completely different direction.

There are more enemies?!

His mind raced to locate any sign of the attackers, but no silhouettes were visible. Instead, another volley of beams from all four cardinal points assaulted him. He executed a sharp turn, narrowly evading the deadly lines of fire. In the fleeting moment before he dodged, Shinn caught sight of very small, fast-moving objects—beam cannon-equipped weapon pods reminiscent of DRAGOONS, likely part of the mobile armor's arsenal.

Intercepting these agile weapon pods in the dark void of space was nearly impossible. They flitted about, firing beams in rapid succession. Shinn raised his shield just in time and responded with his beam rifle, but by the time his beams cut through space, the pods had vanished. The relentless assault from all directions threw Shinn into utter disarray.

Suddenly, one pod darted directly in front of him, aiming a beam straight at the cockpit—certain doom was milliseconds away. But once again, Rey's white ZAKU Phantom intervened, shielding Shinn at the critical moment.

His voice edged with panic and frustration, cut through the chaos.

"What are you doing?! If you fly absentmindedly, you're no better than a target!"

"Now, I think I'll have that machine as well!"

Neo declared, his tone confident as he expertly manipulated the beam gun barrels. He had the new model mobile suit nearly cornered, each movement calculated to cut off any escape. Just as victory seemed certain, the white ZAKU Phantom intervened, its actions unnervingly precise.

Neo paused, a flicker of doubt crossing his mind. There was an odd fluidity to the Phantom's movements, almost as if the pilot had anticipated the aim of his high-speed beam gun barrels. Reflecting on the earlier phase of the battle, Neo realized that the Phantom had seemed to predict his initial attack as well. At that time, the pilot shouldn't have known about the barrels' existence, let alone their capability. Beam weapons were near instantaneous; predicting their path was theoretically impossible.

Yet, the ZAKU Phantom's pilot had now disrupted Neo's aim twice. Was it merely a coincidence?

At that moment—

"This enemy's not like any other!"

The voice wasn't just through the comm; it felt as though it resonated within him, a strange echo that seemed almost to vibrate through every cell of his body.

"What the?!"

Neo exclaimed, his confusion spiked with a surge of curiosity. Pushing aside his initial astonishment, he refocused and intensified his barrage

toward the ZAKU Phantom. But with uncanny agility, the Phantom dodged every beam, weaving through the laser fire like a specter. In a deft counterattack, it targeted and successfully destroyed one of Neo's gun barrels with its beam assault rifle.

Indeed. This enemy is no ordinary foe.

"Message for all hands at system control. As of this moment, LHM-BB01 Minerva's classification code has been validated. The Minerva is currently going through its emergency launch sequence. A55M6 warning alarm activated. All dock damage control teams, remain on standby."

As the automated voice echoed throughout the ship, the hangar bustled with activity. Maintenance cables disengaged with a series of mechanical clicks, and the massive dock cranes retracted, clearing the space around the warship. Below the Minerva, the dock floor began its slow, deliberate opening. The large hatch yawned wide, revealing the void of space beneath. Simultaneously, the massive walls that had secured the ship slid downward, vanishing into the dock structure.

As the Minerva glided forward into the launch gate, the hatch above methodically closed, sealing the ship inside. Moments later, a hiss resonated through the ship as the gate interior depressurized, preparing the Minerva for the vacuum of space.

"Launch gate depressurization complete. We're ready to go any time."

Receiving Arthur's report, Talia raised her voice.

"Start engines! The Minerva is taking off!"

The hatch below the hull opened, exposing the Minerva to the starry expanse. The mooring hooks released with a definitive clunk, and under the gentle push of inertia, the ship began its descent into the cosmos.

The Minerva, without the fanfare of its planned launching ceremony, ventured forth into the vast sea of stars, not knowing how long this voyage would last.

Inside that Minerva, the duo were led through the ship's passages by the red-uniformed girl - who introduced herself as Lunamaria Hawke.

Cagalli, sensing the urgency of their situation, couldn't contain her concern any longer.

"Is this ship escaping? Is the damage to the PLANT that horrendous?"

Lunamaria glanced back over her shoulder, her expression unreadable, and chose not to answer.

The passage was lined with armed soldiers, ostensibly for their protection, but Athrun felt more scrutinized than safeguarded.

As they continued down the corridor, an alarm suddenly blared throughout the ship, piercing the heavy silence.

"Condition Red issued! Condition Red issued! All pilots assemble in the briefing room immediately."

Athrun's heart sank as he deciphered the implications of the announcement. This was no evacuation. The stark reality of Condition Red meant only one thing—battle readiness. Turning to Lunamaria, he demanded confirmation, his voice sharp with urgency.

"Is this ship taking off to go into battle?!"

Lunamaria's face twisted with perplexity, hinting that she might be as in the dark about the specifics as they were. Cagalli, catching the serious tone in Athrun's voice, looked at him with wide, anxious eyes.

"Athrun..."

At the mention of his name, Lunamaria's reaction was instant.

"Athrun?"

She echoed, her tone shifting.

Realizing her slip, Cagalli clapped a hand over her mouth. Amid the whirlwind of emergencies, she had forgotten to use Athrun's alias. As Lunamaria's gaze sharpened with renewed curiosity and perhaps recognition, Athrun met her eyes, acknowledging the unintended revelation.

As soon as the *Minerva* cleared the dock, Captain Talia Gladys snapped into action. This was no leisurely maiden voyage but a dive into immediate combat.

"Find the enemy position quickly! Where are the *Impulse* and the *ZAKU*?"

Bart, who was manning the detection systems, responded with urgency.

"One unidentified ship at Indigo 53, Mark 22, Bravo! Distance 150!"

"Close," Durandal muttered from behind.

"That must be their mother ship."

"Log the vessel into our database. From now on, we'll refer to it as *Bogey One*."

Talia instructed, assigning a codename to the unknown ship using the designation 'bogey' to mark it clearly as an enemy.

Meyrin, responsible for mobile suit control, suddenly voiced out, her tone laced with panic, "*I-Impulse* and *ZAKU* located at 157, Mark 80, Alpha! They appear to be involved in a battle!"

"Can you hail them?" Talia asked quickly, her brow furrowed in concern.

"No, ma'am. It's impossible with all the radio interference."

"How many enemies?"

It could be the three units from earlier, or enemy reinforcements might be present. But Meyrin returned with an unexpected answer.

"One unit. However, it is a mobile armor!"

Meyrin's reply brought a mix of feelings—relief that it wasn't the trio of formidable units but disappointment that they might already be out of reach.

The possibility of retrieval had drastically decreased. But at least against a single mobile armor, the *Impulse* and *ZAKU Phantom* shouldn't fall behind.

Talia's initial relief was short-lived as the monitor displayed a dire scene. Beams crisscrossed around Rey's *ZAKU Phantom*, which dodged with agile

corkscrews. Shinn's Impulse, drawing its beam saber to engage, was instead bombarded with beams, barely managing to defend with its shield.

"Shouldn't the enemy be just one unit...?"

Arthur's voice broke through, his astonishment evident at the overwhelming firepower directed at their pilots. The reality was stark—despite facing a single mobile armor, the situation was dire. With the Impulse's energy dwindling, there was no time to mourn the potentially lost units. Immediate action was crucial.

"We'll attack Bogey One!" Talia decisively commanded, then rapidly issued further orders.

"Lower the bridge! Course, Indigo, Delta. Accelerate 20 percent. Prepare to fire signal flares and anti-beam depth charges! Arthur, what are you doing?!"

The bridge lowered into combat position, linking directly to the combat information center. As Talia prodded Arthur, who had momentarily frozen, he sprang into action.

"Wha- y-yes, ma'am! Load launcher eight, numbers one through four, with Neidhardt!"

Scrambling into his assigned seat, Arthur began issuing instructions.

This bridge shutter system allowed for smooth transition to combat status while also protecting the defenseless bridge located at the ship's bow.

"Activate Tristan one and two! Activate Isolde! Target: Bogey One!"

As the weapon systems started up one after another, Durandal called out to Talia from behind.

"Shouldn't our priority be to rescue them. Captain?"

Talia turned, a trace of exasperation hidden by her composed facade.

Did he not understand that they couldn't just fire the ship's guns wildly to provide support in a mobile suit battle?

"That's right," she affirmed, her tone measured.

"That's why we're attacking the mothership. In this situation, the quickest way to save them is to push the enemy away."

"A battleship?"

Neo murmured, his eyes narrowing as he noticed the light gray battleship maneuvering around Armory One.

Had the port been restored?

Up until now, the tide of battle had overwhelmingly favored Neo. However, his focus wavered as the battleship appeared, providing just enough distraction for the ZAKU Phantom to shoot down another of his beam gun barrels.

"Tch... Try to take too much, and we could lose everything, I guess."

Neo knew there was a time to quit while he was ahead. Without wasting further time, he decisively turned his machine around. The suddenness of his retreat caught the two pursuing mobile suits off guard. They faltered, unable

to react quickly enough as Neo rapidly increased the distance between them.

As he retreated, his mind lingered on the encounter with the ZAKU Phantom. The unit's mobility was extraordinary, far surpassing that of conventional mass-production models. It was the first machine that had managed to match the pace of his Exus, almost anticipating his maneuvers. And there was that voice he had heard briefly during the battle—was it possible that the pilot's capabilities were as exceptional as the machine itself?

Neo contemplated this as he steered towards the Girty Lue, but he decided to defer any firm conclusions for later.

The relentless beams that had barraged Shinn suddenly ceased, leaving a sudden quiet that was filled only by the sound of his heavy breathing. The battle had been so fierce, it was only in the sudden stillness that Shinn became fully aware of his own ragged breaths.

Huh...?

Looking around in surprise, Shinn stared blankly at the spot where the enemy machine had been—a now distant, shrinking point of light against the vast backdrop of space. Why had the mobile armor suddenly fled, especially when it seemed to have the upper hand?

His answer came swiftly as a massive silhouette emerged from a different vector in space.

"The Minerva!"

Shinn's eyes widened in recognition. The ship, which had yet to complete its launching ceremony, was advancing towards the battlefield. It was clear now—the enemy had seen the approaching Minerva and chosen to retreat.

Just then, a bright signal flare burst from the direction of the Minerva. Shinn's heart sank.

"A retreat signal?! Why?!"

His voice was a mix of confusion and frustration as he grappled with the abrupt order.

"It's an order," came Rey's voice.

Blunt as ever. He was strict about orders and regulations, and it was typical of him to admonish Shinn, who tended to deviate from them at times.

Reluctantly, Shinn throttled his machine in the direction of the mothership, following Rey's lead. The fact that Rey seemed unfazed and not even out of breath only added to Shinn's irritation.

"Heat source approaching! Possible battleship. Classification unknown! Red 53, Mark 80, Delta."

The operator's alert reverberated through the bridge as an unfamiliar ship configuration flashed onto the monitor.

Ian Lee leaned forward, scrutinizing the image.

"Is that the rumored new model ship? Fifteen to starboard, accelerate 30 percent. Activate Igelstellungen!"

His commands came swiftly, expecting an imminent attack.

"Where's the Exus?!"

Although rhetorical, his question was promptly answered as the distinctive red-violet mobile armor made its appearance, darting toward them.

From Lee's perspective, Neo had his whimsical side but was by no means a fool.

Multiple missiles streaked from the enemy ship's port side.

"Evade!" Lee commanded.

The 75mm Igelstellungen close-in weapon system turrets on the ship's underside sprang to action, intercepting and destroying the incoming missiles. A final missile, slipping through the barrage, was obliterated at point-blank range, the blast shaking the ship violently.

Amid the chaos, the Exus landed on the deck, weaving through the crossfire with astonishing agility. Even Lee, familiar with his superior's skills, marveled at Neo's piloting finesse.

The moment the mobile armor touched down, Neo's voice cut through the din.

"We're withdrawing, Lee!"

He had been waiting for those words.

Lee ordered the helmsman.

"Come about, engines to maximum!"

There was a brief interval before the second wave. The enemy ship took in its own mobile suits, fired its main guns, and launched more missiles.

"Commander!"

The bridge crew called out as Neo stepped from the elevator, his presence instantly commanding attention.

"Sorry. Guess I got carried away."

Neo apologized, his tone devoid of regret. Lee held his tongue; this was not the time for recriminations.

"Enemy ship still approaching! Blue zero, distance 110!"

The operator's update brought everyone's focus back to the screens.

"It appears to be an awfully fast vessel. This could be trouble." Lee muttered, just as another warning rang out.

"Missiles approaching!"

"Starboard rudder! Evade!"

The aft Igelstellung swatted down the missiles, trying to latch onto the ship's stern one after another. As the ship rocked as if thrust upward by the nearby explosions, Neo yelled in a rough tone.

"Detach extra propellant tanks from both sides and detonate them! No need to separate the arms! Let them have a taste of that."

Lee stared up at his superior's mask-covered face, stunned. It was a tactic he never would have thought of. In a clear voice one would never imagine from his usual airy demeanor, Neo commanded:



"Meanwhile, raise bow 35, turn 10 to port, maximum thrust!"

"We'll strike Bogey One in one go like this! Course heading Yellow Alpha."

Back on the Minerva, Talia echoed the sentiment of aggression, directing her crew as the Minerva advanced, firing its XM47 Tristan guns. The enemy ship revealed as a blue-gray battleship, tried to escape but couldn't match their speed. They couldn't let it escape while carrying those three units.

Staring at the monitor with a sense of urgency, the structures jutting out from both sides of Bogey One swayed and detached from the main body.

"Bogey One has detached a section of its hull!"

Initially, Talia considered it a maneuver to shed weight and increase speed. However, as the detached structures, equipped with nozzle-like protrusions and encircled by tanks, drifted towards them, a grim realization dawned on her.

"!!"

Talia's sharp command sliced through the air.

"Belay firing! 10 to starboard! Maximum thrust!"

Helmsman Malik Yardbirds executed the order, turning the rudder sharply, but their response was a fraction too late. The tanks on the detached structures expanded ominously and detonated right before the ship, engulfing the Minerva in a blinding explosion.

The bridge was swallowed by a turbulent whiteout, the ship trembling violently under the impact. Meyrin's scream pierced the air, and Talia, gripping her seat tightly, felt a sinking feeling as she faced the cunning of their adversary.

They got us!

What the enemy had detached were auxiliary propulsion units. The tanks must have been filled to the brim with propellant. To think they would slam those into them like naval mines!

Talia was convinced. Whoever was on that ship was no easy opponent.

Shinn climbed out of the cockpit, his expression etched with bitterness. Vino and Yolant called out to him as they noticed his arrival, but he was in no mood to humor them. His body was weary, his muscles aching from the relentless tension of the battle, but it was his nerves that truly felt frayed.

We lost, he thought grimly. He had witnessed the fall of his comrades, yet despite his efforts, he couldn't reclaim even a single one of their units. To make matters worse, he had been outmaneuvered by just a single mobile armor—an outdated weapon, albeit equipped with formidable armaments.

With these heavy thoughts, Shinn made his way toward the pilot locker. As he walked, his gaze inadvertently caught on a ZAKU Warrior, its left arm gruesomely destroyed. It seemed to be the same unit that had shielded him during the battle. Was that pilot also aboard the Minerva?

Lost in his thoughts, he was jolted back to reality by a sudden, violent shudder that coursed through the ship.

"What the?!"

"We're hit?!"

The corridor echoed with the startled cries of the crew.

Equipment and personal belongings, unmoored by the impact, floated chaotically in the zero-gravity environment. Panic began to ripple through the technical staff as they scrambled to secure the floating objects.

"Bridge! What's going on?!"

Rey shouted, having just disembarked from his own unit. He grabbed the intercom, his voice urgent, but there was no response. The communication lines seemed dead. Frustrated, he threw aside the receiver and stormed toward the bridge.

"Dammit!"

Shinn's voice cracked with anger, a fiery resurgence burning in his eyes. The momentary thought of retreat vanished as quickly as it had appeared. With a renewed sense of urgency, he vaulted back into the cockpit he had just vacated.

"All stations: damage reports immediately!"

Arthur's voice echoed urgently through the comm system as Talia, focused and stern, turned to her detection officer.

"Bart. What's the enemy ship's position?"

"Wait one moment, I still haven't..."

Bart's fingers flew over his console, the monitors flickering in response to the previous explosion that had rocked the Minerva.

Without waiting for a solid answer, Talia preemptively issued her next set of commands.

"Activate CIWS, fire anti-beam depth charges! They'll be firing at us next."

She probably never imagined suddenly finding herself in such a hellish situation. Meyrin looked on the verge of tears.

The enemy was sure to take advantage of this opening and counterattack - but Talia's prediction was betrayed by Bart's report.

"Found it! Red 88, Mark 6, Charlie! Distance 500!"

Realizing what those coordinates meant, Arthur cried out in blank amazement.

"Did they get away?!"

The bridge was filled with low murmurs of concern and confusion as the crew tried to understand the implications.

At that moment, Rey Za Burrel entered the bridge, presumably to assess the situation himself. His eyes widened in surprise upon spotting an unexpected figure.

"Mr. Chairman?!"

Talia exhaled sharply, her frustration palpable as she slumped back in her command seat.

"The nerve! Trying something like this to get away!"

Durandal, seated unassumingly at the back of the bridge, added thoughtfully, "Seems to be one tough unit we're facing."

Talia swung around to face him, her expression tight with resolve.

"All the more reason why we mustn't let them get away. If such a team gained the use of those machines..."

"Yes..."

Durandal's expression also darkened at that concern.

Among the provisions set by the Junius Treaty were clauses related to the number of mobile suits each nation could possess. It stipulated limits on the number of battleships, mobile suits, and mobile armors each nation could maintain based on their national strength. The national strength mentioned here was calculated from several parameters, such as population and GNP, meaning nations with higher "national strength" could have more weapons. Named the Lindemann Plan after its proposer, this clause favored the populous superpowers - dare one say, the Atlantic Federation. The PLANTs had initially objected to this plan. They grudgingly accepted it because the treaty signing was held at Junius Seven, the site of past tragedy, as the PLANTs had hoped, and because they had unshakable confidence in their own technological prowess.

If the number of mobile suits they could possess was limited, they simply had to raise the performance of each individual unit. It was with that concept that the ZAKU and the Second Stage series, starting with the Chaos, were developed. As for the Impulse, it was an attempt to give a single unit the combat capabilities of multiple machines by swapping equipment. Literally a machine worth a thousand, that was the Impulse, along with the Chaos, Gaia, and Abyss. That's why those three units being stolen and falling into enemy hands would cause more than just the risk of intelligence leaks. In the worst case, it could drastically upset the balance of power between the two militaries.

Talia fully understood the gravity of the situation.

She met Durandal's gaze again and presented her opinion in a concise tone.

"At this point, it's too late to have you disembark, and I believe it is best that we continue our pursuit of that ship. What is your opinion on this, Mr. Chairman?"

Durandal, who had been listening intently with a stern expression, suddenly softened his demeanor with a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry about me, Captain."

His smile quickly faded, replaced by a serious tone.

"Judging from that firepower, it scares me to think of the level of attacks we'd be subject to later if we let them go now. Right now, our top priority is to capture them or to destroy them."

"Thank you very much."

Having gained his assent, Talia felt a faint elation as she turned forward again. Their anxious faces reflected the tension in the air.

She quickly checked in with Bart, "Still have a trace on them?"

As if he had been waiting, Bart immediately replied.

"We can still go after them!"

"Then this ship will resume its pursuit of Bogey One! Course Yellow Alpha! Engines to maximum!"

As Talia issued the order, a renewed sense of purpose electrified the bridge.

"Attention all hands. This ship is commencing pursuit of Bogey One!"

The crew sprang into action, and Arthur began a shipwide announcement. His face clearly showed an expression of "this has turned into a real mess."

"Due to a sudden change in circumstances, this has become our maiden voyage, but the ship will be on an extremely crucial mission. All hands, this is your opportunity to show what progress you've made during the daily training sessions."

In the meantime, Talia lowered the alert level to yellow and reopened the bridge shutter. As the bridge rose, she allowed herself a brief moment of respite, sharing a knowing smile with Durandal.

"Mr. Chairman. Please use the Captain's quarters to get some rest. The Minerva prides itself on its speed, but the enemy vessel is also fast. I don't imagine much will happen right away. Rey. Please, show him to his quarters."

Rey acknowledged with a crisp, "Yes, ma'am!" and snapped a polite salute to Durandal.

"Thank you."

Durandal's response was a warm smile, a brief thaw in the icy tension that clung to the air. Talia caught the familiarity in their exchange and a flicker of relief passed through her; Durandal was a reasonable man. Hey should be able to weather this storm, she mused, just as an internal communication punctured her thoughts.

"Captain."

The monitor showed Lunamaria, the other pilot. Talia's heart sank; trouble was never far behind such tones.

"What is it?"

"Due to the battle, I was delayed in informing you about a situation."

The red-uniformed girl reported in a boyish, efficient tone.

"During take off, we found two civilians in the hangar aboard a ZAKU."

"What?"

This had turned troublesome. Even though this ship was heading into battle - as Talia thought that, unbelievable words reached her ears.

"We detained the two and found that one is Representative Cagalli Yula Athha of the Orb Union, and the other claims to be her attendant. They requested medical attention

and a meeting with Chairman Durandal."

"From Orb?!"

The astonishment was clear in Talia's voice, mirroring the disbelief that marred Durandal's features as he halted his steps toward the elevator.

"I acted on my own and arranged for the necessary medical care, and they are currently resting in the officers' quarters."

Her instincts had been right; trouble had indeed boarded the *Minerva* with them. Talia felt an urge to hold her head in her hands. Really, one crisis after another! Three mobile suits were stolen, Armory One was wrecked, and the ship launched without any ceremony. And now, letting the enemy slip through their fingers was dwarfed by the new dilemma: the princess of Orb had come aboard. Managing one head of state was daunting enough for any battleship!

In the dimly lit room, the only sounds were the faint whirring of motors and the low, murmured conversations of dedicated staff. At the far end, behind a sleek console, Neo peered into the shadowed corners where three circular beds were arranged in a cloverleaf pattern. Under the translucent dome-shaped glass covers, his cherished subordinates, Sting, Auel, and Stella, lay in innocent repose.

Indeed, their sleeping faces were innocent and adorable like young children. As if they had yet to know any of this world's worries or fears.

"Yes. Forget all the bad things," Neo whispered silently to them and left that room.

Stepping onto the bridge, Captain Ian Lee caught his eye, a flicker of anticipation in his expression. "It looks like we've succeeded," he stated, an unspoken question hanging between them.

Neo positioned himself behind his designated seat, his posture relaxed yet alert.

"How much longer till we reach point B?"

"About two hours."

The operator answered, and Lee stared at Neo probingly.

"Do you think they will come after us?"

"Hard to say."

Neo replied readily.

"Because it's hard to say, so we should assume they will and continue along our planned route. One should always assume the worst, right? Especially on the battlefield."

Lee's grunt of agreement was low and grudging. Despite his reserved demeanor, Neo had found an unexpected compatibility with the captain. It might have been a one-sided perception, but it was a dynamic that worked.

Lee, driven by a sense of duty, broached another topic.

"How about their recovery?"

"They appear to be fine. They're sleeping like babies."

Neo responded, the image of their peaceful faces fresh in his mind. He remembered the maintenance room, where the pilots underwent 'maintenance'—a term clinically devoid of emotion, much like how mechanics tended to mobile suits post-battle.

The more precisely something was built, the more care it required to demonstrate its full performance.

Initially, the art of piloting a mobile suit was a skill that eluded Naturals, requiring the superlative reflexes and robust physical capacities inherent to Coordinators. When the Earth Alliance forces recognized the dominance of this novel armament introduced by their adversaries, their attempts to replicate such prowess met with significant hurdles. The endeavor to train Naturals to pilot mobile suits was ultimately realized through enhancements to the operating system. However, a covert and more radical strategy was simultaneously pursued: engineering the pilots themselves.

These were not ordinary pilots but enhanced humans, crafted to embody the prowess of Coordinators. Unburdened by fear or doubt on the battlefield, these warriors possessed physical capacities that rivaled their engineered counterparts. Among them, Sting and his comrades represented the zenith of this project: individuals who, through hypnotic suggestion, had their fear of mortality erased and their innate capabilities amplified to surpass even the Coordinators. They were the epitome of ultimate pilots.

"However, I'm a little concerned that Auel used the block word on Stella. I find that somewhat distressing."

Neo confessed, referring to a report from the staff dedicated to their oversight.

Each of these enhanced individuals was burdened with 'forbidden words'—specific triggers ingrained to unravel the fabric of their conditioning. For Stella, the utterance of 'death' could shatter the illusion of invincibility carefully woven around her psyche. This forbidden word had the power to resurrect the suppressed terror of mortality, a fear meticulously erased during their sleep. The therapeutic bed they rested in bathed their minds in soothing images and melodies, purging not only fear but all residual memories that might impair their performance in upcoming sorties. This 'maintenance' was crucial in preserving their psychological edge as optimal combatants.

Lee's response came with a hint of scorn.

"Pilots that need to be returned to the cradle whenever something happens? Does the lab really believe they can be of use to us?"

It was clear Lee harbored reservations—not necessarily about the pilots themselves, but perhaps about the creators of such beings. In an effort to smooth over the tension, Neo argued, "But they're a lot better than the previous group, don't you think? They fully understand what we tell them and the work they're given."

Indeed, the trial of enhanced humans in the last great war had seen pilots augmented through implants and drugs that elevated their physical abilities to match those of Coordinators. Their combat skills were formidable, yet the drugs had obliterated not just their fear but their capacity for sound judgment, rendering them unreliable. Sting and his group, however, products of meticulous refinement, managed to retain their cognitive functions—

though Stella occasionally displayed quirks that seemed inherent to her character.

To Neo, they were akin to mischievous adolescents, merely requiring a bit more finesse in handling—wasn't that characteristic of all young individuals? He saw this as a significant improvement, though Lee clearly disagreed, his disdain as palpable as if he'd tasted something bitter. Attempting to pacify his captain, Neo offered, "It can't be helped. We're still in the trial stages in many regards. This ship, the mobile suits, our pilots, and the world."

Lee nodded, seemingly convincing himself.

"Yes, I understand."

"The day will eventually come, when everything will begin in the true sense."

Neo affirmed with a hopeful smile, meeting Lee's gaze.

"Under our name."

Despite the lightness in his voice, Neo's smile, partially obscured by his inorganic mask, carried a somehow inhuman coldness.

## Phase.02

"I don't have the words to express my regret for involving you in this unfortunate situation. However, Princess, please understand our position."

Durandal's silky voice carried a hint of genuine remorse. Behind him stood Talia Gladys, the Minerva's stoic captain, her face an impenetrable mask of professionalism.

Finally ushered into the captain's quarters, its polished surfaces reflecting the tension in the room, Athrun and Cagalli found themselves face-to-face with the Chairman. While this encounter dispelled any lingering doubts about their identities, Athrun felt his heart sank. He knew all too well that this ship was battle-bound. In their desperate quest to secure sanctuary for Cagalli, they had unwittingly stumbled into the eye of the storm. It felt like a cruel cosmic jest, as if fate itself conspired against them, each roll of the celestial dice landing on the most calamitous outcome imaginable.

Cagalli, her head enshrouded in stark white bandages that stood out against her ashen complexion, sat before Durandal. Though physically present, her mind whirled like a tempest, consumed by concerns that diverged sharply from Athrun's immediate fears.

"Don't you know anything about that enemy unit yet?"

The question erupted from her lips, sharp and urgent.

Durandal's response came haltingly, each word measured and cautious.

"Ah, well... I guess not. We still have no information, not even on their carrier."

This carefully worded reply likely concealed a web of suspicions about the perpetrators but lacked the concrete evidence required to make any definitive pronouncements.

"However, that's all the more reason why we must take control of the situation as soon as possible," Durandal pressed, his tone grave. "Before it becomes too late."

"Yeah. I understand. That's pretty obvious, Mr. Chairman." Cagalli nodded, her face a canvas of barely contained frustration and worry.

"Right now, we must do everything we can to avoid upsetting the still fragile state of our world! No matter what!"

Her hands clasped tightly, almost prayer-like, on her lap.

Athrun and Cagalli were acutely aware of the precarious balance – the world teetered on a razor's edge, where the slightest provocation could cause this peace to come crashing down. For the past two years, both the PLANTs and Earth had poured their resources into recovery, prioritizing healing the wounds of the last great conflagration. Beneath the veneer of



peace, they had silently agreed to a wary détente, each avoiding overt interference with the other. But now, Athrun and Cagalli, steeped in the murky waters of international intrigue, could sense with alarming clarity that the stagnant currents were beginning to churn, searching for a violent outlet.

Hearing Cagalli's impassioned words, Durandal's face suddenly illuminated as if struck by a ray of hope in the gathering gloom.

"Thank you very much. I believed that you, Princess, would view the situation in that way."

The latter half of his statement, directed at Athrun, caught him off-guard, a discordant note in the tense atmosphere.

Was this man's cordiality so boundless as to extend even to a mere attendant? The question nagged at Athrun's mind.

"If you'd like, I'd like to give you a tour of our ship while there's still time."

At this unexpected proposal, Captain Gladys visibly stiffened, her composure cracking for a moment.

"Mr. Chairman!"

She uttered a low, urgent warning, keenly aware of Cagalli's presence. This was, after all, ZAFT's pinnacle of naval engineering, a warship bristling with classified technology. Even to Athrun's discerning eye, the Chairman's offer seemed recklessly cavalier.

But Durandal remained unflappable.

"Although it's temporary, we are asking them to put their lives in our hands. This is the least that our nation can do for our allies, in good faith."

Gladys found herself cornered. To refuse now would be tantamount to casting doubt on the very foundation of their alliance.

Athrun's bewilderment deepened, his mind racing to decipher Durandal's true intentions. Was the Chairman simply naïve, a political ingenué blundering through diplomatic minefields? Or did a more Machiavellian design lurk beneath his affable exterior?

In the hangar, disbelief echoed.

"I still can't wrap my head around this! It's like some twisted joke," Vino exclaimed, peering into the red ZAKU Warrior's cockpit.

"Yeah..." Youlant muttered, his fingers dancing across a keyboard.

"How'd we end up here so suddenly?" Vino turned to his colleague, who exhaled heavily, the weight of their situation evident in his slumped shoulders. The crew was still reeling from being hurled into the crucible of combat before the ship had even been officially christened. For green recruits like Vino and Youlant, this would be their baptism by fire.

"But surely... this doesn't mean we're heading straight into another war... right?" Vino lowered his voice, seeking reassurance.

Youlant shrugged. "...I'd like to think not."

Shinn caught their exchange as he crossed the hangar. War – the very thought darkened his eyes.

Who'd want to relive that hell? And yet, he couldn't fathom the intentions of the enemy unit that had infiltrated their territory, stolen those mobile suits, and wreaked such havoc. Did they really think they could get away with such actions? Or did they simply not care about igniting another conflict?

As these thoughts churned in his mind, his gaze once again fell on the ZAKU, missing its left arm. On impulse, Shinn called out to Vino and Youlant.

"Hey, who piloted that ZAKU?"

It galled him to admit it, but his life had been saved. He should at least thank the pilot.

But Vino and Youlant just shook their heads, puzzled. Then, a voice chimed in from behind.

"That was the Orb Representative, Athha," Lunamaria chimed in, bounding towards her machine. "Caused quite the uproar!"

"Athha of Orb?!"

Shinn could scarcely believe it. Both names carried weight for him. He kicked off the wall, returning to Lunamaria's side as she climbed into her mobile suit. She nodded, her expression somewhat excited.

"I know, right? Who'd have thought we'd run into the Orb princess here of all places!"

Shinn's face hardened. He knew that Orb's current head of state was a young girl from the Athha family, barely older than themselves. He was also aware that she was hailed as a hero in Orb for her role in the Battle of Jachin Due and in bringing the war to an end. These facts left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Oblivious, Lunamaria probed, "But why the interest in that ZAKU?"

"Ah, no. The machine hadn't been assigned to the Minerva. So I was curious who was piloting it."

Shinn deflected. No way he'd admit to an Athha saving him. Hell, he didn't want Lunamaria knowing he needed saving at all.

She bought it, her straightforward nature rarely doubting others.

"Actually, it seems that it was her escort piloting it. He said his name was Alex. But..." Her eyes lit up as she leaned in conspiratorially, "...he could be Athrun."

"What?" Shinn blinked, caught off-guard by this revelation. Another name that carried significant weight in his world. Lunamaria pressed on, her excitement palpable.

"The Representative slipped up – called him 'Athrun.' You've heard the rumors about Athrun Zala in Orb, right?"

Athrun Zala—son of former PLANT Supreme Council Chairman Patrick Zala and an ace ZAFT pilot. During the war, he had single-handedly neutralized an enemy prototype mobile suit, a feat that earned him the prestigious Order of the Nebula and a coveted place in the elite FAITH unit. He was widely regarded as the *crème de la crème* within the military echelons. However, he had later deserted, vanishing into the cosmic ether

without a trace. Myriad speculations about his whereabouts abounded, including persistent rumors of his defection to Orb.

"Athrun... Zala...?" Shinn murmured. If true, his exceptional performance against the Abyss and Gaia made perfect sense, even while piloting an unfamiliar machine.

But a nagging question persisted, gnawing at Shinn's psyche.

—*Why would someone of Athrun Zala's caliber consign himself to the role of a mere bodyguard for that Athha woman?*

The query lingered in Shinn's mind, leaving him profoundly uneasy and perplexed.

"But this ship has certainly gotten itself involved in something incredible!" Durandal reminisced as they walked along the corridor.

"To have to fight in an actual battle the day before its own launch ceremony?"

Escorted by him, Athrun and Cagalli were being shown around the Minerva. Leading them was a blond boy in a red uniform named Rey Za Burrel. As they passed, soldiers saluted the group, and Athrun reflexively raised his hand to return the gesture.

Rey stopped in front of an elevator, opened the door, and announced, "We'll take this lift up to the mobile suit deck."

"Right..." Athrun and Cagalli exchanged wary glances, but Durandal, seemingly oblivious to their hesitation, ushered them inside.

Still, was it really alright to show them this much? Wasn't Chairman Durandal being too generous?

As the lift hummed to life, Durandal's tone shifted, becoming more guarded.

"Think of this section as being the core of the ship. I am not at liberty to tell you how many the ship can hold, but the ship is not currently loaded to its capacity."

Athrun found himself oddly reassured by this limited disclosure. He studied Durandal's profile, a flicker of doubt crossing his mind. Were they being underestimated? Did the Chairman assume these young visitors wouldn't comprehend the intricacies regardless? Or was this a subtle compensation for the earlier, unsatisfactory discussion about Orb's technology leak?

Durandal's refined features betrayed nothing, yet every action seemed layered with hidden meaning. Perhaps it was his unnervingly smooth eloquence.

As the elevator doors parted, however, Athrun's scrutiny evaporated. The expansive hangar stretched before them, lined with rows of familiar ZAKU units.

"I'm sure you're already aware of the ZGMF-1000, the ZAKU. It's currently the mainstay machine of ZAFT."

Cagalli, sharing Athrun's interest in mobile suits, stepped forward instinctively, her eyes filled with wonder at the sight before her. Beyond the Zakus, a multi-tiered deck housed familiar white components – pieces of the advanced mobile suits they'd glimpsed at Armory One.

Durandal continued, his voice taking on a lecturing tone.

"And then there's the Impulse that utilizes the launch system, arguably the main feature of the Minerva. I understand you had a chance to see it at the factory."

Athrun nodded uneasily, caught off guard by the direct question.

"Ah... yes."

"The engineers tout it as a revolutionary, highly efficient mobile suit system," Durandal added. "Though I confess, the technical details elude me."

He turned to Cagalli, his eyes twinkling with a hint of challenge.

"But I take it that the Princess does not much care for this."

Cagalli's expression hardened, guilt warring with defiance. She met Durandal's gaze defiantly.

"You seem awfully happy about it, Mr. Chairman."

Durandal chuckled at her blunt observation.

"It's not necessarily that I'm happy about it. The thing is, for everyone to work earnestly, starting from that chaos to come this far and gain this much power..."

"Power..." Cagalli muttered, her expression pained. She looked up sharply.

"You said that power is necessary because there will always be conflict, Mr. Chairman."

Durandal met her intense gaze with unwavering calm.

"Yes."

"Then, how do you explain what happened here?!" Cagalli demanded, her voice rising. "The damage suffered by your nation as a result of just those three new model mobile suits!"

"So you're saying that's reason enough not to have any power?" Durandal countered, his tone almost provocative.

"Why are such things necessary in the first place?!" Cagalli cried, her frustration boiling over. "Why now?!"

Her voice echoed off the high ceiling of the mobile suit deck, drawing curious glances from the staff. But Cagalli paid them no mind, focused solely on the path the world seemed to be taking.

"We made a pledge not to repeat the tragedies of the past! We were committed to following a path that we could proceed along hand in hand!"

Athrun understood the turmoil in Cagalli's heart all too well. At Junius Seven, where his mother had died, people had sworn to come together. He, too, had believed it was the end of the conflict. And yet...

A young voice suddenly cut through the tension, dripping with sarcasm.

"Idealism has always been a specialty of the Athhas, hasn't it?!"

Athrun turned, startled by the blatant disrespect. The speaker clearly knew they were addressing VIPs.

"Shinn!"

Rey's voice rang out, his face tightening with anger as he vaulted over a railing. Another young man in a red uniform stood below, slowly turning to face them with defiance in his eyes.

As Athrun met that gaze, his anger evaporated. Those eyes burned with a deep crimson, a color of rage he would never forget.

Beside him, Cagalli flinched, taking a small step back. In that moment of charged silence, an alarm suddenly blared through the ship.

"Located enemy vessel. Distance 8000!"

The tense atmosphere shattered as the alert echoed through the deck.

"Condition Red announced! Pilots, standby in your machines!"

"Hurry with the final checks! It's starting!"

The previously frozen staff burst into frenzied activity. Shinn shook off Rey's attempt to reprimand him and bolted towards the mobile suits.

"Shinn!" Rey called after him before turning back and saluting crisply.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Chairman. He will be punished for his actions later!"

As Rey hurried off to prepare for battle, Durandal turned to Cagalli with an apologetic air.

"I'm terribly sorry, Princess. He's an immigrant from Orb, so that was the last thing I expected to come out of him."

"What...?"

Cagalli's confused expression gave way to shock as she stared after Shinn's retreating form.

Athrun watched her, a seed of worry taking root in his chest as he observed the deep turmoil etched across her features.

"Large heat source located at Yellow 50, Mark 82, Charlie! Distance 8000."

The sensor operator's alert sent a ripple of tension through the Girty Lue's bridge.

"They came, after all," Lee remarked coolly.

Neo shrugged, his voice tinged with amusement.

"Yeah. Well, it goes to show that ZAFT aren't a bunch of sleepyheads."

His casual observation quickly shifted to a commanding tone.

"We're going to crush them! All hands to battle stations! Pilots are to proceed to the briefing room!"

Through the bridge's panoramic windows, the blue curve of Earth was visible, wreathed in a halo of orbiting debris.

Stella stirred in her bunk as alarms blared throughout the ship. Sitting up groggily, she realized she was alone – her comrades had already departed. She'd overslept.

Rubbing her eyes, she felt wetness on her fingertips. Tears. She'd been crying in her sleep. Stella stared at the droplets, perplexed. Why had she been crying? There was nothing to be sad about. She felt fine, happy even. Just like always.

In the pilot's locker room, Sting and Auel were already suited up, chatting animatedly.

"That new model vessel?" Auel asked.

Sting nodded. "Yeah. Think we'll face that combining bastard again?"

Both were in high spirits, as usual, before a sortie. Even Stella felt a thrill of anticipation at the thought of piloting her mobile suit.

"Combining bastard" – that's right, there had been a strange new model that could combine, Stella recalled. She continued dressing silently as the boys carried on, oblivious to her presence. Having been raised together regardless of gender, nudity held no significance for them.

Auel grinned wickedly.

"This time, we'll either tear it apart or capture it..."

"In either case, we're gonna have some fun again, right Stella?" Sting called over.

Stella looked up but remained silent. She hadn't been following the conversation and wasn't sure how to respond. Her companions exchanged exasperated glances at her blank expression.

On the Minerva's bridge, Captain Talia briefed her crew with practiced efficiency.

"I don't expect the enemy to deliberately proceed into the debris but this is a dangerous area to do battle in just the same. Helm. We're counting on you."

"Yes, ma'am!" Malik, the helmsman, responded with tense focus.

The debris belt – a region where space junk and asteroids accumulated in Earth's orbit. Even Junius Seven, the catalyst of the last war, now drifted among this celestial graveyard.

"We'll send out Shinn and Lunamaria first. The crew's ready, aren't they?"

"Yes, ma'am!": Meyrin confirmed.

"6500 to target!" announced Bart.

The bridge door slid open, and Talia turned, expecting Chairman Durandal. He entered first, as anticipated, but the two figures following him caught her completely off guard.

"May I have a word, Captain? I'd like to invite our guests from Orb to join us on the bridge." Durandal said casually.

Cagalli Yula Athha and her aide looked uncomfortable, sensing the unwelcome atmosphere. Talia hesitated, torn between protocol and the chairman's wishes. Having outsiders – let alone foreign dignitaries – on the bridge during combat was unthinkable.

"Huh? Ah, but, that's..."

Durandal pressed on.

"As you're well aware, the Representative took command of a battleship during the previous war and has experienced many battles. I'd like to have her perspective as she observes our combat methods."

That was precisely the perspective Talia didn't want. Durandal alone would have been preferable to a teenage girl playing at being a soldier, regardless of her war record.

But Cagalli herself looked dejected and ill at ease. If she stayed quiet, perhaps it wouldn't be an issue.

"Very well. If that's how you feel, Mr. Chairman."

Talia relented. At least Athha had actual combat experience. Surely, she'd respect the chain of command. If not, they could always politely escort her out.

"Thank you, Talia," Durandal smiled warmly as the three guests took seats at the rear of the bridge.

"6000 to target!"

"Lower the bridge! Prepare for battle against a battleship and mobile suits."

The bridge began to descend as Talia gave orders, startling the Orb visitors with its transformation.

"Standby to launch Impulse. Blast module selected. Silhouette Hangar number three to be released."

On the mobile suit deck, Lunamaria's ZAKU Warrior and Shinn's Core Splendor were being prepped for launch.

"Target, on our present course. Distance 4700." Bart reported.

"ZAKU! Impulse! Launch!" Talia commanded.

"Gunner ZAKU Warrior, catapult engaged," Meyrin announced as the red mobile suit was hurled into space. It was equipped with the long-barreled M1500 Orthros high-energy long-range beam cannon and a large-capacity energy tank on its back, configured as a Gunner ZAKU Warrior. Like the Impulse, the ZAKU could adapt to various combat situations by swapping out its back-mounted modules.

"Bogey One..." Durandal mused from behind Talia. "I wonder what that ship's real name is."

"Huh?" the black-haired youth accompanying Cagalli responded, caught off guard. Talia recalled he was called Alex Dino, supposedly the Representative's personal bodyguard. He seemed more like an ex-soldier to her, though he lacked an intimidating presence and appeared quiet and intellectual.

"You're next, Impulse. Go ahead!" Meyrin called.

The white mobile suit rocketed out. Like the ZAKU Warrior, the Impulse was configured for long-range combat. The Core Splendor's nose and wingtips folded as it combined with the leg unit "Leg Flyer" and chest unit "Chest Flyer" launched in quick succession. In a blink, a complete mobile suit emerged, its back fitted with the "Blast Silhouette" - a module featuring beam cannons and railguns as tall as the suit itself, along with missile pods.

The suit's color shifted - limbs turning white, while the chest and shoulders became black and dark green. Impulse's armor used a special PS system that changed color based on the equipped back module. This was due to varying power consumption for different modules, allowing Impulse's

armor control system to optimize PS functionality for each configuration, significantly extending its operational time. This adaptive armor was known as Variable Phase Shift.

"The name of a thing is an indicator of its existence," Durandal continued philosophically. "Then what if that name is not real? If it's not real, would that mean its existence is not real either? Is that what it would mean?"

Talia found the chairman's timing odd for such musings.

"Alex... or rather... Athrun Zala."

—*Athrun Zala?!?*

Talia barely resisted the urge to whirl around in shock.

"My record isn't that great in debris field battles," Lunamaria's voice crackled over the comm, a hint of self-deprecation in her mutter. The unspoken reference to their simulation scores hung in the air between them. Fragments of asteroids and colony structures occasionally obscured their view, ghostly reminders of the past conflict.

Shinn's voice cut through the static, sharp with rebuke.

"The enemy will have noticed us by now. Stay alert."

Lunamaria's retort was immediate and bristling.

"I know! You're starting to sound like Rey! It's throwing me off!"

Their mobile suits, flanked by two GuAIZ Rs, pushed deeper into the sea of debris. It was a graveyard of shattered dreams and broken lives, remnants of a colony destroyed in the previous war drifting endlessly. On their monitors, a large heat signature pulsed steadily - the enemy ship, "Bogey One." The blip remained stationary as if lying in wait.

Something about this didn't sit right with Shinn.

—*Why?*

As they closed in, his unease grew. They were already within 1500 meters of the enemy vessel. As he'd just reminded Lunamaria, the enemy must have detected their approach by now.

—*So why haven't they made a move?*

Suddenly, movement caught his eye. In the shadow of a massive colony fragment, something shifted.

Back on the Minerva's bridge, Captain Gladys's voice rang out, sharp with tension.

"Okay, load launcher one to launcher six, numbers one through four with Dispars! Activate CIWS and Tristans! We'll get them this time!"

Amidst the frenzied battle preparations, Athrun found himself locked in a silent staring match with Chairman Durandal, whose serene smile seemed wildly out of place. The realization hit Athrun like a physical blow - Durandal had known all along.

"Mr. Chairman! That's..."



Cagalli's voice, tight with alarm, cut through Athrun's stunned silence. She half-rose from her seat, her body coiled with tension like a spring ready to release.

Durandal's calm tone cut through the tension.

"Not to worry, Representative Athha. I'm not challenging him for his actions."

The young woman at the mobile suit control station kept stealing furtive glances their way, her eyes wide with curiosity. The air hummed with unspoken questions, and Athrun was acutely aware that Captain Gladys could hear every word of this loaded exchange.

"I understand what happened. And the measures taken against him and others by former Chairwoman Canaver."

Cagalli sank back into her seat, clearly still uneasy. Athrun's mind raced. If Durandal didn't intend to make an issue of it, why expose his identity here and now?

The Chairman's gaze met Athrun's, unwavering and intense.

"It's just that if I were to talk to you, I'd rather talk to the real you. Athrun. That's all."

Despite Durandal's gentle smile, Athrun found himself unable to meet that penetrating stare. He looked away, feeling exposed and raw.

A false existence...

The words from earlier echoed in his mind, cutting deep. A false existence? He wasn't pretending to be someone else. Sure, he was using a different name, but that was just a formality. He was still the same Athrun Zala he had always been.

And yet, Durandal's gaze seemed to imply something more, something unspoken but heavy with meaning.

"Impulse, 1400 from Bogey One."

An operator's voice sliced through Athrun's inner turmoil.

The XO tilted his head, puzzled by the report.

"Hasn't it changed its course yet? What's going on? Is this part of a plan?"

The pieces fell into place for Athrun a heartbeat later. Every hair on his body stood on end as cold realization washed over him.

—*Shit!*

"It's a decoy!"

The words burst from both Athrun and Captain Gladys in perfect, horrified unison.

From behind the debris, three mobile suits burst forth: Chaos, Gaia, and Abyss. Shinn gasped, instinctively initiating evasive maneuvers. His four-unit squad scattered as Abyss unleashed a barrage of beams that tore through their formation. They dodged the first wave, but Chaos's detached weapon pods enveloped one of the GuAIZ Rs, skewering it with beams from both sides. In the blink of an eye, barely a second into the battle, one of their allies erupted into flames.

"Shawn!" Lunamaria's anguished cry pierced Shinn's ears.

"We'll scatter and fight them separately!" Shinn barked, his voice cracking. The red ZAKU Warrior and the remaining GuAIZ R peeled away, following his command. Weapon pods darted about in a dizzying dance, firing beams from all directions. Shin groaned in frustration.

"Damn! They were waiting for us!"

They'd let their guard down, fooled by the mothership's apparent inactivity.

As he weaved through the crisscrossing beams, Shinn glared at the blips on his monitor. Suddenly, one of them vanished from the screen!

"Bogey One?!"

Shinn stared in disbelief, unable to process what he'd just witnessed.

"I've lost Bogey One!"

On the Minerva's bridge, Bart's voice rang out in confusion as he observed the same phenomenon. Arthur's eyes widened in shock.

"What?!"

"We've lost the signal from Shawn's machine!" Meyrin cried out, her voice bordering on hysteria.

"Three heat sources at Yellow 62, Beta. It's them... It's Chaos, Gaia, and Abyss!"

Talia bit her lip. So Shawn had already fallen to those three...

"Find the enemy vessel, Bogey One, quickly!"

But before her words could even fade, Bart reacted to a new sensor reading.

"Heat source at Blue 18, Mark 9, Charlie! It's Bogey One! Distance 500!"

"What?!" Arthur jolted up in his seat, and Talia froze as she processed the coordinates.

—*Behind us?!*

"Also, two mobile suits!"

"Detecting targeting lasers, directed at us!"

—*We've been completely outmaneuvered!*

Talia, grinding her teeth in frustration, rapidly fired off orders.

"Fire anti-beam depth charges! 30 to starboard! Aim Tristans now!"

"Can't do it! Mobile suits at Orange 22, Delta!"

Bart shouted back. Surrounded, locked on by the enemy, they couldn't even turn around. Talia, seething at their predicament, bellowed:

"Engines to maximum! Turn us around using that starboard asteroid as a shield!"

The Minerva surged forward, attempting to shake off the incoming missiles. A massive chunk of rock loomed to starboard. Missiles dogged the Minerva's tail, some shot down by the rear intercept system, others exploding against the asteroid's craggy surface in brilliant bursts of flame. The impacts rocked the bridge, eliciting cries from the crew. Talia barked out her next commands, her voice a rallying cry:

"Meyrin! Bring Shinn and the others back! And prepare to send out our remaining machines! Arthur! Counterattack!"

"Damn it all!"

Shinn and his team struggled to regain their footing, forced into a desperate dance of evasion against the enemy's relentless barrage. The psychological shock of losing sight of the enemy ship still hung heavy in their minds. Shinn couldn't grasp the situation.

—*Where the hell is the enemy ship?!*

The question flashed through his mind, only to be swept away by the fierce onslaught of enemy mobile suits. Abyss unleashed a simultaneous attack with its shield-mounted triple beam cannon and the Callidus multi-phase beam cannon in its chest. Seven beams tore through the colony's reflector mirror, shredding the GuAIZ R hiding behind it into a smoldering wreck.

"Dale! They got two of ours in no time. This can't be happening!"

Lunamaria's voice cracked with anguish as Shinn gritted his teeth, swallowing the bitter taste of defeat.

At that moment, a laser communication message flashed on his console. As Shinn's eyes darted across the text, he was stunned to finally learn Bogey One's position. The message was from the Minerva, urging them to return after being ambushed by the enemy vessel.

"The Minerva?!" Lunamaria's voice rang out in disbelief as she, too, saw the message.

"We've been completely played?!"

"Yeah, looks like it!" Shinn shouted back, a hint of desperation in his voice as he dodged another volley of beams from Chaos's weapon pods.

They had fallen right into the enemy's trap. The enemy ship had cut its engines and gone dark somewhere while they chased after decoys broadcasting false data. After luring away the main mobile suit force, the enemy ship had leisurely revealed itself to hammer the Minerva.

Weaving through the relentless beam attacks, Shinn cried out in frustration, "But how the hell are we supposed to get back like this?!"

Despite their growing urgency, the tide of battle was overwhelmingly against them. Forget returning to the ship—they were struggling just to avoid the fate of the two destroyed GuAIZ units.

Breaking away from the enemy mobile suits seemed like an impossible task.

"They're hanging tough," Ian Lee muttered, his tone suggesting a grudging appreciation.

The monitor displayed the enemy ship nestled in a groove carved into the asteroid. Two Dagger Ls, which had been approaching from the flank, veered away to avoid a barrage of missiles. While the enemy's stern faced

the Girty Lue, rendering them vulnerable, the asteroid's bulk shielded them from effective bombardment.

"But they're finished if they stop moving," Neo Roanoke responded with a smirk before issuing a sharp command.

"Fire missiles into that asteroid they're stuck to! Let's give them the gift of a crushed rock shower! Enough to bury their hull!"

Lee nodded silently. Clever. There was no need for direct hits. They could turn the surroundings into an indirect weapon—the very sanctuary the enemy relied on.

After giving his orders, Neo stood up as usual.

"I'm going out to finish them off. Take over for me."

"Yes, sir," Lee acknowledged.

As his superior left the bridge, Lee once again refrained from spoiling the man's fun.

"With them on our tail, there's nothing we can do! Can't we get behind them?!"

Captain Gladys asked, her frustration evident. The helmsman shook his head.

"No, ma'am! It's the best we can do just to evade their attacks!"

"Send out Rey's ZAKU!" the XO began, but the captain cut him off.

"Right now, we can't get a clear course to send anyone out!"

Indeed, clinging to the asteroid as they were, there wasn't enough space to catapult mobile suits.

Athrun understood the precarious situation the Minerva was in. While the asteroid shielded them from direct hits from the enemy ship, Dagger L attacks from the side left them immobilized. At this rate, they'd be slowly cornered.

"Half of our firepower is useless here!" the captain groaned in frustration. The main guns couldn't target the enemies behind them, and any missiles they launched would likely be blocked by the debris and rock fragments floating around.

"Missiles approaching! Six missiles!"

As the radar operator announced the enemy's attack, Captain Gladys instinctively ordered, "Intercept!" But Athrun, noticing the missiles' projected course, felt something was off.

—But these missiles... They're not aiming at us!

As he wondered if the enemy was firing blindly, knowing they couldn't hit, his eyes were drawn to the asteroid's rock face.

"This isn't good!" He stood up suddenly, shouting, "Move the ship away from the asteroid!"

"What?!" Captain Gladys began to turn, but it was too late—!

The missiles struck the asteroid the Minerva was huddled against, gouging the rock face and scattering debris. Countless fragments ricocheted

off, embedding themselves in the ship's hull. A lateral impact rocked the vessel.

"Our starboard... Captain!" XO Arthur cried out, his voice nearly drowned by the thunderous noise. The captain's voice cut through, issuing orders:

"Get us out of here! Raise bow 15!"

But before she could finish, the radar operator shouted again:

"Second wave of missiles approaching!"

"Decelerate 20!" the captain ordered, reading the missiles' trajectory. The second volley hit just ahead of the ship, subjecting the Minerva to a frontal barrage of flying rocks. Athrun could only cling to his seat to avoid being thrown off, sparing a glance at Cagalli beside him. Rock fragments became terrifying projectiles assaulting the hull. A massive boulder impaled itself right before their eyes. If the captain hadn't ordered deceleration, the ship might have been crushed instantly. But now, this boulder completely blocked the Minerva's path.

"Number four and six thrusters damaged. Captain! At this rate, we'll be trapped!" Arthur reported, panic etched on his face. The starboard thrusters had been destroyed by the rock barrage. They couldn't move forward, with the rock face to their right and the enemy ship closing in from behind. With the thrusters crushed, they couldn't turn or move left either.

"Where is Bogey One?!"

"Blue 22 Delta, distance 1100!"

The mobile suit control's voice cut in:

"More mobile armors and suits approaching!"

At the girl's words, everyone's expressions darkened. The enemy was moving in to finish off the immobilized Minerva. Cagalli glanced at Athrun with a tense look, and he bit his lip.

—We'll be done for at this rate! I don't care about myself, but if anything happens to Cagalli!

Yet all he could do was sit here, waiting for others to act.

In the momentary silence that enveloped the bridge, Captain Gladys picked up the internal comm.

"Aves, send out Rey!"

Athrun looked at her skeptically. How could they secure a launch path in this situation? The person on the other end must have said the same thing, but the captain barked back:

"Walk him out if you have to! Hurry!"

Hanging up, she snapped at the mobile suit control.

"Where are Shinn and the others?!"

The girl at the controls answered, looking on the verge of tears.

"The Impulse and ZAKU are still in a battle against Chaos, Gaia, and Abyss!"

We can't expect support from them, Athrun thought. Just surviving against those three must be challenging enough. The enemy units were undoubtedly ordered to keep our mobile suits at bay.

While he understood this logically, Athrun couldn't help but feel frustrated at their inability to return.

"Aren't there any more mobile suits on this ship?!"

Suddenly, Durandal, who had been silently observing until now, posed a question. Athrun was snapped out of his thoughts. The captain turned and answered matter-of-factly.

"We have no pilots!"

Athrun's heart skipped a beat. Beside him, Cagalli's eyes snapped to him as if struck by those words.

—There is a pilot... right here.

Overcome by a sense of guilt, Athrun lowered his gaze, avoiding the looks around him.

Shinn dove into the shaft of the abandoned colony, caught in a pincer attack between Chaos and Abyss.

"Damn it... this position...!"

Shinn groaned as he tore through the shaft at breakneck speed. While one side was glass, the other three formed a long, narrow, sealed space. In such poor visibility, it was impossible to predict where the enemy would strike from.

"Shinn!"

Lunamaria's voice rang out just as her red mobile suit crashed through the glass. A beam grazed the shaft in pursuit. Shinn instinctively raised the thick cannon mounted on his back and pulled the trigger. His suit slid sideways from the inertia, the beam arrow slicing across space. Gaia changed direction at the last second, avoiding the torrent of energy.

The Impulse shot out of the shaft, with Lunamaria's ZAKU close behind.

"Damn it... the Minerva!" Shinn's voice cracked with urgency, and Lunamaria cried out, "We have to get back, or they'll be done for!"

"I know that!"

Only Rey remained on the Minerva. How long could a single ZAKU Phantom protect the mothership?

As Shinn emerged from behind the abandoned colony, a beam whizzed past his back. He turned, heart racing, to see Luna Maria narrowly applying her brakes. Chaos and Abyss bore down on them from above. The Impulse raised both M200F Cerberus cannons from its hips while the MMI-M16XE2 Deluge hyper-velocity rail cannon deployed from its shoulder. All four barrels blazed simultaneously. As he continued firing at the two evading units, the high-powered beam sliced the massive colony structure clean in half.

Lunamaria darted out from cover, aiming at Abyss as it fled the beam. It was perfect coordination, but Abyss dodged her sniper shot by a hair's breadth as if it had eyes in the back of its head. Before Shinn realized it, Chaos and Gaia were right on his tail.

"Tch!"

Shinn fired his leg thrusters. The Impulse flipped backward, and the moment it faced away, Shinn opened its back verniers full blast. Caught off guard by the sudden charge, Chaos and Gaia scattered left and right. The Impulse launched missiles from both shoulders in pursuit. Chaos and Gaia either shot down the self-guided AGM141 Firefly missiles or evaded them by hiding behind debris.

Shinn gritted his teeth in frustration. It seemed it would take much longer to shake off these enemies and rush to the mothership's aid.

"Captain! We can crush the cliff ahead of us with the Tannhauser..."

Arthur suggested anxiously to the captain as Athrun watched with concern.

"That'll only scatter rock toward us as we approach the next layer of solid rock," Captain Gladys dismissed curtly, leaving Arthur silent and dejected. Through an open hatch, a white ZAKU Phantom gently lifted off, its verniers flaring. This single mobile suit was now their only hope.

But—Athrun pondered—even Rey's ZAKU could only hope to fend off approaching enemy mobile suits and armors. That would be a tall order for one unit, and it would be the same if Athrun went out now. The Minerva remained immobilized while the enemy ship steadily closed in from behind. The captain was likely racking her brain for a solution, her fingers tapping restlessly on the armrest.

Suddenly, an idea struck Athrun.

The enemy had used this asteroid to attack them. Why not use the same tactic?

"How many starboard thrusters are still functioning?!"

Athrun's abrupt question earned him a clearly hostile glare from Captain Gladys, whose train of thought he'd interrupted. It was a natural reaction; Athrun had no authority to interfere with ship operations. But this was no time for such concerns.

Durandal, seated to Athrun's right, gave an encouraging look. The captain grudgingly answered, "Six. But venturing out with just that would only make us an easy target!"

As she began to turn away, considering the matter closed, Athrun pressed on.

"Fire everything on starboard all at once, against the asteroid!"

The captain's head whipped back around, her face registering shock as she looked at Athrun again. He appealed to her passionately.

"We'll push the hull out in one motion with the force of the explosion, together with the rocks surrounding us."

"Ah..."

This idea seemed to have never occurred to Captain Gladys. It was also an extremely risky plan. Her shapely eyebrows furrowed. No doubt she was weighing the potential benefits against the risks in her mind.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Executive Officer Arthur fixated on the risks.

"Think of the damage to the Minerva's hull if we did that!"

Firing on the asteroid would inflict the same damage on the ship that they'd just suffered from enemy fire. Could the already damaged vessel withstand such an impact?

But Athrun stood firm in his conviction.

"Right now, we must think about getting out of here. We're nothing but a target if we stay here."

Their eyes locked in a fierce stare-down. After a moment, Athrun looked away. Arthur's face clearly said, "Outsiders should keep their mouths shut."

Indeed, Athrun wasn't part of this ship's crew. He couldn't understand their attachment to the vessel. But more than that, he was truly an outsider—living under a false name, having abandoned his country, afraid to wield power again. He had no right to interfere in this battle.

In the tense atmosphere, Durandal quietly spoke up, "Talia."

His call seemed to snap Captain Gladys back to herself. Composing her expression into a somewhat displeased look, she said, "You have a point..."

Athrun couldn't believe his ears for a moment. The captain turned forward and announced, "Very well, let's try it."

"Captain...!" Arthur protested.

"We'll discuss this later, Arthur," she cut him off, then began issuing clear orders.

"Prepare to fire all starboard weapons! Starboard thrusters to maximum as we fire! Match the timing!"

As Arthur fell silent with a dissatisfied expression, Athrun watched guiltily. His earlier excitement had vanished, replaced by an overwhelming sense of shame.

Denying the power to fight while placing himself in the midst of battle, yet still craving that power.

*—/I'm... a walking contradiction...*

"Gil's aboard the Minerva! I won't allow you to sink it!"

Rey muttered to himself as he moved away from the Minerva. He was piloting a white Blaze ZAKU Phantom—equipped with a large booster and missile pods on its back module, designed for high-mobility combat. He'd been told the enemy consisted of two Dagger Ls and a mobile armor. The ZAKU Phantom could handle two Dagger Ls, but the mobile armor was the real concern. Could it be that one?

Suddenly, Rey felt a prickling sensation on his skin, confirming his suspicion. It was the same opponent from the previous battle. This strange feeling was unmistakable.

Acting on instinct, Rey sharply turned his mobile suit. Beams pierced the space he'd occupied a split second before. That special weaponry again. As Rey maneuvered the ZAKU Phantom evasively, he targeted the buzzing weapon pods with his beam assault rifle. The mobile armor's main body



intersected his path, firing its railgun. Feeling the overwhelming pressure, Rey spat out in frustration.

"What is it with you?!"

In the Exus's cockpit, Neo Roanoke muttered the same question.

"What is it with you, White Baldy?!"

But his tone carried a hint of amusement. Neo deployed all his beam gun barrels, attacking the white mobile suit from all directions. Yet the ZAKU avoided every beam that should have been impossible to predict, returning fire. It was as if it knew Neo's attacks in advance.

An allied Dagger L, noticing the battle, approached and aimed its anti-ship bazooka and beam rifle at the white ZAKU. The ZAKU casually turned and fired its beam assault rifle, the single shot piercing the allied unit with deadly precision.

"Jon!"

As the other pilot called out the name of his comrade engulfed in flames, Neo quickly ordered.

"Get back, Miller! This guy's tough! Return and guard the ship!"

Average Naturals couldn't handle this ZAKU. Seeing Miller's Dagger L head towards the enemy ship, the white ZAKU turned to pursue.

"Oh no, you don't!"

Neo sent his gun barrels to block its path. The ZAKU, noticing this, dove into the debris field scattered by the earlier bombardment. The gun barrels fired at the mobile suit, weaving through countless rock fragments, but the debris interfered with their aim. Still, this should prevent the enemy from targeting the Dagger L.

But Neo's expectations were shattered in the next moment. The ZAKU unleashed a barrage of missiles from its back-mounted pods, blasting away the debris in front of it. Beyond lay Miller's Dagger L.

The line of fire was clear. A beam erupted from the ZAKU's rifle, streaking straight toward the Dagger L. In a flash of light, the Dagger L disintegrated. Neo snorted in displeasure inside his cockpit.

Another miscalculation on his part. One should always prepare for the worst—yet this enemy kept defying even his pessimistic predictions.

At this rate, finishing off that new model ship would be difficult. Lee must be getting impatient by now. As Neo felt a tinge of frustration—

The enemy ship, its hull almost completely covered by rock fragments, moved. No, exploded—?

"What?!"

The *Girty Lue* hadn't fired. Blinded by the explosion's flash, Neo retreated while dodging flying debris. As he tried to assess the situation, a pale gray hull slid into view.

"Starboard thrusters to maximum!"

"All starboard cannons, fire!!!"

Talia's command overlapped with Arthur's. Missiles launched from every tube, and the Tristan blazed to life. In the next instant, despite their anticipation, a tremendous impact struck the ship broadside. Missiles exploded, heat rays vaporized rock, and rapidly expanding gas propelled the Minerva forward along with the surrounding debris. Countless fragments pelted the hull, hammering it relentlessly.

"Turn bow 30! Fire at Bogey One!"

Talia's voice rang out over the continuing roar. As gas and dust obscured their vision, Malik turned the helm. Gripping his console for support, Arthur shouted, "Aiming Tannhäuser! Bogey One!"

The ship's bow opened, revealing the massive muzzle of the positron cannon. The QZX-1 Tannhäuser, the bow's main gun. The distance to the enemy ship had dropped below 800. Talia gave the order.

"FIRE!!"

Responding to her voice, a torrent of positrons erupted from the enormous barrel.

The thick beam of light pierced through the sea of debris before Neo's eyes. The positron cannon fired by the enemy ship grazed the Girty Lue's starboard side, instantly vaporizing armor that flashed brilliantly in the dark void. Even just witnessing it made its power unmistakable. They were lucky the enemy's visibility was impaired. A direct hit would have left them without a place to return to.

Belatedly, Neo understood what the enemy ship had done. They had fired upon the asteroid on their starboard side, using the recoil and explosion's energy to gain propulsion beyond their lost thrusters. A stunningly desperate tactic.

The enemy ship passed dangerously close to the Girty Lue's damaged starboard side.

"Dammit! They've risen from the brink of defeat!"

Neo shouted in frustration as he turned his mobile armor.

Unbelievable! He'd have to completely reassess how he made predictions on the battlefield.

The white ZAKU pursued, firing its beam assault rifle wildly. Dodging the attacks, Neo piloted the Exus towards the mothership.

"I look forward to seeing you again. White Baldy! And the ZAFT crew."

Bidding a one-sided farewell, he fired a signal flare. It was the signal for retreat.

Three signal flares were launched, bursting and painting the darkness of space with their colors.

"Ah..."

The intense expression vanished from Stella's face without a trace as she gazed up at the lights, entranced. She loved these lights. Not just because they meant "come home," but simply because they were beautiful.

The Chaos and Abyss had appeared beside Gaia at some point. Auel's voice came through the comm.

"Game over with only two kills?"

He sounded dissatisfied with the battle's outcome.

"Can't be helped," Sting said matter-of-factly, then addressed Stella.

"Stella, Neo's calling. He says to come back."

"Okay..."

Stella nodded, feeling happy. She, too, was unsatisfied with the fight. They couldn't shoot down that white one again. The red one was annoying, too. She'd never failed to take down an enemy before.

But next time, she'd surely get them. Now it was time to go home. Neo was waiting.

Like children tired from play, they eagerly headed back to their mothership.

"Bogey One is withdrawing!"

Bart announced, his voice tinged with relief. Meyrin also reported.

"Power has reached critical level on both the Impulse and Lunamaria's ZAKU."

"Captain. With that explosion, our number two engine and portside heat sensors have also been..."

The stream of reports all conveyed one fact to Talia: they could not continue the battle.

The Minerva was battered. Though their desperate measure had saved them from sinking, they were now helpless in front of Bogey One.

"Captain Gladys," Durandal called from the rear seat as if to calm the frustrated Talia.

"You've done enough. We'll think of another plan."

His words signaled the mission's failure. Talia bit her lip in frustration. Despite being given the most advanced battleship and mobile suits, she had failed miserably in her first mission as captain. As if to console her, Durandal added, "I personally cannot inconvenience Representative Athha any longer."

The Chairman's attempt to save face for Talia only stung her more. She had just endangered the heads of state of her country and an allied nation. Worse, it was the opinion of an outsider—Alex, or rather, Athrun Zala—that had saved them from that crisis. Her own incompetence was bitter.

She bowed her head, her expression pained.

"I'm very sorry."

Soon after, she escorted Durandal and the two guests off the bridge.

"I sincerely apologize for everything, Representative Athha," Durandal said.

Cagalli Yula Athha responded calmly, "Never mind us. Although I must say I regret very much that things ended this way. I pray from my heart that you're able to resolve things quickly."

Her words carried genuine concern. Talia reassessed this young head of state. Throughout the battle, she had remained composed, enduring without unnecessary comments. As expected of someone who had survived the fierce battle of Jachin Due. Her current statement truly reflected someone worried for their country. Of course, her concern was for the impact this incident would have on the world and, consequently, on her own nation.

"Thank you very much," Durandal replied respectfully, and Talia added, "We've finally reestablished contact with the homeland. I'm told that rescue teams and investigative units are on their way to Armory One, so I've requested that they send a vessel our way to pick you up."

"Thank you," Cagalli nodded, her face tired, and entered the officers' room.

As Athrun Zala—or the person who might be him—moved to follow, Durandal spoke, as if to hold him back.

"But really, we were saved earlier, thanks to him. Weren't we, Captain?"

"Ah... yes..." Talia agreed, her feelings mixed.

"That was impressive. The true strength of someone who has survived numerous battles," Durandal praised cheerfully, seemingly oblivious to Talia's expression and the uncomfortable look on the face of the one being praised. The black-haired youth had been listening with his head down but suddenly turned to Talia.

"Thank you. But I apologize for sticking my nose into things like I did," he said politely, bowing his head.

Seeing the young man bow, Talia felt her reservations melt away. The fondness she had developed for his companion was likely a factor. Besides, it would be childish to hold a grudge while someone younger was bowing in apology.

True, it had been an unauthorized action. But without that action, they wouldn't be standing here now.

She smiled and said firmly, "Your decision was the correct one. Thank you."

Receiving Talia's thanks, the young man averted his eyes, seeming confused.

"Excuse me!" she saluted and left. As she walked alongside the Chairman, the youth's troubled expression lingered in her mind.

So that was Athrun Zala, the "legendary ace." While demonstrating bold, unconventional strategies and decisiveness that even Talia couldn't conceive, his expression just now revealed a hint of youthful vulnerability. This imbalance in him somehow intrigued her.

"Athrun Zala? Him?"

Shinn exclaimed, his voice tinged with disbelief.

Meyrin, who had just finished her shift, was telling Shinn, Lunamaria, and the others who had returned to the ship about what happened on the bridge. Come to think of it, Lunamaria had mentioned such suspicions, but to think it was actually true. While Shinn and Lunamaria were shocked, Rey alone remained impassive. However, he seemed at least somewhat interested, silently listening to Meyrin's story.

"The Chairman called him 'Athrun Zala,' and he didn't deny it! But that's not all—he was amazing!" Meyrin's voice, sweet and girlish in stark contrast to her sister's, lilted with excitement. She painted a vivid picture of how "Athrun Zala" had devised a brilliant strategy in the midst of crisis, his quick thinking becoming their salvation.

As Shinn listened, his expression gradually soured, his mind replaying the recent battle. They had been outmaneuvered by the enemy, lost two comrades, and ultimately failed to neutralize those three units. While the Minerva teetered on the brink of disaster, he and Lunamaria had been mere playthings for the enemy. And now, the mantle of hero had been snatched away by "that guy" from the outside.

—*Someone from Orb, no less!*

A maelstrom of childish anger and deep-seated resentment, rooted in past traumas, churned within Shinn.

"But, does he really need to change his name and everything?" Meyrin and Lunamaria continued their animated discussion about Athrun Zala as they made their way to the recreation room. Women are so frivolous, Shinn thought bitterly. Their excitement seemed to stem solely from sharing a ship with a legendary figure, a former ace pilot who had vanished into obscurity.

"Think of what he was before."

"Are you serious? Regardless of his past..."

Lunamaria's retort died on her lips as they entered the room. Meyrin, startled, sought refuge behind Rey. The cause of their sudden silence was a solitary figure perched on a bench in the rec room. A young man with raven hair, seemingly a year or two their senior, turned at the sound of their voices. Lunamaria, recovering quickly, stepped forward with a challenging smile.

"Well... We were just talking about you, Athrun Zala."

It was just like Lunamaria to address him so directly. Shinn scrutinized the young man on the bench. Though he had only caught a fleeting glimpse of him on the mobile suit deck, it was undoubtedly the same person who had been in the company of the Athha woman.

So this is Athrun Zala, Shinn mused, inwardly surprised. As a refugee from Orb, Shinn had rarely seen images of Athrun, who had been a military elite during the war and the fiancé of national idol Lacus Clyne. The young man before him, while undeniably handsome, didn't exude the aura one might expect from someone with such an illustrious past. Nor did he appear to be the hero who had rescued the ship in their stead.

"Hard to believe, but it figures. I'm honored to have the chance to meet such a legendary ace in the least expected of places," Lunamaria said, her

tone so casual it sounded almost insincere. The young man on the bench averted his eyes and replied.

"I'm not anything like that. I'm Alex."

"So you no longer have to pilot a mobile suit?"

Lunamaria remained provocative. Athrun's annoyance was palpable as he fixed her with a stern gaze that made Meyrin shrink back. At that moment, Shinn interjected angrily.

"Cut it out, Luna! Who cares about anyone living in Orb? They have no idea about what really goes on!"

He turned on his heel without entering the rec room.

"Shinn!"

Rey called out from behind, likely intending to reprimand him for his rudeness, including the earlier incident. Shinn ignored him and strode away briskly.

As if he'd apologize to someone like that. How could someone who fled from the fight and now serves those hypocrites in Orb be called a hero?

Shinn retreated to his room, sinking onto the bed. On the bedside table sat a pink mobile phone adorned with a cute strap, seemingly incongruous with his persona. Shinn picked it up, his fingers moving with practiced familiarity. A young girl's voice emanated from the device.

*"Hi! Mayu here! I'm sorry. I can't talk to you right now! I'll call you back later, so please leave your name after the beep!"*

The voice of his sister, long departed from this world, resonated vividly in Shinn's hand. This sole memento was all that remained of her.

He loathed his homeland almost as much as he despised the enemy. He abhorred Orb for its self-righteous hypocrisy, for reveling in a false peace built on complacency. He detested those who had stripped everything from him.

His grip tightened around the pink mobile phone.

*—/I'll never forgive them. I'll never, ever forgive those people!*

## Phase.03

"Solar wind velocity remains the same. Flare level at S3. Estimated arrival time, 30 seconds."

The long-awaited "wind" was about to blow. Sato, still engrossed in his work, called out to his comrades in mobile suits and work pods with a crisp, authoritative tone.

"Hurry up! What's the status on Unit 9?"

"Sir! Almost ready!"

The responding voices carried a unique air of discipline, hinting at their origins.

A frozen sea, fields of withered white wheat, city streets devoid of bustling crowds—an ineffable tranquility permeated the landmass floating in the vast emptiness of space. In one corner of the frozen earth stood a meticulously polished monument, its engraved words commemorating the signing of the Junius Treaty at this very site.

This was all that remained of Junius Seven, the site of unspeakable tragedy. The hourglass-shaped colony base was surrounded by a sea flash-frozen from rapid decompression, with high-tension strings that once formed the outer walls now barely clinging to shards of self-repairing glass. Countless wires were intricately wound around these strings. Massive activation devices with keypads were strategically placed, and work pods were just finishing their input sequences.

As his comrades' machines slowly drifted away from the site, Sato silently bowed his head, seeking forgiveness for disturbing the slumber of the dead. But this, he knew, was necessary. Surely, the deceased would understand. After all, who could comprehend their unfulfilled wishes better than Sato and his team?

"Particle emission detected. Flare motor countdown to passive level, commencing now."

Sato piloted his beloved GINN High Maneuver Type 2 above the frozen landscape, listening intently as the countdown ticked away.

"Particles flux detected. Flare motor activating!"

The slightly excited voice of the observer reached Sato's ears. The "wind" had caught up. One by one, the activation devices attached to the strings came to life, their operational lights flickering on. The sight reminded Sato of a massive Christmas tree being illuminated, filling his heart with an incongruous warmth. Yet despite its beauty, this twinkling remnant of a space colony had, in that moment, transformed into a weapon of terrifying power.

Solar wind is triggered by phenomena known as solar flares. When energy stored in the corona above sunspots is suddenly released, it's called a flare, and the plasma ejected by this event forms the solar wind. The charged particles within the solar wind carry the sun's magnetic field. If another object wrapped in a magnetic field is exposed to this wind, it generates a force that can move the object—much like magnets attracting each other. The flare motor, in essence, was a device that treated the entire solar system as one gigantic motor.

First, they used power generated from Junius Seven's underground power plant to run an electric current through the wires wound around the strings. This served as an electromagnetic coil, enveloping Junius Seven in a powerful magnetic field. This field would then interact with the solar wind's magnetic field, gently pushing this colossal gravestone toward Earth. Though the force was minimal, once the colony's remnant deviated from its orbit, it would be drawn by gravity, gliding gracefully through space—towards the blue planet that lay in Sato's sights.

"Allen... Christine..."

Sato's eyes drifted to several photos taped to his cockpit, lingering on the smiling faces of a man and woman. A young man in a ZAFT uniform, and a young woman embracing Sato himself, both beaming with joy.

"After this, I can finally see you again."

The beloved figures in the photographs remained silent, but their smiles seemed genuinely happy, prompting Sato to smile in return. Then, the news he had been anticipating for months finally reached his ears.

"Junius Seven has begun to move!"

The enormous landmass suspended in the void started to shift, slowly but unmistakably.

"Now fall! Our great tombstone!" he proclaimed grandly as he watched it depart.

"On a world that has forgotten the voices of sorrow, turns a blind eye to the truth, and continues to live in overflowing deception... We shall give them a lesson!"

It was his declaration of war against the world.

"There's no need to fret, Talia," the man whispered in the dimly lit room. His voice, as always, reminded Talia of dark chocolate melting on her tongue—rich, smooth, and slightly bitter. She rolled over, turning her back to him, the silk sheets rustling softly against her skin.

"I didn't invite you into my quarters for consolation over my failures," she retorted, her voice carrying a hint of steel beneath its velvet tones.

"Oh?" came the nonchalant response. The man, draped in a luxurious bathrobe, didn't even raise his eyes from the checkboard he was studying. Talia glanced over her shoulder, the sheet barely clinging to her curves.

Chairman Durandal sat there, the very picture of composure, his long ebony



hair cascading over his shoulders as his eyes darted across the display, processing the tedious official documents that streamed before him.

Every time she saw him like this, the same question bubbled up in her mind: How did I end up here? If anyone were to ask her, she'd likely respond with a bemused shrug and a "Who knows?"

Talia Gladys was well aware of the whispers that circulated through the ranks—that she had seduced her way into the captain's chair. Of course, it would be a lie to say there hadn't been any calculation involved. But for Talia, Durandal had been the type of man she'd genuinely wanted to lure into her bed. Before she knew it, they'd fallen into this... arrangement, and without her even having to ask, she found herself appointed captain of the new prototype warship. One might say fortune had simply smiled upon her. More importantly, Talia harbored an unwavering confidence in her own abilities to excel in this role.

However—she mused, recalling Durandal's meddlesome tendencies—having finally secured the captain's seat only to find its benefactor constantly looming over her shoulder made her job infinitely more challenging.

Oh well, she consoled herself. It's not as if he'll be breathing down my neck during every single voyage.

"I don't mind if you turn up the lights, you know," Talia said as she burrowed deeper into the sheets. "You'll strain your eyes."

Durandal's only response was a noncommittal "Hmm," his gaze never leaving the checkboard.

Just as Talia was about to slip into the welcoming embrace of sleep, a jarring electronic tone shattered the comfortable silence. With a flicker of irritation, she rose from the bed, the sheet still wrapped around her, and answered the call.

"Captain, there's a Channel One communication for Chairman Durandal from the Supreme Council," came the crisp voice of her communications officer.

Talia couldn't help but turn back towards the man on her bed, her eyebrow arched in surprise. Channel One was the highest priority hotline, reserved for only the most urgent matters. She noticed Durandal's brow furrow slightly, a rare crack in his usually imperturbable facade.

"What did you say?!" Cagalli exclaimed, momentarily struck speechless by the news Durandal and Talia brought to the officer's quarters. Not just her—even her father, known for his composure and fortitude, would likely have reacted similarly. It was news beyond anyone's wildest imagination.

"Junius Seven is... moving? How is that even possible?!" To Cagalli, this was tantamount to hearing the moon was plummeting towards Earth. As she stumbled over her words, Chairman Durandal, his expression uncharacteristically grim, answered.

"We don't know why. But it is moving—at considerable speed, and on the most dangerous trajectory possible."

His tone was grave, yet as smooth and unwavering as ever. A stray thought flitted through Cagalli's bewildered mind: Did this news actually surprise him? She couldn't quite picture Durandal flustered or panicked.

"We've been able to confirm the same with our own crew," Captain Talia corroborated. Beside her, a visibly shaken Athrun asked, "But how could this happen? Junius Seven was supposed to be in a stable orbit for centuries..."

"Why?"—such a futile question in times like these, yet humans can't help but ask, as if the answer could change anything.

"A meteor impact, perhaps... or some other factor..." Durandal shook his head. "Regardless, it's moving as we speak—towards Earth."

A chill ran down Cagalli's spine. The PLANTs were roughly ten kilometers in diameter. Was such a massive object truly hurtling towards the people on Earth at this very moment?

"If it falls... what will happen?! To Orb—no, to the entire Earth?!" she cried out instinctively.

Durandal replied, his tone somber yet somehow grating on Cagalli's frayed nerves.

"Given its mass, I'm sure you can imagine the consequences, Princess."

Every word from Durandal seemed to irritate her. She disliked being called "Princess," and felt as if there was some hidden meaning behind everything he said. Was this stemming from her own feelings of inadequacy as a leader? He always seemed so flawless and elegant—like a perfect actor.

"The PLANTs are currently dedicating all its resources to investigating the cause and exploring prevention methods," Durandal continued. Hearing this, Cagalli felt ashamed of her momentary anger towards him. The people of PLANT were concerned about this situation, even though it didn't directly affect them.

Yet, a cold realization swept through her—for those people, this was a distant problem. Junius Seven wasn't falling towards their heads.

"I must apologize for involving you in yet another incident, Princess, but I've issued special orders for the Minerva to head towards Junius Seven as soon as repairs are complete," Durandal said, bowing slightly. "Fortunately, we happen to be in close proximity. I hope you can understand and approve of this decision."

"Of course!" she nodded vigorously, her hands clenched in frustration. "This is crucial for us—no, it's even more critical for those on Earth! If there's anything at all that I can do to help..."

Durandal gently calmed her, "I understand your feelings, Princess, but please remain calm. If there's anything you can do, we'll be sure to ask you."

Despite his words, Cagalli knew there was little she could do. In this emergency, she felt powerless—unable to fly out and stop Junius Seven, unable to devise countermeasures back home, unable even to be with her people.

"It may be difficult, but we will try to establish direct contact with your nation." Captain Talia added softly, attempting to alleviate her anxiety.

"We will also take steps to have a ship come and pick you up as soon as possible."

"Yes... thank you..."

Cagalli bowed her head, a mixture of gratitude and frustration welling up inside her.

"But how could it have moved?"

The crew gathered in the rec room was in an uproar over the news about Junius Seven. Vino exclaimed in a shrill voice, and Yolant posited a plausible theory.

"Either a meteoroid hit, or some influence to alter the orbit."

"They say it's on a collision course with Earth... Is that really true?" Shinn asked, his face suddenly serious. Meyrin nodded firmly.

"That's what Bart said."

Bart had been the first on the ship to notice Junius Seven's orbital anomaly. Around the same time, the Supreme Council had informed Chairman Durandal.

Lunamaria sighed, brushing back her red hair.

"First the theft at the Armory, and then before that's even settled, this happens? What's going on?"

Shinn had to agree that things seemed strange. Of course, the two events weren't related, but he had a feeling that something terrible was unfolding around them.

"So, what are we supposed to do about Junius Seven now?" Lunamaria asked, and everyone fell silent for a moment. Then Rey, who had been quiet until now, answered matter-of-factly.

"We have to break it apart."

Vino and Yolant exchanged glances at this seemingly simple solution.

"Break it apart?"

"That thing?"

Rey continued in his usual calm manner. "If it's already being pulled by Earth's gravity, changing its orbit is impossible. If we want to avoid a collision, breaking it apart is our only option."

"B-but it's huge!" Yolant exclaimed, practical concerns surfacing. "Even though it's already split in half, the longest part is still about eight kilometers..."

Vino chimed in, "How the hell are we supposed to break something like that?!"

"But if it collides, Earth will be annihilated," Rey stated, his expression unwavering as he delivered this terrifying possibility. "Nothing will remain. Not even the people living there."

Shinn caught his breath, and even the boisterous Vino fell silent at these words.

It's said that the energy of a one-kilometer asteroid impact is equivalent to 100,000 megatons of TNT. A nuclear bomb is 50 megatons, so it would be like 2,000 of those. By that calculation, the impact energy of the nearly 10-kilometer Junius Seven would be close to 100 million megatons. Of course, its entry speed would be much slower than an asteroid, so a simple conversion wouldn't apply, but still—

A chilling silence fell over the rec room.

"Nothing?" Shinn repeated softly. The homeland he thought he had abandoned—Orb's shimmering sea, the scent of the wind—flashed through his mind for a moment, leaving him breathless. Would all of that simply vanish?

And along with it, billions of people living on the surface?

The assumption was too grand and chilling. Vino, seemingly unable to bear the heavy atmosphere, spoke up in a joking tone.

"Earth go boom?"

"Yeah," Yolant shrugged nonchalantly, then continued in a deliberately casual tone. "Well... but, y'know, can't be helped, right? It's an act of God, isn't it?"

Inwardly, Shinn flinched at Yolant's words. But Yolant, as if trying to break the tense atmosphere, pressed on.

"But hey, it might actually make things easier for us on the PLANTs. All those messy hassles would just... disappear."

His caustic words were suddenly interrupted by a sharp voice.

"How can you say such things?! All of you!"

Yolant jumped, and Shinn and the others turned anxiously towards the voice. Standing at the entrance to the rec room, her golden eyes blazing with anger, was Cagalli Yula Athha. Shinn instinctively scowled and looked away. Of all people, she was the last one he wanted to hear this.

Rey calmly saluted, while the others straightened up with uncomfortable expressions.

"'Can't be helped'? 'Might make things easier'?" Cagalli continued, her anger unabated.

"Do you have any idea how serious this is?! What could happen to Earth?! How many people will die as a result?! Do you guys realize what you're saying?!"

A look of exasperation passed over everyone's faces. Her words were logical, but they sounded like a boring lecture to their ears.

"Sorry," Yolant mumbled, bowing his head sullenly. He might have felt guilty about his irresponsible remarks, but it was just a joke. Being scolded outright without any regard for the atmosphere—especially by someone from another country—was hardly pleasant. Cagalli, seeing their defiant expressions, tensed even more.

"So, is that the way you people from ZAFT think?!"

Her accusatory tone grated on Shinn's nerves.

"After all that war... after all we've been through! I thought things had changed under Chairman Durandal's leadership!"

The more heated her tone became, the colder the crew's expressions grew. Didn't she realize? She was the only Natural in this room. This confrontation starkly highlighted the difference in their positions.

Athrun Zala, looking troubled behind her, gently pulled at her arm.

"That's enough, Cagalli."

At that moment, Shinn spoke up, directly challenging her.

"It's not as if Yolant really meant what he said. Can't you even tell the difference?!"

Although Shinn had initially felt Yolant's words were too much, Cagalli's overbearing accusations now had him completely incensed. From his perspective, she was just a clueless princess, spouting idealistic nonsense without understanding the realities of the world.

"Shinn, watch what you say," Rey admonished in a low voice. He responded with a contemptuous shrug.

"Oh, right. I forgot. This person's important. She's Orb's Representative, after all."

"You!" Cagalli, enraged by his attitude, tried to lunge at him, but Athrun grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Put a lid on it, Cagalli!"

Shinn was a bit surprised by the rough tone. He had thought the legendary ace had been reduced to the princess's lapdog, but it seemed their relationship was different behind the scenes.

Athrun stepped between the glaring Shinn and Cagalli, fixing him with a sharp gaze.

"You seem to have a strong dislike for Orb. Why is that?"

Shinn shifted his glare to Athrun, who continued in a restrained—yet ominous—tone, unfazed.

"I hear you used to live there. If you're trying to pick a fight with the Representative for some unrelated, trivial reason, I will not allow it."

"Trivial?"

Shinn's head felt hot with anger.

"I won't allow anyone to call it *trivial*!"

In his mind's eye, he saw a small hand, severed at the wrist, rolling in the dirt. A life cut short at just nine years, everything taken away in an instant by gunfire.

"And you're dead wrong about it being unrelated," he spat, glaring at the blonde girl before him.

"My family was *killed* because of the Athhas!"

Everyone around them froze at those words. But Shinn's eyes were fixed on just one person—the one who should bear responsibility for those lost lives.

"We believed in the nation, and we believed in your so-called ideals. And in the end, my family was *killed* at Onogoro!"

Not invading other countries, not allowing invasions, not intervening in conflicts—that was Orb's philosophy. It sounded beautiful in words. But what kind of nation sacrifices its citizens to uphold its principles?

A country exists for the people who live there. Isn't it backward to kill and torment innocent citizens to protect some professed justice?

And after all that, those in power survived, wiped their mouths as if nothing had happened, and clung to their positions. They raised the banner of idealistic justice, led the people down the wrong path, destroyed the country once, and yet were hailed as heroes, showered with praise, and now tried to walk the same path again, spouting the same pretty words. He could never forgive this woman.

"That's why I will *never* believe you! And I will *never* believe the nation of Orb! I'll *never* believe any of your idealism again! When you said you'd protect the nation's justice, did you ever stop to think how many lives would be lost as a result of your insistence?!"

As Shinn shouted, his voice trembling with rage, Cagalli stumbled back, the color draining from her face. Even Athrun, who caught her, showed visible distress.

"I don't want someone who doesn't have a clue to talk like she knows everything!"

With a final venomous remark, Shinn stormed past the stunned Cagalli and out of the room. From the frozen silence of the room, Vino's panicked voice followed him.

"H-hey! Shinn!"

He didn't stop. Both his clenched fists were still trembling slightly.

Not invading other countries, not allowing invasions, not intervening in conflicts. What good is justice that exists only in words? Without power, you can't refuse invasion. If the other side is going to shoot at you, you have no choice but to shoot back. To survive, to protect, you need power. Not beautiful, empty words.

In a country somewhere in Western Eurasia, rolling green hills stretched endlessly, dotted with forests, pastures, and beautiful houses weathered by time. Amidst this tranquil rural landscape stood an especially grand colonial-style mansion. Perhaps an ancient hunting party had just concluded, as men in riding attire gathered in one of its rooms.

"Now... this is just terrible," said one of the older men, settling into a Victorian-style chair and puffing on a cigar. A mahogany snooker table dominated the center of the room, with several men taking shots around it. In total, nine men lounged about in various states of relaxation.

"Indeed, an unprecedented crisis. A scenario for the Earth's destruction," another chimed in, his tone betraying no hint of the gravity his words implied.

One man, readying his cue, snorted.

"Hah! Has anyone actually written one like this?"

A man in his early thirties, standing out with his nearly white hair and pallid complexion, replied, "I've ordered Phantom Pain to investigate and report back. Just in case."

This man was Lord Djibril. The youngest among them, his piercing gaze left a lasting impression. He was both the owner of this magnificent estate and the current leader of Blue Cosmos.

"Will things be all right?" one man inquired.

Djibril answered leisurely, "Things will be fine."

But the elderly man who had spoken first voiced his skepticism.

"What good will an investigation do at this point?"

Djibril's thin lips curled into a wry smile.

"That's precisely *what* we're investigating."

"So, why are we meeting, Djibril? Well, I can't imagine the Atlantic Federation and governments around the world sitting back and letting that thing fall. They're all busy dealing with evacuation issues and plans, should it fall."

The threat they had been discussing was Junius Seven, steadily approaching overhead. These men, privy to information known only to a select few worldwide, spoke of it as if it were a calamity entirely unrelated to them.

"To be honest, I was quite shocked by this turn of events..." Djibril said in a theatrical tone, looking heavenward. "Junius Seven? How could this be? Why? — Those were my first thoughts."

As he gestured dramatically, one man cut him off impatiently.

"Skip the preamble, Djibril."

Djibril shook his head, his expression sharpening.

"No, this is precisely the point."

"Oh?" The group looked skeptical.

Djibril addressed them coolly.

"Given the situation, eventually the whole world will be asking those same questions."

How could this happen? Why?

Everyone would surely think that. Whether there was an answer or not, people would inevitably ask. Why?

"Then we must provide them with an 'answer.'"

As Djibril spoke, the men's eyes narrowed, and a faint murmur arose. Basking in their attention, Djibril revealed information known only to a select few.

"Durandal of the PLANTs has already issued a warning to all Earth nations and sent the message that he is doing everything within his power to avoid a collision and address the situation."

"That was a quick response. They must be panicking too."

"Then perhaps this really was caused naturally. But if so..."

One elderly man voiced what seemed to be a naive opinion, though no one present was truly naive or honest. Djibril, aware of this, shrugged slightly as if to dismiss the notion.

"No, that doesn't matter anymore. What's important is the answer we give to the masses who will lament, 'Why did this happen?' after this disaster."

The group murmured at his words, but it was more akin to wry amusement than shock or indignation.

"My, my, you're already thinking that far ahead?"

"Of course," Djibril replied sharply, his eyes gleaming. "Regardless of the cause, that unsightly, foolish mass will soon fall to Earth, right above our heads!"

He gestured angrily, his tone growing fierce.

"Think about it! Because of that thing, we end up looking spineless as we run around trying to find a way out of the mess!"

His manner gradually took on the fervor of a cult leader inciting his followers.

"Somebody must pay for this humiliation. But who?! Why, of course, the Coordinators who built that thing in the first place. Don't you agree?!"

The others regarded his anger with somewhat cynical expressions as they responded.

"Hmm... That's fine with me, but..."

"But at this rate, depending on the casualties incurred, we may no longer have the strength to fight a war."

Djibril coldly addressed their concerns.

"That's why I've gathered you all here today."

All eyes focused on the youngest member.

"By all means, evacuate and escape, but immediately after that, we will attack them at once. With the plan. I wanted you all to understand this beforehand."

As Djibril declared this resolutely, the others offered their opinions, tinged with mockery.

"I see... quite bold, aren't you?"

"With a growing hatred for the Coordinators, the people will be fired up."

"If there are any left, that is."

"We'll be uniting them, I imagine. With hatred masquerading as love."

After a brief discussion, the first speaker summarized, "It appears that everyone approves of the plan, Djibril."

Djibril bowed his head respectfully. The elderly man stood, issuing a leisurely command.

"Then we shall meet next after the incident. Have a detailed plan prepared by then."

"Yes, sir."

With that, the others rose to leave.

"But how extensive will the damage be?"

"Wars are fine, but these things are nothing but trouble."

"Whatever the case, it's all for the preservation of our blue and pure world!"

"Where shall we evacuate to..."

The men continued to chat, their tone still devoid of any sense of crisis, as they left the mansion. Djibril moved to the window, watching them leave with growing irritation.



Why are those old men like that?!

Do they understand the gravity of this situation? Once again, those Coordinators — those monsters who have no right to live — are threatening the world of humans. The very fact that they exist in space — above our heads — is unacceptable. As if they were gods! Allowing this was a mistake! And yet, those old men treat it like someone else's problem. This is a matter that concerns the dignity of all humanity!

Djibril's sharp eyes flashed with anger, and his hand, holding a snooker ball, lashed out. The ball shattered an intricately crafted Meissen porcelain piece in the corner, instantly reducing it to a pile of worthless fragments.

"The Voltaire and the Rousseau have taken the Meteor Breakers and gone ahead," Talia reported to Durandal as he entered the bridge.

"Right. We should hurry as well," Durandal nodded, taking his seat at the rear. Naturally, his demeanor betrayed no hint of last night's intimacy.

The Minerva, having completed its urgent repairs, had begun its journey towards Junius Seven. Despite being the fastest ship in ZAFT's fleet, even a moment's delay felt costly.

"Have the Earth Alliance Forces taken any action yet?" Arthur inquired discreetly.

"What are they doing? We have yet to receive word on any action taken by them," Durandal replied, sighing heavily. "But even if they launched ships from the moon, they wouldn't make it in time..."

"The best they can do now is fire missiles from Earth's surface to destroy it," he continued, his tone somber. "But that'll likely have little effect. It won't do much more than scorch the surface."

Talia concurred silently—ground-based interception would likely prove futile.

To minimize the impact on Earth's surface, their only choice was to break Junius Seven into the smallest possible fragments before it entered the atmosphere.

"Nevertheless, Earth remains our mother planet too. We must do everything in our power to address this unprecedented crisis," Durandal declared.

The crew listened intently, their expressions grave. They alone could reach the scene in time. Even if those on the surface were considered enemies, not a soul present could deny the urge to save them in this dire situation. Scanning each crew member's face, the Chairman addressed them:

"What we can do with this ship and what it's equipped with might be limited, but I ask that each and every one of you give it your all."

"Yes, sir!" the crew responded with fervor, focusing intently on their stations.

"Cagalli," Athrun called softly as he entered, carrying drink packs in both hands. Cagalli glanced briefly in his direction before lowering her gaze again.

The words hurled at her by that boy, Shinn, still echoed in her ears. Athrun approached and set a drink before her, but she made no move to take it. He knelt in front of her.

"There's no use dwelling on it, Cagalli. You knew, didn't you? That there would be people who felt that way."

She had known. No, she had thought she knew. That her father's decisions during the last war had caused many citizens to suffer. That there must be people who resented her father and her family because of it.

But in truth, she hadn't understood at all. Not until that boy stood before her and hurled those words of accusation.

"But..." she murmured, her voice pained. "For him to talk of my father in that way!"

Remembering her father brought tears to her eyes, and she bit her lip to hold them back.

For Shinn, whose family was taken by her father's decision, it was understandable to want to blame them. And yet—

"My father suffered a great deal over the decisions he made. Yet he..."

Her father, Uzumi Nara Athha, had fought to the very end for his country and its people. While the world burned in warfare, Orb alone remained peaceful until the very end. That was because Uzumi had steadfastly maintained his country's position, refusing to side with either faction. And when those efforts were finally crushed, he took responsibility and ended his own life. If people still wouldn't believe after all that, how could she make them understand?

She remembered her father's smile as he sent her to safety while he faced certain death, the touch of his hand as he stroked her hair one last time. No matter what anyone said, her father was an admirable man. He had loved her as his own daughter despite their lack of blood relation and entrusted her with his hopes.

Unable to hold back any longer, she began to cry. Athrun gently embraced her.

"But there's nothing we can do. Asking him to try and understand won't help. Right now, there's no way he could understand. I'm sure it's overwhelming enough for him to deal with his own feelings."

Athrun stroked her hair, looking into her eyes as he whispered, "You do realize that, don't you, Cagalli?"

The hatred—the overwhelming desire to kill those who took away your loved ones, to take up arms against them.

It was a path she herself had once walked. And Athrun too.

They had been able to abandon that hatred because of the person before them now, supporting each other—and because of her father's words.

"Fighting each other endlessly resolves nothing," her father had said. If the world continued on its current path, it would become a place of endless conflict between those who refused to accept each other.

He had fought to stop that, and for a moment, they thought they had succeeded. But what was the reality?

The world was still embroiled in conflict. No matter how loudly they shouted that this was wrong, no one seemed to listen to Cagalli and her allies. Had her father—and all those who fought alongside them, believing in their cause—died for this kind of world?

If only she were more capable—if she were even half the leader her father was, couldn't she stop this tide? As things stood, she couldn't face her father or their fallen comrades.

Cagalli clung to Athrun's chest, sobbing. He silently embraced her, holding her tightly.

Their presence was the only comfort they had in this moment.

The remnants of Junius Seven, pulled by Earth's gravity, trailed long strings behind it, resembling a massive jellyfish drifting in the deep sea.

On the bridge of the ZAFT Nazca-class ship *Voltaire*, observers gazed at the approaching debris of the PLANT.

"Man, seeing it up close like this... it's huge!" remarked a young blonde soldier in a standard uniform, his voice filled with awe. He couldn't have been more than twenty. His tanned face, usually adorned with a cocky grin, now bore a serious expression, clearly overwhelmed by the sight.

"Of course it is. We live in places just like it, you know!" snapped the silver-haired young commander beside him. Though around the same age, his straight silver hair and sharp features gave a cold first impression—one that would surely be proven wrong. His tone carried more casual familiarity than actual reprimand.

"I'm just saying, it really hits home how big a job it is to break that thing up!" the blonde retorted, his tone equally lacking in deference to his superior.

This was Dearka Elsman.

"You're too short-sighted. Stop grinning and take this more seriously," the young commander coldly replied. His name was Yzak Joule. Dearka peered at his face, clearly dissatisfied.

"You know, I really don't want to hear that from *you* of all people."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

As Yzak flared up, Dearka shrugged off the question.

"Oh, nothing at all, *Captain* sir!"

"Don't you 'Captain' me only when it suits you!"

The bridge crew watched their exchange with barely concealed amusement, as if thinking, "Here they go again." Dearka casually winked at a female crew member who happened to catch his eye, causing her to nearly burst out laughing before hastily turning back to her station.

Despite their banter, both men were veterans who had survived countless fierce battles during the war.

"But you know..." Dearka said softly as they headed towards the elevator. "This is what mobile suits *should* be used for."

Though developed as weapons, mobile suits with their freely moving limbs and resistance to strong solar winds—lethal space radiation for humans—were perfect for operations like this. Sensing the deeper meaning in Dearka's words, Yzak's ice-blue eyes reflected a complex emotion. Then, as if switching gears, he gave a sharp final instruction.

"Listen up. We don't have all the time in the world. The Minerva's coming too. Work efficiently!"

"Roger that!"

Dearka closed one eye, offering a casual salute through the closing elevator doors.

Shinn stood pensively at the alert station, gazing at the Core Splendor lined up on the mobile suit deck. He didn't want anyone to find him. He had never told his comrades about his past before. Now that it was out in the open, he couldn't bear the thought of being pitied or treated like a fragile object. At least not right now.

He replayed the words he had hurled at Cagalli, and the ones she had spoken before that.

He didn't think he was wrong. Sure, everyone had had enough of war. He understood that if Coordinators and Naturals could truly understand each other and live hand in hand, that would be ideal.

But what were they supposed to do when they extended a hand, only to have it slapped away and a gun pointed at them? Were they supposed to just stand there and be shot? What Cagalli said was ultimately just pretty words that didn't match reality. Look at what happened in Orb. No matter how loudly you proclaim non-aggression, it's all over once guns are pointed at you. Without strength, you'll ultimately be destroyed by those who have it.

The quickest way to end war was to possess overwhelming power. Then the enemy would be too afraid to attack. Power was necessary. To protect oneself and one's people.

But, he bitterly reflected, even though he had obtained power, he felt like he still couldn't do anything. Those three units—Chaos, Gaia, and Abyss—were taken without him being able to do a thing, and he was tossed about every time he fought. At this rate, having power meant nothing.

The alert station door opened, snapping him out of his thoughts. It was Rey, wearing a pilot suit of white with light purple accents. Though Rey noticed Shinn, he silently approached the wall display and began checking data. Shinn, who had been bracing himself for comments about the earlier scene, found himself staring at Rey's back. Perhaps sensing this, Rey glanced over his shoulder.

"What is it?"

"N-nothing, really..." he stammered.

Rey turned back to the display as if nothing had happened and casually said, "Don't worry about it. I'm not upset."

Shinn looked at his back, taken aback. After a moment, he realized that Rey, in his own way, was trying to be considerate.

"What you said was correct too," he added in his usual detached tone.

A smile broke across Shinn's face. He was immensely pleased by his colleague's unchanging demeanor and consideration, and by the affirmation of his own beliefs.

As Athrun gently stroked Cagalli's hair, exhausted from crying and now asleep, he quietly stood up. Her sleeping face, with tears still clinging to her eyelashes, looked like that of a young child.

She must be tired, Athrun thought, gazing down at her vulnerable expression with a pang of sympathy.

Lately, she'd been running around non-stop, and now this crisis. Cagalli was trying her best, but her efforts were so rarely rewarded. It was wearing her down, and Athrun too.

He softly left the room and headed for the elevator, where he encountered a red-haired girl exiting.

"Oh," Lunamaria, as she was called, addressed him casually as they passed. "Is the Princess feeling better?"

Athrun shot her a sharp look, catching the sarcasm in her words. They were the ones who didn't understand. They assumed Cagalli was just a sheltered princess who knew nothing of hardship or pain, simply because she was from the ruling family.

"She's lost her father and friends too. In that war," Athrun said in a low voice.

Lunamaria turned back, surprised.

"She's not as clueless as you think," he added, closing the elevator door.

It wasn't the fault of girls like her. They didn't know war. Even Shinn, who lost his family in the conflict, didn't truly understand war in its fullest sense. Once started, war engulfs hatred and grows endlessly like a snowball rolling down a hill. A child whose parent was killed takes up arms, and in firing, kills someone else's parent, whose child then takes up arms in turn. Grand causes like fighting for one's country, family, or peace become meaningless. If you truly care about these things, you must never start a war. That's what Uzumi Nara Athha believed until the end.

Those living in Orb likely didn't understand Uzumi's efforts. People rarely appreciate the value of peace when they're in it. Many of those being protected never consider how much effort it takes to maintain that peace. Anyone who truly believed in Uzumi should be able to understand his decisions.

But no matter how much you try to explain this, it won't reach the hearts of young people clouded by hatred. To their ears, Cagalli's words sound like empty platitudes. Indeed, if they were just pleasant-sounding words given by

someone else, they would be just pretty talk. But for her, they were the answer she had grasped after experiencing pain and loss—her own truth.

As the elevator doors opened, the bridge monitors were displaying Junius Seven. Though its movement wasn't visible from here, it had already emerged significantly from the sea of debris, approaching the blue planet visible in the background as if being drawn in.

"Can you open a line with the Voltaire?"

"No, not on the regular channel yet."

As Athrun stepped forward, listening to the bridge exchange, Durandal noticed and turned to him.

"What's the matter, Athrun? Oh, Alex, was it?"

Hearing his voice, Captain Talia also looked over. Athrun hesitated for a moment. What he was about to say would betray his previous stance. But he spoke resolutely.

"I ask you this, knowing it would be unconventional. Please lend me one of your mobile suits!"

His words drew surprised looks from the entire bridge crew. Talia stared at his determined expression. Her eyes held a hint of wry amusement rather than reproach, but she quickly responded in a clear tone.

"That certainly would be very difficult to do. Do you seriously think I could authorize that, given you're currently a civilian from another country? Do you want to put former Chairman Canaver's efforts to waste?"

Her statement implicitly acknowledged that he was Athrun Zala. She was warning him not to reveal any more. If he was Athrun Zala, she, as a soldier, would have the duty to detain him as a deserter. To avoid this, she had to treat him as "Alex Dino," an Orb citizen.

Understanding her benevolence, Athrun still insisted stubbornly.

"I understand completely. But given the situation, I can't just watch and do nothing."

This was for Cagalli—for her, and for all the people living on Earth, who were also his own people. Athrun bowed deeply.

"If there's a unit I can use, please—!"

"I understand how you feel, but—" Talia's exasperated voice was interrupted by Durandal.

"Very well. I'll authorize it."

Surprised by the casual interjection, Athrun turned to look at him. Durandal's almond-shaped eyes regarded him with an amused smile.

"Chairman?!"

"Under my authority as Chairman, for special cases," he said, seemingly enjoying exercising his power.

Athrun wasn't particularly surprised. Somehow, he had a feeling this man would understand.

"But, Chairman..." Talia started to object with an annoyed expression, but fell silent at his counterargument.

"This is not a combat situation, Captain. The more machines we can get out there, the better."

Durandal maintained a gentle smile as he added jokingly, "You know his skills are reliable, don't you?"

He really seemed to be enjoying this. But... enjoying what exactly?

For a moment, an odd sense of unease flitted through Athrun's mind.

The mobile suits launched one after another from the Voltaire's linear catapult. The GuAIZ Rs, plunging into the pitch-black void of space, received massive work equipment ejected from the mothership and headed towards Junius Seven. The work equipment, called "Meteor Breakers," had drills mounted on tripod bases. Originally used for asteroid demolition, their mission now was to drive these into various points on Junius Seven and detonate them underground to break it into smaller fragments.

"Let's go! Captain Joule says to hurry!" Dearka called out to his unit, taking the lead in his Gunner ZAKU Warrior. Before them loomed the artificial landmass, resembling a giant jellyfish trailing its tentacles.

Dearka's mind flashed to the face of a girl he'd met during the war. She should be on Earth now. The thought that this massive jellyfish was about to fall on her head filled him with an unpleasant sense of urgency.

"I'll take care of this thing for sure!" he silently vowed.

The advance work team descended onto the frozen land and immediately began setting up the Meteor Breakers. Suddenly, two GuAIZ Rs exploded in quick succession. Dearka realized they'd been hit by beams from an unknown source just as he narrowly dodged a beam aimed at him.

"What the—?!"

As alarms blared in his cockpit, Dearka scanned his surroundings. From various points on the frozen landscape, unfamiliar mobile suits emerged, firing beam rifles continuously.

—*We're under attack?*

"What the hell is this?!"

Though the black and purple color scheme and additional boosters stood out, Dearka easily recognized the base model of these mobile suits. They were GINNs. These units, which should have been friendly, were now systematically destroying his comrades before his eyes.

"Damn it! Fall back! Everyone, fall back for now!" Dearka called out to his unit while returning fire with his M1500 Orthros.

The GuAIZ Rs of the work team were unarmed. They were being destroyed one after another without any means of defense.

"Ejecting GuAIZ rifles! Dearka, protect the Meteor Breakers!" Yzak's voice, having received the report, came through mixed with static from the mothership. "I'm launching too!"

"Shit!" Dearka yelled in anger and frustration.

Who were these guys? Why were they interfering? If they didn't hurry, Junius Seven would fall to Earth as is. And if that happened, the people living on Earth—*she* would...

Just then, a chilling realization crept up his spine, and he took a fresh look at the modified GINN squad.

—*Could it be... these guys are...?*

Why had Junius Seven, supposedly in a stable orbit, started moving? Dearka had just found the answer to the question everyone had been asking.

"Three minutes to mobile suit launch. All pilots are to standby aboard your machines. I repeat. Three minutes to take off. All pilots are to standby aboard your machines."

As the launch countdown echoed through the hangar, Athrun, now clad in a pilot suit, dashed towards the moss-green mobile suit. The familiar, constricting feel of the suit brought back memories.

"I know the mission is to support smashing it apart, but what are we expected to do?" Lunamaria, discussing with tech staff in front of her red ZAKU, looked surprised upon noticing Athrun.

Athrun was assigned the ZAKU Warrior. Though he already knew how to operate it, Madd Aves, the ship's chief technician, briefed him on the unit's specifications. He overheard Lunamaria's voice as she glanced at him while talking to the staff.

"Huh... Well, he is capable of piloting mobile suits after all..."

She disappeared into her cockpit with a cocky tone.

As Rey's white ZAKU Phantom was moved to the catapult, Athrun entered his own unit and powered it up. Suddenly, control announced a change in plans.

"Launch aborted! Situation change!"

Athrun looked up, puzzled. The next announcement surprised him doubly.

"The Joule Team is engaged with unknown units at Junius Seven!"

"Yzak?" Athrun murmured, the name evoking inescapable memories.

He and Yzak Joule had graduated from the academy together and served in the same unit during the war. Comrades, though Yzak might prefer "rivals."

"All units, alter your equipment for anti-mobile suit combat!"

Questions raced through Athrun's mind. Yzak was here? And in combat? Who were these unknowns?

Before he could process this, another report came in.

"Bogey One also confirmed! Green 25, Delta!"

Bogey One—the unidentified ship they'd recently failed to capture. Why was it here?

Completely at a loss, Athrun demanded answers from the controller.

"What's going on?!"

The red-haired girl on the monitor looked equally confused.



"I have no idea! However, our mission to support the Joule Team remains unchanged! Launch as soon as re-equipment is complete!"

Anti-mobile suit combat—this was unexpected. Athrun hesitated briefly, but concern quickly overtook him. Was the Joule Team—was Yzak—alright? He knew Yzak's skills, but he couldn't help worrying.

Shinn's Core Splendor launched first, followed by its three component units. Rey's ZAKU Phantom, now equipped for high-mobility combat, launched next. Lunamaria's unit was moved to the catapult, being fitted with artillery equipment.

Suddenly, Lunamaria's face appeared on Athrun's monitor.

"The situation's changed. It could be dangerous. Would you rather not go?" she asked challengingly.

Athrun glared back.

"Give me a little respect!"

Did they see him as some relic of the past? Lunamaria's ZAKU Warrior launched, and Athrun's unit was moved to the catapult, fitted with equipment similar to Rey's—now a Blaze ZAKU Warrior.

The starry void peeked through the open hatch before him. A mix of exhilaration and resignation filled his chest.

He had returned here after all.

But now wasn't the time for hesitation. His friend was fighting. And Junius Seven was still falling towards Earth.

As the launch light turned green, Athrun fixed his gaze straight ahead.  
"Athrun Zala, taking off!"

"I won't let you pests..."

Sato and his comrades charged towards the work team carrying Meteor Breakers, showering them with beam fire. Their GINN High Maneuver Type 2 units, enhanced with additional boosters, now rivaled the next-generation GuAIZ R in mobility. But the difference in piloting skill was even greater. No one in this squad would fall behind to these greenhorns who had just started piloting mobile suits.

And in the weight of their convictions.

Sato closed in on a GuAIZ attempting to retreat while holding a Meteor Breaker, firing a precise shot as he passed. The beam pierced the GuAIZ, which erupted into a brief flash of light behind him before scattering.

"We won't let you thwart our resolve! Not now!" he roared, his fighting spirit palpable. Behind him, Junius Seven slowly ticked down its countdown to destruction. This massive gravestone was now the only thing worth protecting for those who had already lost everything they once sought to defend.

Rifles ejected from the mothership were caught by GuAIZ units, which began to return fire. Sato maneuvered his mobile suit with dizzying speed; the desperate barrage from the GuAIZ couldn't even graze his unit. In an instant, he closed in and drew the heavy sword at his waist. As he wheeled

his unit around, the GuAIZ's cockpit had already been cleaved in two, silent. His swordsmanship was flawless.

These were people content to soak in the lukewarm bath of hypocrisy. Oblivious to the feelings of their fallen comrades, did they intend to pile on more hypocrisy by bringing out these Meteor Breakers?!

Sato's fury erupted from his gun barrel, systematically destroying the mobile suits of the organization he once belonged to.

*—If that's how it is, we'll have to force their eyes open!*

Dearka leveled his long-barreled cannon, unleashing an arrow of energy. But the enemy unit, which should have been hit, dodged at the last moment. The beam was swallowed uselessly by the remnants of Junius Seven.

"Damn! Who the hell are these guys?! To maneuver a GINN like that...!" Dearka groaned in frustration.

*—This can't be happening. My shots aren't even grazing them!*

It wasn't mere conceit. Though currently treated as a regular soldier, he was once an ace qualified to wear the "red" uniform. Like Yzak, who led their squad, he had brushed with death countless times. His instincts told him—these guys were veterans.

Another enemy GINN closed in on a GuAIZ desperately protecting a Meteor Breaker. Just as it seemed doomed, a beam of light pierced the darkness. A mobile suit, appearing like a flash of blue lightning, showered the enemy with warning shots, forcing the GINN to retreat.

"The workers are to continue with the demolition! If we stop, we're playing right into their hands!"

The sharp voice issuing orders belonged to Yzak, who had arrived in his Slash ZAKU Phantom. His personal blue ZAKU Phantom was equipped for close combat, with Gatling beam cannons mounted on both shoulders.

Following his orders, the GuAIZ that had narrowly escaped death headed towards Junius Seven with its Meteor Breaker. The enemy GINN that had just been spared now recklessly charged at Yzak head-on. The ZAKU Phantom's precise shot, almost casual in its execution, caught the unit and scattered it into space.

With their commander's arrival, the disoriented work team began to regain their composure. But their relief was short-lived as more warning alarms blared in Dearka's cockpit. Three heat signatures entered his thermal detection range, approaching at incredible speed. Before his eyes could even catch their silhouettes, high-powered beams rained down on the area like a sudden downpour. They indiscriminately swept away both the unidentified GINNs and the GuAIZs mid-demolition work, incinerating even the Meteor Breakers being set up.

*—More enemies?!*

As Dearka grappled with confusion, the heat signatures were identified as friendly units. Or more accurately, units that were once friendly.

"What the—? Chaos, Gaia, Abyss?!" Yzak's voice rang out in bewilderment. Dearka struggled to grasp the situation.

"The units stolen from Armory One?!"

Why were these units here? Hadn't they escaped after shaking off the Minerva? What was their intention in intervening in this battle?

But with enemies firing at them, there was no time to ponder their motives. The demolition work was already severely delayed due to the GINN squad. Dearka and Yzak deployed to protect the working team, turning their weapons towards the three units.

As Cagalli entered the bridge, Chairman Durandal's stern voice resonated through the air.

"So those forces are using GINNs?"

She hesitated, taken aback by the tense atmosphere. Having dozed off earlier, she'd awoken to find Athrun gone, presumably to the bridge. But he wasn't here, and an unexpected situation seemed to be unfolding.

"Yes, they appear to be High Maneuver Type 2s. Any sign of a mothership nearby?" Talia responded.

"None detected!"

It was as if they were in the midst of battle. Cagalli cautiously approached Durandal. Then, she heard the Executive Officer Arthur's indignant words that made her doubt her ears.

"But why would they... Does this mean these guys are responsible for altering Junius Seven's orbit?"

"What?!" she couldn't help but exclaim.

—*Altered the orbit? GINNs did this?*

Confused, she stared at Junius Seven on the monitor. Were they suggesting this wasn't an accident?

"What fools would do such a thing?!" Arthur cursed.

Talia spoke with a grim expression.

"But if that's true, it's all the more reason why we can't let them drop it on Earth! Please update Rey and the others!"

"Princess..."

She jumped, startled by Durandal's voice right in front of her. Flustered, as if caught at an awkward moment, she blurted out her initial reason for coming.

"W-where's Athrun?"

In contrast to her stammering, he replied with a calm smile.

"Oh? Didn't you know?"

"Huh?" She blinked in surprise.

"He came to us and asked that he be allowed to help," Durandal explained, gesturing towards the monitor with his eyes. "Right now, he's out there."

Cagalli gasped, stunned.

The screen showed Junius Seven, surrounded by flashes of light indicating ongoing combat.

"Damn it! Those guys!"

The moment Shinn saw the three mobile suits attacking the Joule squad, his blood boiled. Chaos, Gaia, Abyss—they were killing allies again!

Driven by rage, he shot forward. He couldn't let this opportunity slip away. The impending crisis on Earth vanished from his mind, replaced solely by the desire to settle the score with those three units.

"We'll get those three today!"

Lunamaria, seemingly sharing Shinn's sentiments, shouted enthusiastically as she followed. Just then, an unfamiliar voice cautioned them.

"Our objective isn't combat!"

After a moment, Shinn realized it was Athrun Zala speaking. A bitter feeling spread through him. This guy who ran away from fighting to choose Orb was now piloting their mobile suits like he owned them, and even trying to give orders!

Shinn naturally ignored the warning, and Lunamaria defiantly shouted back.

"I know that! But they're firing at us! Unless we get rid of them, we won't get any work done, will we?!"

Athrun's unit, either satisfied or having given up, said no more and headed towards Junius Seven alongside Rey's unit. Shinn snorted mockingly.

—*What legendary ace? He's just a coward!*

"Junius Seven, descent angle increased by 1.5! Acceleration up 4%!"

"The Joule Team is under attack from Chaos, Gaia, and Abyss!"

Hearing these reports echoing through the Minerva's bridge, Cagalli anxiously stared at the monitor. Athrun was out there now. While this fact stirred up worry, she wasn't actually concerned for his safety. She trusted his skills so much that she naturally believed no enemy could shoot him down in battle.

What pained her heart was the thought that he had taken up that power again, the power he had once abandoned, to go out there.

"They're unable to continue with the demolition work. Captain! The ship should engage Bogey One!" Arthur urged Talia for attack orders in a frustrated tone. But Talia had been deep in thought, her expression troubled. After a moment, she spoke.

"Mr. Chairman. What is your assessment of Bogey One's current involvement?"

Caught off guard by the sudden question, Durandal looked at her, gauging her meaning. She pressed on, as if steeling herself.

"As pirates? Or... as Earth Forces?"

"That's a difficult one. I didn't want to consider them Earth Forces, but..."

"We don't know what kind of powder keg this could become, do we?"

Talia smoothly agreed. Both Cagalli and Arthur listened intently to this delicate conversation.

"But the situation has changed," Durandal said, as if having made up his mind. Talia continued, picking up his thread.

"Yes, in this emergency, if they acknowledge themselves as Earth Forces or an associated unit... battling them here would be meaningless."

At this point, Cagalli finally understood the meaning behind their conversation. If that unidentified ship was indeed Earth Alliance as everyone suspected, they would have no reason to interfere with the demolition work. They probably didn't understand what ZAFT was trying to do. Or rather—

"On the contrary, they could be interpreting our actions as protecting those GINNs."

Durandal voiced exactly what Cagalli was thinking.

"That's absurd!" Arthur exclaimed, sounding offended, but Talia calmed him.

"It can't be helped. If those units happened to be Daggers, wouldn't you suspect Earth Forces involvement too?"

She was right. Not only were they not protecting the GINNs, but they might not even be able to distinguish between the two sides. In other words, to those unaware of the situation, it might appear that ZAFT was trying to make Junius Seven fall.

Cagalli bit her lip, feeling a sense of urgency.

This was bad. It was already terrible that this disaster was artificially induced, but leaving this misunderstanding unchecked could lead to irreparable consequences.

Durandal spoke decisively.

"Can we contact Bogey One?"

"We could use the international distress channel."

"Then try reaching them using that channel. Make it clear to them that we are making every effort to crush Junius Seven and stop it from falling to Earth."

"Yes, sir."

Watching their calm response, Cagalli continued to anxiously watch the monitor.

Bogey One—she could only hope that those on that ship would be satisfied with this explanation...

Athrun hovered above Junius Seven. Below, GuAIZ units descended to the frozen surface, protecting their Meteor Breakers. As modified GINNs swooped in to attack the work team, Athrun returned fire with his beam assault rifle. In a split second, his shots blew off one GINN's head and left leg.

Two more GINNs, having marked Athrun, approached from the side, firing beams. Athrun instantly ignited his leg thrusters. His ZAKU executed a

brilliant somersault, dodging the beams while firing its rifle without pause. This acrobatic movement, coupled with precise shooting, first shot down one GINN's rifle, then pierced the second's head. As the first GINN tried to draw its heavy sword, a third beam tore off its right arm.

Just as a GuAIZ team attempted to set up a Meteor Breaker on the surface, beams from the opposite direction assaulted them. From above, Chaos, with its massive weapons pod on its back, took aim with its beam rifle.

"Damn it!" Athrun cursed, turning his unit. He quickly unleashed a barrage of beams, causing Chaos to detach its weapons pod. The DRAGOON system. Dodging beams from the pods front and back, Athrun instantly predicted their trajectories from the streaks of light and pulled the trigger. One pod was pierced by his shot. During this exchange, his unit closed the distance to the Chaos in one swift movement, diving into close range.

"Stop it!"

Chaos fired its head vulcans, but Athrun's ZAKU's fist had already connected with its face. The inertia-packed blow sent the Chaos flying backward.

The pilot inside should be from the Earth Alliance. If so, their objectives should be the same. There was no time to waste on this battle.

Despite Athrun's frustration, the Chaos stubbornly persisted in its attack. Unable to shake it off, Athrun had no choice but to engage. The remaining weapons pod, as if manifesting the enemy's determination, launched rapid-fire attacks. While evading this barrage, Athrun drew a beam tomahawk from his shield and hurled it. The spinning blade of light caught up with the pod, bisecting it.

Yet the Chaos still charged in, drawing its beam saber. Athrun caught the tomahawk as it returned after destroying its target, and pointed its blade towards the enemy.

Through the communication channel, Stella heard Auel's shout: "Is it your fault that Junius Seven started moving?!"

Burning with anger, she glared at the ZAFT forces deployed below.

—*It's their fault! Bad people!*

A red ZAKU Warrior was heading straight for her. The cocky one she'd failed to shoot down earlier. This one's also part of the bad guys!

Stella drove her Gaia towards the red ZAKU. As she fired her beam rifle, the red enemy unit returned fire. Beams grazed each other's units before disappearing into the void. She fired repeatedly while evading, but still couldn't hit the enemy. She grew frustrated.

—That white one and this one, why won't they go down?!

As they clashed, both units had unknowingly approached the still-falling Junius Seven. Chasing the red ZAKU weaving through surface buildings, Stella descended to the ground. Gaia swiftly transformed into its quadruped

mode, powerfully kicking off the ground and firing simultaneously from its back-mounted cannon and shoulder-mounted rifles. Pursued by three beams, the red enemy unit escaped skyward, there raising its long-barreled beam cannon to fire from the hip. But when intense energy burst from the enemy's muzzle, Stella was no longer there. The Gaia kicked off the frozen ground, using floating debris to close in on the enemy unit in an instant, using that momentum to kick the red unit away. Unable to absorb the inertia, the ZAKU was helplessly slammed onto the ground below, carving a long furrow in the frozen soil before finally stopping.

Stella descended triumphantly towards the vulnerable drifting unit.

"This'll finish you, Red Suit!"

But the moment she fired her beam, the red ZAKU kicked up its legs, using both hands to push off the ground for acceleration. The rotating unit narrowly dodged the beam, its foot soles kicking Gaia's head. A tremendous impact crushed Stella's body.

"What?!"

Controlling her sent-flying unit, she aimed her beam cannon at the ZAKU. Without pause, the enemy hurled a tomahawk at her. The spinning blade grazed Gaia, tearing off its shoulder-mounted rifle, while simultaneously, Stella's beam pierced the enemy's right leg.

—*Just a little more!*

Burning with frustration at her near miss, she continued to pursue the red unit that had lost one leg.

Amidst the ongoing battle, a GuAIZ team that had landed on Junius Seven's surface successfully activated a Meteor Breaker. As they watched the device burrow into the ground, the pilots cheered. Soon, a rumbling arose from deep within, and the frozen land shook violently. Cracks spread across the surface.

Yzak Joule, wielding a beam axe longer than his mobile suit, had just cleaved two GINNs in half. He looked down at Junius Seven expectantly. But the rumbling subsided quickly, leaving the cracked surface silent.

"Damn it!"

This PLANT remnant was too large to be shattered by just one or two Meteor Breakers. As a GuAIZ tried to activate another Breaker, an enemy GINN swooped in to attack.

"Oh no you don't!"

Dearka's ZAKU aimed its massive beam cannon at the GINN. The intense beam caught the unit, blowing off one of its legs and forcing it to retreat. Fighting to protect the surface, he urged his team on.

"Hurry! If we take our sweet time, it'll be too late even if we can get it to split!"

More Meteor Breakers activated, driving into the ground. Below the clashing mobile suits, the land trembled with the impacts.

As everyone watched with bated breath, a massive fissure opened in the frozen ground, widening to reveal the starry sky beyond.

"Great! We did it!" Dearka cheered, his voice joined by others over the comm channel. Relief flickered across Yzak's face.

Junius Seven had split nearly in half, drifting apart slightly from the explosion's force. Yzak retreated to avoid the scattered debris. Even the three stolen Second Stage units seemed to pause their attack, perhaps surprised by the turn of events.

As everyone felt a sense of accomplishment, a calm voice cut through the comm channel.

"But it's not enough yet..."

Yzak's ears perked up at the familiar voice. A ZAKU Warrior crossed his view, descending towards the split Junius Seven.

"We need to break it into smaller pieces..."

The voice's assessment was correct. Even halved, Junius Seven's diameter was still nearly ten kilometers. It remained a significant threat to Earth. But what caught Yzak's attention wasn't the content.

That voice—

"Athrun?!" Dearka exclaimed in surprise, almost in unison with Yzak's own reaction.

"Bastard! What the hell are you doing here?!"

Athrun Zala—there was no mistaking the voice of his former comrade. The guy who had snatched most of the top ranks from Yzak at the academy, still irritating to remember. But Yzak had heard he had secretly defected to Orb. Why was Athrun here, casually piloting a ZAFT mobile suit?

"That's not important right now! We must continue with our mission!"

Athrun urged them on in the same cool voice from two years ago. Dearka snapped back to reality with an "Ah, right," while Yzak barked back angrily.

"I know that!"

Honestly, even after two years, this guy still got on his nerves! Showing up out of nowhere, giving orders without explanation, and taking the spotlight—he hadn't changed at all.

Scowling, Yzak lined up next to Dearka's unit carrying a Meteor Breaker. Athrun's unit flanked the other side. After a moment, an amused voice came over the comm.

"You haven't changed, Yzak."

Even that line was stolen from him. Yzak shouted back, "Neither have you!"

"Good grief," Dearka muttered, his voice tinged with amusement.

Two modified GINNs approached from the front. Leaving the Meteor Breaker to Dearka, Yzak and Athrun moved forward. Athrun's unit shot down one GINN's rifle as they passed, while Yzak swiftly severed the other's arm. The second GINN tried to snipe them to save its comrade. Yzak unleashed his shoulder-mounted Gatling beam cannons, and as the GINN dodged, it flew right into Dearka's beam cannon, exploding as it was pierced.



Without a word exchanged, the three units' coordination was natural. For a moment, Yzak felt as if he'd returned to two years ago. Noticing a smile had unconsciously formed on his lips, he quickly composed himself.

Athrun Zala was still an irritating guy. But he was also one of the few men Yzak could trust to watch his back.

"Damn it!"

The debris scattered by Junius Seven's fragmentation caused Shinn to momentarily lose sight of the Abyss he'd been engaging. In that instant, Abyss closed in on a ZAKU carrying a Meteor Breaker, its chest cannon melting the surrounding terrain with a thick heat beam. As Shinn pursued the enemy, two ZAKUs guarding the Meteor Breaker suddenly split to the sides.

"Yzak!" Athrun Zala's warning came through the comm.

"Shut up!" Yzak Joule snapped back without hesitation.

Athrun's ZAKU skillfully weaved through Abyss's line of fire, unleashing a barrage from its rifle. As Abyss was distracted, Yzak Joule's ZAKU Phantom slipped behind it.

"I'm the one in command here! Stop giving orders, you damn civilian!"

With that, Yzak's unit swung its beam axe, cleaving the Abyss's hastily raised beam lance in two. Seizing the moment, Athrun's unit darted in, its energy blade flashing as it severed Abyss's left leg. It happened so quickly that Shinn barely had time to gasp.

Despite their seemingly antagonistic tone, the two ZAKUs displayed remarkable teamwork as they turned to face the Chaos that had come to assist. Athrun's precise barrage kept the Chaos off-balance while Yzak's unit closed in at incredible speed. His axe cut through even the anti-beam coated shield. As Chaos tried to return fire while retreating, Athrun's thrown beam tomahawk struck, shearing off its right arm along with its beam rifle.

Shinn watched in awe, stunned by the elegant yet devastating combat of the two units. In mere seconds, they had nearly incapacitated enemy units that Shinn and his team hadn't been able to scratch despite numerous battles.

"So, these are the abilities of the survivors of Jachin Due?" he muttered in admiration. Captain Yzak Joule was renowned among Shinn's peers for his great achievements at Jachin Due. It was surprising enough that Athrun Zala was an old acquaintance of his, but Athrun's skills were clearly on par with, if not surpassing, Yzak's. Shinn now understood why Athrun was called a legendary ace. He felt ashamed for having looked down on such a formidable pilot without knowing better.

"Shinn! What are you doing?!" Rey's voice suddenly came through, snapping him back to reality. Rey was still diligently working on Junius Seven.

"We're not finished with our mission yet!"

Shinn finally remembered their original objective, feeling guilty for his distraction. But even as he headed towards Junius Seven, he couldn't help glancing back once more at the battle unfolding behind him.

Just then, signal flares shot up from a blue-gray warship in the distance, causing him to turn back in surprise. The colorful lights illuminated the darkness of space, casting an eerie glow on the fragments of Junius Seven.

On the Minerva's bridge, they also witnessed the return signal. Durandal exhaled with relief.

"Looks like they finally believe us."

Talia responded dryly, "That may be true, or there could be another reason."

"Another reason?"

"The altitude," she replied tersely, her eyes fixed on the instrument readings.

Hearing their exchange, Cagalli snapped back to reality and looked out the window. While they'd been focused on Junius Seven, the blue planet below had grown to fill their view.

"If we continue descending with Junius Seven, the ship will eventually be unable to escape Earth's gravity."

Cagalli turned anxious eyes to the monitor. Thanks to the mobile suit teams' efforts, Junius Seven had been broken into several pieces. But given its original size, even the fragments seemed threatening to Cagalli.

The mobile suit teams were still trying to break the fragments further with Meteor Breakers. But continuing the operation was becoming dangerous for them too. If they got too close to Earth, they might be pulled in by its massive gravity along with Junius Seven. And Athrun was among those working mobile suits.

"We must decide now what lives we cannot afford to lose." Talia continued dispassionately. "Who we can save, and who we cannot."

Cagalli looked at her, struggling to understand. Durandal also called out, sounding puzzled.

"Captain?"

Talia turned to face them, an uncharacteristically daring smile on her face.

"I'm sorry to have to bring this up under the circumstances, but please make your way over to the Voltaire."

"What?" Durandal asked, taken aback. Cagalli furrowed her brow, confused. Why ask them to transfer ships at a time like this?

Answering their unspoken question, Talia revealed her intention:

"The Minerva will enter the atmosphere and use its main cannon as long as the ship will hold to break up the target."

Everyone on the bridge, not just Cagalli and Durandal, gasped at her bold declaration.

"W-What?!" Arthur, the vice-captain, froze. Malik, the helmsman, grimaced.

"C-Captain! You can't be..."

Cagalli stared wide-eyed at the woman calmly seated before her. Ignoring her crew's hesitation, Talia shrugged nonchalantly.

"I don't know how much we can do, but—it would leave a bad taste to just watch when we have the power to act."

A wave of emotion welled up in Cagalli's chest. The people on the ground were likely strangers to Talia and her crew—no, even potential enemies. Yet she was willing to risk herself to save them.

Cagalli regretted her earlier words to the ZAFT youths. When they had said Earth could perish, she had doubted if they could ever understand each other. But she was wrong. Talia and the pilots still working on Junius Seven all wanted to save even enemy lives. If roles were reversed, Cagalli would do the same without hesitation. They weren't incompatible species after all, but fellow humans with the same heart.

"Talia, but..." Durandal voiced his concern. Cagalli understood his worry. The Minerva likely had atmospheric entry capabilities like the Earth Alliance's Archangel-class, originally built by Orb. But it had never been tested, and despite repairs, the ship had taken considerable damage in recent battles. They couldn't rely on spec sheet heat resistance values. This was a highly risky move. But Talia responded with a bright smile.

"I'm a lucky woman. Leave it to me."

"Alright," Durandal sighed, smiling as if admiring her spirit.

"Thanks, Talia. I appreciate it."

"No need, Mr. Chairman. Please hurry. Notify the Voltaire of Chairman Durandal's transfer! Issue the return signal to our mobile suits!"

After a parting salute, Talia immediately began issuing orders to her crew. Durandal hurriedly stood, urging Cagalli.

"Well then, Representative."

Cagalli hastily shook her head at his outstretched hand.

"I'm staying here..."

Both Durandal and Talia, who had turned back, looked at her in surprise, but Cagalli firmly declared:

"Athrun hasn't returned yet. And if the Minerva's going to all this effort, then I shall join you!"

"However, there are other duties where statespersons are required."

She understood Talia's point. That's why Durandal was transferring to another ship. Leaders shouldn't risk themselves; the loss of one person could throw a nation into chaos.

Cagalli knew this. But while the Minerva's crew and Athrun were giving their all, she felt powerless. If nothing else, she wanted to witness their efforts to the end, even at the same risk.

Seeing her determination, Durandal sighed as if giving up.

"If you insist, Miss Representative, I shall respect that."

And—Cagalli thought privately, her face clouding—she was different from Durandal. Losing him now would be a massive loss for the PLANTS. But she...

A leader's work—did what she was doing really matter? This doubt that had been nagging at her lately surfaced even now, and she lowered her eyes, feeling conflicted.

Seeing the return signals from the Minerva and Voltaire, Shinn startled and checked his instruments. They were approaching the altitude limit.

Junius Seven had been broken into several fragments, but the largest pieces still measured kilometers across. Shinn recalled hearing that objects over 20 meters in diameter wouldn't completely burn up in the atmosphere. While not as catastrophic as before, the damage to Earth would still be devastating. If only those GINN squads and the Chaos units hadn't interfered, things might have been better...

But this was the limit. Even Rey and the Joule Team's work teams, who had stayed till the end, were retreating.

A laser communication followed the return signal, from the Minerva:

*—Upon retrieving all mobile suits, this ship will enter the atmosphere and continue breaking up fragments with the main cannon—*

Descending to Earth? Shinn was surprised by the captain's decision but felt somewhat relieved. He wasn't sure how effective the Tannhauser would be, but it might reduce the damage to the surface.

The lower fragments were already enveloped in superheated gases like flames. Shinn was about to retreat when he noticed movement on one of the largest fragments. He looked closer and saw a ZAKU Warrior trying to set up a Meteor Breaker. Checking the ID code, he realized it was Athrun Zala's unit from the Minerva.

Angered by Athrun's reckless behavior, Shinn turned the Impulse back.

"What are you doing?!" he shouted without restraint. "Orders have been given for us to return! You should've received the notice!"

But Athrun ignored him, continuing his work alone.

"Yeah, I know. You'd better hurry on back," Athrun replied.

"You'll end up being blasted away! Are you okay with that?!"

Shinn exclaimed in disbelief. He was still using respectful language due to the respect he'd gained for Athrun's abilities. Athrun shouted back, his voice tinged with urgency:

"Firing from a distance there's a greater margin for error even with the Minerva's main cannon! So if we can at least get this one going..."

He continued working silently. Shinn glared at Athrun's unit in frustration.

*—He may be amazing at piloting mobile suits, but this guy is an idiot.*

Did he think Shinn could just leave after being told this?

As the Impulse began to assist with the installation, Athrun's unit paused briefly in surprise. Shinn continued working while muttering under his breath:

"Why would someone like you side with Orb..."

He had thought Athrun was a coward who fled to save his own life. But seeing Athrun risking his life to save others, Shinn's image of him changed further. His respect for Athrun grew, but so did his frustration. Why had Athrun chosen Orb? That hypocritical nation built on lies?

Focused on their urgent task, Shinn had assumed they were alone. But this belief was soon shattered. A beam grazed the Impulse, and alarms blared. Looking up in shock, he saw three modified GINNs attacking, firing beam rifles and drawing their swords. Though damaged, missing legs or arms, all three charged without hesitation.

"These guys, still here!"

Anger surged through Shinn. Though he had lost his beam rifle, he drew his saber from his back and moved to confront the GINNs. Athrun, also without his rifle, pulled out a beam tomahawk from his shield and quickly moved to protect the Meteor Breaker.

As Shinn engaged in combat, a voice filled with resentment suddenly reached his ears:

"My daughter's tombstone must be dropped and burned for this world to change!"

It was from the pilot of the GINN right in front of him—Shinn realized this just as his energy blade sliced through the unit's torso.

"Daughter?"

Shinn muttered in shock, turning to look at the exploding GINN behind him.

"What the?"

Athrun must have heard the voice too through the comm channel. He voiced his surprise while blocking the blade of another attacking GINN with his shield. This time, a different pilot's voice lashed out:

"Why have you forgotten the sorrow of the lives mercilessly thrown away here?! Why do you live in a fabricated world, laughing with those who caused this?!"

This accusation pierced Shinn's heart.

"Tricked by the cowardly successors of Clyne, ZAFT has changed for the worse!"

The GINN pilot continued to spew words of resentment. Shinn forgot to attack, listening to his words in a daze.

These people... they're from ZAFT...?

He had been angry and confused about why they were doing such terrible, foolish things. Now, Shinn realized:

—*They had what they believed to be a just reason for dropping Junius Seven...*

Athrun was also shocked by the enemy's words. He too had lost his mother on Junius Seven. These people he faced were, in a sense, like reflections of himself.

But that didn't justify their actions. If these fragments fell, even more lives would be lost than at Junius Seven. Athrun stood firm, protecting the Meteor Breaker as he faced the attacking enemy.

"Why can't you realize?!" the GINN pilot shouted while striking relentlessly. "For us Coordinators, the path of Patrick Zala was the one and only correct path!"

The impact of those words hit Athrun like a physical blow. In that moment of shock, the enemy's blade flashed towards Athrun's right side. The heavy sword sliced off the ZAKU's right arm. As the Impulse moved to intervene, another GINN leapt at it from behind. Shinn cut off its arm, but the GINN still clung desperately to the Impulse, restricting its movement. Shinn grunted in frustration.

The next instant, a flash of light seared Athrun's eyes. The GINN clinging to the Impulse had self-destructed. The white mobile suit was sent flying by the impact.

"Shinn?!" Athrun instinctively moved to pursue the Impulse. At that moment, debris from the exploded GINN struck the Meteor Breaker. The impact activated the insufficiently secured device, and it burrowed into the ground.

This was an unexpected turn even for the GINNs trying to stop the demolition. Both sides watched anxiously as the Meteor Breaker activated. The ground heaved upwards—but that was all. The last Meteor Breaker had been wasted. The fragment remained intact, slowly falling towards Earth. Its lower edge was already beginning to glow with heat.

With hope lost, they couldn't stay any longer. As Athrun looked towards the Impulse, preparing to retreat, he was startled by a sudden battle cry.

"Our will... This time for sure, we'll let those Naturals know how we feel!" The last GINN charged. Athrun tried to leap away, but its hands grasped the ZAKU's legs.

"Ugh!" The mobile suit was jerked downward. Athrun felt a chill run through him, as if the grudges of the past had physically grabbed him. The memory of his father's fanatical gaze and the feeling of fingers digging into his arm vividly resurfaced.

—*Was I truly unable to escape my father's curse?*

In the next moment, the Impulse's energy blade freed him from that weight, cutting off the ZAKU's leg along with the clinging GINN. Without pause, the Impulse discarded its saber and grasped the ZAKU's arm, igniting its verniers at full power to ascend. Athrun snapped back to reality and fired his own thrusters.

Looking down, he saw cracks spreading across the superheated fragment, its structural materials glowing red. On that primordial-looking surface, the GINN spread its arms as if looking up at them. As they watched, the mobile suit heated to a glowing red, its propellant exploding and scattering before it burned up completely.

Athrun closed his eyes for a moment.

—*They too were victims created by that war...*

But at this point, Athrun and Shinn had also been caught firmly in the massive gravitational maw that had pulled in the GINN. Even with both units' verniers at full power, ascending was now impossible. Like sliding down the sides of a bowl, their mobile suits were inexorably dragged down by gravity. Eventually, the Impulse's hand slipped away, and the two units fell helplessly into the depths of the atmosphere.

"Descent sequence, Phase Two," Malik announced.

Talia gritted her teeth.

"The Impulse and his ZAKU?"

Her voice was harsh as she asked. Meyrin shook her head vigorously, looking on the verge of tears.

"It's no use! I can't pinpoint their location!"

"Athrun!" Cagalli, seated in the rear, stared at the monitor and moaned as if in prayer.

They could no longer recover the mobile suits. But for Talia, there was an even more serious problem. With sensors impaired by the friction heat from the atmosphere, they couldn't locate the small mobile suits.

"Phase Three imminent!" Arthur turned a confused face to Talia.

"If we wait any longer, we won't be able to fire the cannon, Captain!"

"But we still don't know where the Impulse and ZAKU are!"

Bart shook his head, and Chen Jian Yi, the fire control officer, showed anxiety in his almond-shaped eyes.

"Without their positions, we could end up firing at them!"

That was the crux of the problem. Talia bit her lip. Firing blindly could spell disaster if allied units were in the line of fire. Her order could cost the lives of two young men, right in front of the girl who cared for one of them.

But—the number of people this single shot could save might be tens of thousands—no, perhaps even millions.

Talia raised her face as if shaking off her doubts and made her decision.

"Activate Tannhauser."

Everyone on the bridge drew in a sharp breath.

"Our mission to stop Junius Seven from falling intact must be achieved no matter what the consequences!" Talia declared in a deliberately cold voice.

"Target the structure to starboard bow!"

For her, it felt like signing the death warrant for two young men. Chen repeated the order in a strained voice.

"Aiming Tannhauser at the object to starboard."

Cagalli, who might have been expected to cry out, remained silent, her lips tightly pressed together. Her state of mind was evident from her wide eyes on the brink of tears and her tightly clasped hands. The strength of the bond between her and Athrun was clear, even in the short time since she'd

boarded the ship. But she too undoubtedly understood the significance of this shot.

The bow opened, revealing the muzzle of the QZX-1 Tannhauser positron cannon. The noisy monitor displayed a massive, superheated mass. Talia gave the order resolutely.

"Fire!"

A vortex of positrons erupted from the massive muzzle, striking the superheated chunk of earth. The center of the fragment vaporized, and a thick beam of light pierced through the massive chunk in an instant. Debris scattered in all directions, quickly engulfed in flames.

Talia prayed silently that the two young men were not caught in that inferno.

A broadcast continues in an empty room, seemingly from a forgotten television.

"We repeat: While the breakup of Junius Seven was successful, the threat of damage from falling debris remains. Areas near the equator are predicted to be at highest risk. Those in coastal regions should move away from the sea and evacuate to higher ground—"

The residential area is deserted, an eerily pale morning sun illuminating the silent streets. Nearby highways are congested with evacuating vehicles, drivers shouting at each other in frustration.

Shelters throughout the city are overflowing, with desperate crowds still trying to force their way in. People are trampled, police struggle to redirect them, their voices drowned out by screams and shouts.

Traffic to higher ground is at a standstill. People abandon their cars and start running. Above them, countless fiery objects streak across the sky. Smaller fragments burn up in the atmosphere, while larger pieces trail white smoke as they plummet towards Earth—a terrifyingly beautiful sight, like squadrons of angels crossing the sky.

Then, the moment arrives. Massive fireballs strike the surface one after another, raining down on jungles, deserts, oceans, and cities. Impact sites are instantly engulfed in expanding fireballs, shockwaves radiating outward and demolishing everything in their path. The ground ripples like water, toppling and churning everything on its surface. Enormous mushroom clouds rise, scattering superheated gases. The sea vaporizes, and towering waves rear up like predatory snakes, surging towards the shore.

Deep underground, a pale, silver-haired man sipping brandy looks up as the walls tremble violently. This is Lord Djibril's personal shelter, leader of Blue Cosmos. The spacious circular floor, lined with massive bookshelves and a fireplace, seems too grand for a single occupant.

As the tremors and deep rumbling continue, Djibril narrows his eyes in irritation. The black cat under his hand, startled by his sudden grip, flees.

At this moment, thousands or tens of thousands of people above ground are likely suffering catastrophe. But his irritation isn't for their suffering. It's



the humiliation of being driven into this hole like a field mouse, forced to hold his breath and hide.

"Whoa, this is insane..." Auel muttered in disbelief, eyes wide as he stared at the Earth's surface from the observation deck of the Girty Lue. Even from orbit, the devastation was clearly visible. In fact, this might have been the only vantage point from which to grasp the full scale of the disaster.

"Damn it!" Sting groaned in frustration, punching his palm.

Countless streaks of flame painted stripes across the blue planet veiled in thin clouds. Fireballs bloomed and expanded on land and sea. The round fires linked together, resembling a necklace of topaz encircling the Earth. From this distance, the scene appeared beautiful, but within those flames, innumerable lives were being extinguished at that very moment. Soon, smoke rising like living creatures began to obscure the terrifying fires.

Stella, her eyes wide and face pressed against the glass as she stared down, asked in a high, frightened child-like voice, "Will they die? Is everyone gonna die?"

—*They died. Everyone died. Burned by the fire those bastards dropped!*

Sting clenched his jaw in hatred. Coordinators are evil. That's what they had always been taught. The fires below were proof of that.

"Adjusting entry angle, heat dissipation system all green. Automatic attitude control system on, set BCS to neutral."

Shinn's fingers frantically tapped the keyboard. He unconsciously raised his hand to wipe the sweat forming on his forehead, only to be thwarted by his helmet, resulting in a frustrated expression. The Impulse's frame was scorching hot, and the cockpit temperature was gradually rising. However, the unit was designed for independent atmospheric entry. Thanks to Shinn's skilled operation, the Impulse had entered a stable descent posture.

"Where is that guy?"

Shinn was concerned about Athrun Zala's ZAKU. Technically, the ZAKU should have armor capable of withstanding the intense heat of atmospheric entry. But if anyone were asked to try descending to Earth in one, they'd honestly refuse. Moreover, Athrun's ZAKU was damaged. Would it hold up in this extreme heat?

Shinn adjusted his heat-interfered instruments, desperately searching for his comrade's position.

—*Found him! Quite far away. Below me.*

As expected, Athrun's ZAKU had also assumed a descent posture and was falling below the Impulse. The unit seemed fine—for now.

"Athrun... Athrun!"

Shinn called out desperately while maneuvering his unit to approach the ZAKU. It was withstanding the high temperature, but the real problem would come later. The ZAKU's verniers likely couldn't kill this descent speed. At this rate, they'd land in the ocean, but without deceleration, the impact on the water's surface would shatter a mobile suit.

"Shinn... is that you?!" Athrun's voice, mixed with heavy static, came through. Shinn felt slightly relieved. He was safe.

"Stay where you are! I'll be right there!"

He descended towards the ZAKU as if skydiving. But Athrun shouted back against his efforts.

"Stop it! Even the Impulse doesn't have enough thrust to withstand the fall of two machines!"

Irritated again by these words, Shinn ignored them and latched onto the unit before him. Cradling the ZAKU in both arms to control their posture, he fired his verniers at full power and yelled:

"Why must you always insist on telling us what can't be done?"

Athrun's face appeared on the finally clear monitor. He asked with a wry smile:

"Then what would you rather I tell you?"

Shinn thought for a moment.

"Something like, 'Help me, you bastard!'"

"Would you prefer that?" Athrun asked with naive sincerity.

Shinn grumbled back, "No! It was just an example!"

Athrun Zala was indeed worthy of being called a "legendary ace." But without that, he was just a big idiot!

"Captain. We can now switch to aerodynamic control."

Raising her voice over the vibrations shaking the ship, Talia commanded:

"Deploy main wings! Helm, move cautiously."

"Deploying main wings. Switching to atmospheric thrust!"

The Minerva's wings extended, and the ship began to decelerate slowly in the atmosphere. Talia inwardly sighed with relief. Malik was handling this well, successfully managing their first atmospheric entry. When they left Armory One, no one could have imagined this situation—Talia included.

She looked up at Meyrin.

"Status on communications and sensors?"

"Offline. Radio waves are unreliable due to the falling fragments."

Talia clicked her tongue softly. Likely due to the gases and dust stirred up in the atmosphere.

"Well, use lasers or thermal sensors or something! Find the Impulse and ZAKU!"

At her order, Cagalli, who had been looking downcast, suddenly raised her head. Arthur also turned in surprise.

"Are you suggesting that they've descended safely?"

Talia hesitated. She might be giving Cagalli false hope.

"You may find it strange, after I fired the Tannhauser without hesitation, but I want to believe..."

In those two's luck. And in the probability that they did their best and weren't incinerated during entry. In truth, Talia had a feeling they were alive. Both seemed blessed with both luck and skill.

But if they had survived those harsh conditions, they needed to hurry. They might be facing extreme danger even now.

"Sensors have picked up something!" Bart's voice rose after a while, drawing everyone's hopeful gaze. Cagalli clenched her hands, her expression desperate.

"Seven o'clock, distance 400! This is—the Impulse? No..."

"Can you bring up a visual?"

Talia asked hastily, and Meyrin replied, "Yes! Just a moment!" as she frantically operated the monitor. As the image appeared, cheers filled the bridge. The monitor showed the Impulse, carrying the ZAKU, trying to decelerate.

"Athrun!" Cagalli choked out, covering her mouth with both hands.

"The ZAKU is safe too!" Arthur exclaimed, relief evident in his voice. Talia glanced at him. He seemed to have forgotten their recent friction. She could appreciate this good nature of his. Even as she thought this, she fired off rapid instructions.

"Arthur, signal them with flares! Malik, bring the ship closer. We'd better catch them quickly, or they'll both hit the ocean's surface."

Under Malik's control, the Minerva glided through the air towards the two mobile suits. Noticing the flares, the Impulse adjusted its course towards them.

"Open the hatch! Impulse, ZAKU, prepare for landing!"

As Talia relayed this to the mobile suit deck, Cagalli dashed out of the bridge. She watched her go, a momentary softness in her eyes.

"Athrun!" Cagalli's voice assaulted Shinn's ears the moment he stepped out of the cockpit. He immediately scowled and turned away, but he noticed Athrun's face break into a smile as he saw Cagalli on the catwalk. Just then, a loud impact shook the ship, alarming the crew around them.

"Wh-What? What is it now?"

"It's likely the shockwave from the initial impact, having circled the Earth," Rey pointed out with a calmness belying his age. Shinn unconsciously looked beyond the hatch and was stunned. The shockwave, just traveling through air, still had this much power after circling the globe. He could only imagine the devastation on the ground.

The Minerva continued its descent. Its shadow on the sea grew rapidly, and as they neared, the ground effect caused massive water sprays.

"Attention! All units, brace for impact as we land on the water's surface!"

The ship tilted sharply, then was jolted by an impact that felt too hard to be water. The crew held onto nearby seats to withstand the shock. The

ship's stern cut through the water, moving forward with high sprays on both sides. Eventually, the massive body of the Minerva, slowed by water resistance, fully settled into the sea.

"Water landing complete, warning lifted," Arthur's voice came over the speakers, bringing a sense of relief to the crew.

"All sections checked and no leaks currently detected, but we will continue to watch for leakage. Damage control personnel, make your way to the lower sections."

As the announcement continued, some technical staff in the hangar gathered tools and headed for the corridors.

"So, we're on Earth..." Yolant mused thoughtfully.

"I think we've landed in what they call the Pacific Ocean. It's enormous!" Vino responded, his eyes comically wide.

His voice held none of the earlier concern, just childlike excitement. This was likely his first time on Earth. Yolant, probably also a first-timer, scolded his carefree companion.

"We're not here on vacation, you know. Why are you always like that?"

Indeed, it wasn't the time for such comments. Until they landed, Shinn hadn't had time to think ahead, but now a vague anxiety hit him. Drifting alone in the middle of the Pacific, what were they supposed to do now?

"Are you alright, Athrun?" Beside them, Cagalli worriedly addressed a tired-looking Athrun. He forced a smile in response.

"Yeah... I'm fine."

Athrun stood up, and Cagalli, looking relieved, followed him like a dog trailing its owner.

"But I was really surprised. I was so worried. You never said anything about going out in a mobile suit."

"Sorry about that, acting on my own."

As Athrun apologized, Cagalli shook her head vigorously.

"It's okay. I have no problem with that. I know your abilities. In fact I'm kinda glad you did go out."

Shinn felt somewhat surprised by her words. They didn't seem fitting for a princess who would hide in safety and take it for granted. But what followed ruined it.

"Although what's happened is extremely unfortunate, if it wasn't for the Minerva and Yzak's team, it would've been a lot worse to say the least."

Athrun's expression darkened as he listened. Shinn understood his feelings. But Cagalli continued speaking cheerfully, without restraint.

"I'm sure the people of Earth understand that—"

Unable to bear her superficial, hypocritical words any longer, Shinn finally exploded in anger.

"Stop it! You idiot!"

Cagalli jumped at his voice, turning to look at him as if noticing him for the first time. Shinn glared at her wide-eyed, confused face and stepped forward.

"You were on the bridge! So, I'm sure you know what really took place here!"

"Eh..." Cagalli stepped back, looking intimidated. Her expression further fueled Shinn's anger.

In the end, she understood nothing. She didn't know Athrun's inner conflict, didn't even show concern for his life. That's just how it was.

"The fall of Junius Seven wasn't some *natural* phenomenon! There were people behind this! The ones who did it were *Coordinators*!"

At these words, Athrun's face contorted as if in pain, and even Lunamaria and Vino froze in shock. Shinn himself continued, biting back bitter feelings.

"Men whose families were killed there... and who still hold a grudge about the incident! They dropped that thing, saying 'Naturals should perish!'"

That was the reality. There was no truth in Cagalli's superficial words.

Shinn painfully understood the feelings of those who dropped Junius Seven. He might have done the same in their position. At the very least, he shared their desire to make those who killed their families pay.

Cagalli tried to argue back indignantly.

"I... I know that... but!"

"But what?!"

"Y-You guys did everything you could to try to stop it!"

"Of course we did!"

Shinn shouted at Cagalli, who was pleading desperately.

At that moment, Athrun, who had been listening with his head down, spoke quietly.

"But fragments of it still fell on Earth."

His face was clouded with deep self-reproach. Cagalli turned pained eyes towards him.

"Athrun..."

"We couldn't stop it completely..."

At Athrun's words, Shinn bit his lip and lowered his eyes.

"Even though it was done by only a handful of people, it doesn't change the fact that we—*Coordinators*—did it..."

Athrun confronted them with the heavy reality.

—*What we did...*

Those words sent a shudder through all of them.

"Do you think the people will forgive us with that in mind?" Athrun murmured and turned away. Cagalli fell silent, looking like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. Shinn watched Athrun's retreating back. Athrun was blaming himself. The weight on his shoulders was even heavier than what he had voiced. Shinn glared coldly at Cagalli and spoke.

"The last thing said by the leader of the men who self detonated..."

Cagalli turned to him, looking puzzled. Shinn spat out the words as if striking her.

"He said, 'for us Coordinators, the path of Patrick Zala was the one and only correct path!'"

Understanding finally dawned on Cagalli's face. She hurriedly looked back towards Athrun, but he had already disappeared into the corridor.

"Athrun..." A faint, helpless whisper escaped her lips. But Shinn felt no sympathy for her.

"You really have no idea about anything, do you?!"

He spat out, turning away coldly.

"I feel sorry for him!"

Leaving Cagalli standing there, frozen, Shinn stormed off, his entire body seething with anger.

"Rome. Shanghai. The Gobi Desert. Quebec."

The man recited the place names displayed on the wall monitor, almost singing them. A white finger lifted a teacup, bringing it to his lips with an elegant gesture.

"...Philadelphia, and the North Atlantic, too."

The man who set down the teacup and uncrossed his legs to stand was Gilbert Durandal, Chairman of the PLANT Supreme Council. The dots on the wall monitor marked the impact sites of Junius Seven fragments. He sighed and walked to the window.

From his office in the administrative building in Aprilius City, PLANT, he gazed at the view below. Neatly arranged city blocks, well-dressed people going about their business, and beyond, a sea reminiscent of the Mediterranean glimmering in the distance.

"There's no way of telling how high the number of casualties could climb. An extremely painful tragedy."

Durandal continued speaking as if to himself. His words carried a measured amount of sorrow. Yet somehow, perhaps due to his overly smooth tone, there was an impression that he was putting on a perfect performance for someone.

There was one other person in the room. A girl with a touch of innocence in her expression sat beside the desk, seemingly absorbed in a chessboard. She picked up the beautifully carved crystal pieces one by one, admiring them with wonder. Pink hair cascaded in waves over her shoulders.

Durandal, as if forgetting her presence, murmured while gazing out the window.

"But the real problems are what we must deal with from this point on."

Though his words were meant to express sympathy for the devastation on Earth, for just a fleeting moment, a smile incongruous with his words flitted across his face.

## Phase.04

A sigh escaped Djibril's lips as he surveyed the carnage unfolding on the television screens before him.

"Well, well... a lot of damage has been done after all," he mused, his voice a mixture of satisfaction and feigned concern.

The monitors blazed with images of devastation from across the globe. Colossal craters, still belching plumes of acrid smoke, marked where nothing remained. The surrounding areas, ravaged by shockwaves, had been reduced to mountains of twisted metal and shattered concrete. Coastal regions, without exception, bore the brunt of towering waves, leaving behind a landscape of collapsed buildings and washed-away lives.

Amidst the rubble sat shell-shocked survivors, their eyes vacant, having lost everything they once called home. Yet, Djibril noted with a hint of dark amusement, these were the lucky ones. Countless others hadn't escaped in time, their bodies now nothing more than ash, consumed by the hellfire that had rained from the heavens. The true toll of this calamity, he knew, was yet to be fully realized. The atmosphere, choked with debris, promised long-term consequences that made even survival a dubious blessing.

Despite the apocalyptic scenes, the voices emanating from the communication speakers betrayed no hint of crisis. The men displayed on the monitors appeared as polished and self-assured as when Djibril had last seen them in person.

"Even the Parthenon's been obliterated," one of them growled, his indignation palpable even through the digital connection.

Djibril's response dripped with disdain. "That decrepit relic? Its absence will change nothing of consequence."

He stood before the bank of monitors, a crystal wineglass dangling from his fingers, a stark contrast to the images of devastation flickering across the screens. The fall of "Junius Seven" had left an indelible scar upon the Earth, yet Djibril's demeanor remained oddly buoyant.

"So, Djibril," a gruff voice cut through the tense atmosphere, "what happens now?"

The speaker's weathered face filled one of the eight screens, his expression etched with concern.

"Durandal's not wasting any time," he continued. "The bastard's already spinning his honeyed words, meddling left and right."

Indeed, the PLANT Supreme Council Chairman's response had been swift and comprehensive. From notifying world governments of the crisis to overseeing the largely successful demolition efforts, Durandal's actions had

been nothing short of exemplary. Even now, ZAFT facilities on Earth were dispatching a steady stream of helicopters laden with supplies and rescue personnel to the affected areas. Additional reinforcements from the PLANT homeland were already en route.

One of the monitors displayed Durandal himself, his handsome features contorted into a mask of anguish as he addressed the public:

"I'm sure that the resulting scars are deep and there is no end in sight to your sorrow, but please, my friends on Earth... Please rise from the despair of this day. We are committed to doing everything we can to help you through this unimaginable hardship."

This turn of events did not sit well with Djibril and his cohorts. Durandal's precise and empathetic response threatened to sway public opinion in favor of the PLANTs, potentially derailing their carefully laid plans to stoke anti-PLANT sentiment and push for war. Yet Djibril remained unperturbed, striding confidently towards his desktop display.

"I believe you should all be receiving a copy of something right about now. Phantom Pain has sent us something very intriguing," he purred.

Phantom Pain – a covert strike force operating within the Earth Alliance military, yet outside its normal chain of command. They answered directly to Djibril and his associates, their very existence known only to a select few within the military hierarchy.

The men on the other end of the call let out low whistles as they received the transmitted footage.

"Well, well... so that's how it is..."

"Good grief, it always comes down to this, doesn't it?"

The images now displayed on Djibril's screen – and presumably on those of his co-conspirators – were slightly grainy and dimly lit. Yet there was no mistaking the mobile suits engaged in combat as ZAFT's GINN units. Other clips showed mysterious devices attached to Junius Seven, along with what appeared to be cables wrapped around massive structural supports.

"We've been dealt an unexpected hand, gentlemen," Djibril declared, his voice brimming with unconcealed triumph. "And it's the winning one."

As the murmurs of his associates subsided, he continued, radiating an unshakeable confidence:

"No one – and I mean no one – will be able to forgive this. It will forge an unbreakable bond between us, stronger than any alliance forged by mere words or treaties. This time, we'll bring death to every last Coordinator."

The faces arrayed on the monitors regarded him with carefully neutral expressions. Yet not a single voice raised in protest. They recognized the weight of the gamble before them, and they were all in.

Djibril raised his wineglass in a toast, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth as he delivered the final, chilling pronouncement:

"For the preservation of our blue and pure world."



From the bridge, the sky stretched out like a vast sheet of lead, its usual vibrant blue masked by a thick veil of dust and debris. The sea below mirrored this gloomy pallor, its surface as dim and hazy as twilight. The collision had hurled an immense cloud of particulates into the atmosphere, blotting out the sun's warmth and light.

Cagalli's mind raced with the long-term implications of this catastrophe: climate cooling from reduced sunlight, devastation of plant life, destruction of the ozone layer, acid rain, accelerated global warming due to massive CO2 release. How long would these aftereffects linger? The uncertainty was as oppressive as the leaden sky above.

With effort, she tore her gaze from the sky—a perfect reflection of her troubled heart—and turned her attention back to Bart, who was fiddling with the communication equipment. Captain Talia Gladys stood nearby, her face a mask of concern.

After a moment, Bart looked up, shaking his head in frustration.

"It's no use," he reported. "The dust concentration is too high. Even laser communication is impossible right now."

"I see," Cagalli murmured, bowing her head in resignation. "Thank you for trying."

They had been attempting to establish contact with Orb, to no avail. Beside her, Talia's expression soured. The Minerva's crew was equally stymied, unable to reach their ground-based monitoring stations in Carpentaria and Gibraltar. Their next moves remained frustratingly unclear.

"Once we've completed our ship checks and emergency repairs, we'll set course for Orb," Talia offered, her voice gentle but firm.

Cagalli nodded, a bitter smile playing at her lips. "I understand. Though at this point, I wonder what good it will do to try and direct things from so far away..."

She cursed herself for being absent from her nation during such a crucial moment. Talia, sensing her distress, offered words of sympathy.

"Orb is an island nation. Your concern is only natural."

The thought of Orb's fate gnawed at Cagalli. How much damage had her homeland sustained? In this information vacuum, there was no way to know. Surrounded by ocean, the archipelago had almost certainly suffered from the massive tidal waves. And if a fragment had scored a direct hit on Onogoro Island, where the capital lay... Orb might have been effectively wiped off the map.

Cagalli heaved a deep sigh, then raised her eyes to meet Talia's gaze.

"I had intended to thank you for your courage and commend the Minerva's accomplishments upon our arrival, offering whatever assistance we could," she said, her voice heavy with regret. "But now, I can't even make such a simple promise. I'm sorry, Captain."

"Please, don't concern yourself with that," Talia insisted, shaking her head.

With a respectful nod, Cagalli took her leave, her mind still churning.

Even if Coordinators were responsible for this catastrophe, it didn't diminish her gratitude towards Shinn, Athrun, and the others. Cagalli had witnessed their actions firsthand, had seen their determination to save the Earth.

And yet... doubt crept in. Did she truly understand anything? If she couldn't even grasp Athrun's feelings, how could she hope to comprehend the minds of Coordinators as a whole?

She knew the hatred that festered in those who had lost loved ones. But was it wrong to ask them to let go of that hatred, to not direct it at others? Could she look Shinn in the eye and tell him to forgive, to let go of his grudge against her father, against Orb itself?

I can't, she realized, the thought sharp and painful. I just can't.

Cagalli found herself lost in a maze of doubt, one that seemed to grow more complex with each passing day. In that moment of crushing uncertainty, she couldn't help but wonder if she was truly fit to lead. The weight of responsibility pressed down on her, as heavy and suffocating as the leaden sky above.

Alone in the officers' quarters, Athrun found himself haunted by the words of the GINN pilot.

"Why can't you see? For us Coordinators, the path Patrick Zala chose is the only right one!"

The weight of his father's legacy pressed down on Athrun's conscience. Patrick Zala had taken countless lives during the great war—not just enemy combatants, but also allies who had trusted in his commands. Athrun had been prepared to stop his father, even if it meant killing him with his own hands. Though he hadn't been the one to deliver the final blow, Athrun couldn't deny the relief he'd felt at his father's death. It had meant an end to the bloodshed, or so he had thought.

But Athrun now realized how wrong he'd been. Even in death, his father continued to take lives. Those driven by his misguided ideals had turned Junius Seven—the grave marker of his wife—into a weapon of mass destruction.

The lives lost in this catastrophe... in a way, they too were claimed by his father.

Athrun heaved a deep sigh and shook his head, rising to his feet. There was no use in dwelling on it. In times like these, Cagalli would have stormed in, shouting at him.

"Has your head turned into a mouse's?" she'd say, chastising him for getting lost in his own thoughts.

But now, even Cagalli had lost the fire to rage. She, too, was weighed down by so much: Shinn's thoughtless words, Orb's precarious situation, this disaster, the uncertain future facing the world, and... Athrun's own inner turmoil.

Athrun felt a wave of self-loathing wash over him. It should be his duty to support Cagalli, yet here he was, burdening her further with his own struggles.

Determined to shake off his gloomy mood, Athrun left the room. He couldn't bear to show Cagalli such a dejected face again.

As he walked down the corridor, the distant sound of gunfire made him tense reflexively. But there was no alarm, no signs of panic. Curious, he followed the sound, eventually coming across an open door. What he saw through it brought a faint smile to his lips: young soldiers engaged in target practice on the deck.

Nostalgia washed over him as he stepped out onto the deck. He spotted Rey, Lunamaria, and Meyrin, the girl in charge of mobile suit control. Lunamaria had just emptied a magazine, clicking her tongue in frustration as she moved to reload. She noticed Athrun and turned.

"Oh, hello," she said, a hint of surprise in her voice.

Athrun offered a small smile.

"Mandatory training?"

He remembered his own days in ZAFT, competing with his peers during mandatory training sessions. Sometimes, things had gotten heated between him and Yzak.

"Yeah, if we're going to anyway, they said it would probably be more refreshing outside," Lunamaria explained with a sheepish grin. "But I'm not doing so well today."

She started to turn back to her target, then suddenly spun around again, an idea lighting up her face.

"Want to join us?"

"I... well..." Athrun hesitated, caught off guard by Lunamaria's newfound friendliness.

She grinned broadly. "You know, we all actually know quite a bit about you."

"What?"

"Former ZAFT Red, Creuset Team. In the middle stages of the war, you defeated the Strike, said to be the strongest. After that, you were assigned to the FAITH special forces team, a team that reports directly to the National Defense Committee. Then you became the pilot of the ZGMF-X09A Justice. Athrun Zala, right?"

Athrun felt a chill run down his spine as Lunamaria rattled off his military history. He noticed Meyrin had stopped shooting to stare at him, and even Rey glanced over as he reloaded.

"I don't know too much about your father, but you're a hero to us," Lunamaria continued, her voice filled with admiration. "Especially after what you did at the battle of Jachin Due."

Athrun shifted uncomfortably, unsure how to respond to such praise.

"I heard you're quite the marksman too," Lunamaria added, offering her gun with an innocent smile. "Can you show us a bit? The truth is, I'm not too good at this."

Hesitantly, Athrun accepted the weapon. Its familiar weight brought back a flood of memories. He adjusted the settings and took aim at the targets set up over the sea. What started as a casual demonstration quickly turned into muscle memory taking over. Each shot found its mark with unerring precision, eliciting gasps of amazement from the young soldiers.

"That's incredible!" Lunamaria exclaimed, staring at the gun in Athrun's hand as if it had betrayed her. "You're using the same gun, but what a difference!"

Athrun couldn't help but chuckle, remembering how Yzak had once demanded they switch guns out of frustration.

"It's not the gun," he explained patiently. "You have a habit of twisting your wrist when you pull the trigger. That's why your spacing is inconsistent."

As Athrun began coaching Lunamaria and Meyrin, he suddenly felt a prickling sensation at the back of his neck. Glancing towards the door, he saw Shinn watching silently. The realization snapped Athrun back to reality, and he felt a sudden wave of guilt wash over him.

"Not that being good at this sort of thing really matters in the end," he muttered, handing the gun back to Lunamaria.

"That's not true at all!" Lunamaria protested vehemently. "It's necessary to protect yourself and your friends from the enemy!"

Athrun met the young woman's earnest gaze, seeing a reflection of his younger self. Quietly, he posed a question to both Lunamaria and his past self:

"And who exactly is that enemy?"

"Huh?" Lunamaria blinked, taken aback by the unexpected query.

Athrun's mind drifted back to his military career—the accolades, the battles, the supposed triumphs. He had pointed his gun at a friend piloting the Strike, driven by rage over fallen comrades. For defeating a friend and failing to protect his allies, his homeland had awarded him medals and called him a hero. His commander, Rau Le Creuset, had manipulated events to spread the flames of war, while his father sought to annihilate all Naturals with GENESIS.

In the end, it was the "enemies"—Cagalli, a Natural, and the friend he had once hated enough to kill—who had fought alongside him to stop that madness.

The labels of "enemy" and "ally" had lost all meaning in the crucible of war. That was the harsh lesson Athrun had learned. Now, he found himself turning away once more from the power he had once forsaken.

As Athrun moved to leave, Shinn's voice cut through the air.

"The Minerva is headed for Orb, right? Are you going back there too?"

"Yes," Athrun nodded, pausing beside the younger pilot.

Shinn's crimson eyes bored into him. "Why?" he demanded, his tone almost accusatory. "What are you even doing there?"

The question hit Athrun like a physical blow, leaving him speechless. A strong gust of wind whipped around them, tousling their hair—a portentous breeze that seemed to carry the weight of impending change.

The massive warship, its hull a pale shade of gray, sliced through the waves as it approached the island nation. Gliding past the meticulously arranged piers, the behemoth slowly made its way into the heart of the port. Ahead, an enormous gate yawned open, revealing a spacious dock within. The ship began a gradual turn just short of the entrance.

Inside the dock, a flurry of activity erupted. Announcements blared, heralding the incoming vessel, as workers scurried about in preparation. On one of the platforms, a group stood out from the usual dock personnel—clearly dignitaries awaiting the ship's arrival.

At the forefront of this assemblage, a middle-aged man watched the battle-scarred leviathan with a grimace, muttering under his breath:

"So this is ZAFT's latest smart ship, the Minerva. Our princess certainly knows how to return home at the most inconvenient of times, bringing trouble in her wake."

This was Unato Ema Seiran, one of Orb's chief representatives. His stout frame was draped in the purple robes of office, a stark contrast to his balding head and jovial face. Perched incongruously on his nose was a pair of oversized orange glasses. As the current Prime Minister, it fell to him to support the young Cagalli in her role.

Beside him, a younger man spoke up, his tone placating yet somehow condescending:

"What choice did she have, Father? I imagine Cagalli never dreamed she'd be involved in all this trouble."

The speaker was Yuna Roma Seiran, Unato's son and a cabinet minister in his own right. He too was clad in purple, the fabric draping elegantly over his tall, slender frame. His face, though handsome, bore the faint trace of self-indulgent arrogance common to young men raised in privilege. A self-conscious smile played on his lips as he addressed his father:

"We can hardly give the cold shoulder to a ship that's delivered our Head of State, can we? At least, not for now."

In Orb, the authority of the chief representatives remained unshakable. When this island nation, comprised of a southern archipelago, had joined the ranks of modern states, a parliament was established as the decision-making body. While sovereignty was nominally transferred to the people, the position of Head of State—the nation's representative—continued to be held by the Athha family, the most prominent among the chief representatives.

Orb's technological prowess was said to be unrivaled on Earth, and the nation had flourished as a key trade hub between space and the planet's surface.

Unato's gaze remained fixed on the Minerva as it edged into the dock. He nodded to his son, his voice laden with unspoken meaning:

"Indeed, not at this juncture..."

The moment the hatch opened, Cagalli burst out, her face a canvas of anxiety and impatience. Captain Talia watched her go with a bemused smile, but her expression quickly hardened as she noticed the welcoming party. She and Arthur followed Cagalli and Athrun down the gangway.

Suddenly, a young man broke away from the purple-clad group of government officials.

"Cagalli!" he called out.

"Yuna?" Cagalli halted mid-stride, surprise etched on her face.

Without hesitation, the young man rushed forward and embraced her tightly, heedless of the onlookers.

"Thank goodness you're safe!" he exclaimed, nuzzling her hair. "Oh, you had me so worried!"

"Ah... um... I-I'm sorry!" Cagalli stammered, visibly uncomfortable as she tried to extricate herself from his grip.

Athrun's face darkened with barely concealed displeasure, while Talia and the others watched the "touching reunion" with a mix of bewilderment and amusement.

"Now, now, Yuna," chided a man wearing oversized orange glasses, his expression caught between a grimace and a smile. "I understand how you feel, but mind your surroundings. Can't you tell that the ZAFT crew is uncomfortable?"

"Unato Ema!" Cagalli exclaimed, finally freeing herself from Yuna's embrace.

Unato and the other officials bowed to her in unison. "Good to see you back, Representative," he said smoothly. "It's a relief to finally see you return safely."

"I apologize for my absence during such a critical time," Cagalli responded, her tone formal but sincere. "Thank you for managing things in my stead."

She then asked urgently, "Please update me on the situation with casualties and damages."

Talia noticed Yuna, still hovering protectively near Cagalli, casting a sidelong glance at Athrun. His eyes held unmistakable hostility and a sense of superiority.

"Well, well," Talia thought, feeling a pang of sympathy for Athrun, "it seems we have a rival in love on our hands."

"Areas along the shore were damaged by the high waves, but fortunately there were no direct hits within Orb." Unato began, but then his eyes sharpened as they flickered to the ZAFT personnel behind Cagalli. He lowered his voice.

"I'll provide you with the details later during our administrative meeting."

Understanding the implication—that some matters weren't for foreign ears—Talia stepped forward and saluted. "I am Talia Gladys, captain of the ZAFT vessel Minerva."

"Arthur Trine, executive officer, of the same," Arthur added with his own salute.

Unato's gaze swept over them appraisingly. "Unato Ema Seiran, Prime Minister of the Orb Union. We are most grateful to you for bringing our Chief Representative back safely."

His plump cheeks creased in a genial smile, but his eyes, behind those orange lenses, remained cold and calculating. A crafty one, Talia thought. Every inch the politician, more than making up for Cagalli's straightforwardness.

"Not at all," Talia replied crisply, betraying none of her inner thoughts. "We deeply regret the inconvenience caused to Representative Attha, despite the unforeseen circumstances. Furthermore, we express our condolences for your losses from the recent tragedy."

"Your concern is appreciated," Unato nodded. "For now, please rest. We understand the situation, and your crew must be exhausted."

Talia returned the nod cautiously. "Thank you," she said, careful not to commit to anything. She knew better than to put much stock in a politician's words. Even Chairman Durandal's assurances were taken with a healthy dose of skepticism.

"We should make our way to the administrative meeting," Unato gestured to Cagalli. "I'm sorry to have to insist on this immediately upon your return, but there are many things that we must report to you."

"Of course, I understand," Cagalli nodded, striding forward with her characteristically masculine gait.

As Athrun moved to follow, Yuna smoothly interposed himself, placing a hand on Cagalli's back in a possessive gesture. Cagalli tensed at the touch, glancing up at Yuna with a hint of discomfort before looking back over her shoulder, seeking Athrun.

Yuna, as if suddenly remembering Athrun's presence, turned to him with an artificial smile. "Oh, and we're very grateful for your services, Alex. We thank you for protecting Cagalli during this time."

Athrun bowed his head, his expression sour.

"My pleasure."

"You may submit your report later. Right now, get some rest." Yuna continued, a subtle note of disdain creeping into his voice. "We might need you later as a liaison with them."

The words hung in the air, a thinly veiled reference to Athrun's Coordinator status.

Cagalli cast a worried glance at Athrun but allowed herself to be led away. Athrun straightened, watching her go with a pained expression. Arthur's face was a picture of sympathy, and even Talia felt a twinge of compassion. She had sensed the deep bond between the young people, but this was a problem beyond her power to address. A romance between the

Chief Representative and a Coordinator—the son of a war criminal, no less—was clearly out of the question in their eyes.

As they made their way back into the ship, Arthur couldn't contain his concern any longer. "Captain, what are their true intentions in this situation?" he asked, prompting Talia to glance at him with a raised eyebrow. Her demeanor remained unflappable, seemingly unfazed by their precarious position in a foreign dock.

"They told us to rest easy, but..." Arthur continued, his brow furrowed. "I mean, yes, Representative Attha made some generous offers, but..."

He hesitated, then pressed on. "Resupplying is one thing, but wouldn't it be better to wait until we reach Carpentaria for any major repairs? That's my opinion, at least."

While Cagalli had promised both resupply and repairs, the latter would mean allowing foreign personnel to access the *Minerva*. Given the ship's classified nature, this was far from ideal.

"Ah, well, you see..." Talia mused as they entered the elevator. "Not to be disrespectful, but our young Representative seems... how to put it? Straightforward, perhaps even naive in her sincerity. Admirable, but hardly sufficient for governing a nation. No doubt there's a cunning old fox pulling strings behind the scenes."

Her blunt assessment of a head of state and high-ranking official was breathtaking in its audacity, bordering on unsettling. Yet, recalling the unctuous Prime Minister they'd just met, Arthur couldn't help but grimace. Indeed, unlike Cagalli's earnest words, not a syllable from that man had rung true.

"Still, we came straight here from Armory One," Talia continued, her tone almost casual. "To be honest, we're in pretty rough shape ourselves."

Arthur shot her a covert glare. And whose fault is that? he thought bitterly. Rushing out before the launch ceremony, reckless piloting, and an impromptu atmospheric entry—any ship would be battered after such treatment.

"The political situation is delicate, and it's been a while since the crew had shore leave. Their expectations are high..." Talia mused as the elevator doors opened. Stepping out, she concluded with her characteristic nonchalance, "I suppose we'll just have to play it by ear, won't we?"

Arthur felt a wave of resignation wash over him. When, since leaving Armory One, had the captain's decisions been anything but "playing it by ear"?

Noticing his disgruntled expression, Talia paused. "If you'd like, I could make a note in the ship's log?"

It was a loaded offer. If the executive officer disagreed with a captain's decision, he could request it be recorded in the official log. This would protect his career should the decision later be questioned by superiors. But Arthur's response was immediate and vehement.



"No, no! That won't be necessary!"

He knew he lacked the fortitude to openly oppose this captain.

Talia's lips curved into a knowing smirk, as if she'd anticipated this very response. With a casual wave, she sauntered off, leaving Arthur feeling even more deflated.

He couldn't shake the nagging feeling that it wouldn't be long before he, like the ship, would be completely worn down.

"What did you say?!" Cagalli's voice rang out, her palms slamming against the desk as she shot to her feet. "You're finalizing a new alliance treaty with the Atlantic Federation?! What in the world has gotten into you, and at a time like this?! Right now, our priority should be to send immediate aid to the disaster areas!"

The proposal thrust upon Cagalli upon her return was beyond anything she had anticipated.

"This must be done precisely because of the situation we're in, Representative," one of the assembled cabinet members replied, his tone frigid as the group observed her shock with detached interest.

Tatsuki Mashima, one of the chief representatives, took the lead. "Besides, it isn't a treaty with the Atlantic Federation. It's true that the proposal is coming from them, but the treaty itself will join all nations worldwide. "

Cagalli felt a chill run down her spine, sensing something ominous in those words. Mashima continued, "The agreement naturally includes provisions for aid and relief to affected areas. In fact, it's designed to facilitate more efficient coordination of such efforts."

"But still..." Cagalli began to protest. Surely aid and relief could be provided without the need for a formal treaty? This seemed like nothing more than a convenient excuse. Before she could voice her objection, Unato heaved a deep sigh.

"Perhaps, having been aboard a ZAFT warship all this time, you don't fully grasp the extent of Earth's devastation, Representative."

Unato manipulated his computer, calling up a series of images on the display. Cagalli recoiled at the stark footage of Junius Seven's impact, each new image more harrowing than the last.

"And then... there's this," Unato said grimly.

What appeared on the screen next made Cagalli's blood run cold. It was footage of the modified GINNs responsible for Junius Seven's descent.

"We—that is, all of us who dwell on Earth—are already aware of this," Unato explained, his voice heavy.

Cagalli stared at the display, trembling. Each new clip provided damning evidence of the terrorist group's actions.

"How... how did this footage get out?!" she demanded, her mind racing to the lone warship that had been present in that fateful sector. *Bogey One*. They must have released this!

Why?! Cagalli's heart cried out in anguish. This was the very truth she had desperately wanted to keep hidden. Even she, typically averse to secrets, had resolved to remain silent about this particular fact.

"The information came from the Atlantic Federation," Yuna spoke up, his earlier flippancy nowhere to be seen. "However, PLANT has already acknowledged the broad strokes of this as truth. And I understand that you were also aware of this, Representative."

"But... However, that was caused by a handful of terrorists... and the PLANTs weren't!" Cagalli pleaded, fighting back tears. "When Chairman Durandal and the Minerva's crew learned of the situation, they gave their all to break up Junius Seven! That's why... That's why Earth was saved!"

Thanks to their efforts, Earth had been saved from total annihilation. And yet, instead of gratitude, they were planning to band together and condemn their saviors? How could they be so ungrateful?

"We realize that," Yuna said coldly. "But can you say that to the tens of millions who have suffered? Will they accept it?"

Cagalli fell silent, stunned. Yuna pressed on, "Are you going to tell them, 'Yes, you've suffered terribly, but Earth survived, so forgive and forget?'"

Cagalli bit her lip, unable to respond. It was the same dilemma she had faced before. How could she tell those who were grieving not to hold a grudge? It was impossible.

"There isn't a soul on this planet who wouldn't be enraged upon seeing this," Unato spat out, his own anger palpable.

But they didn't understand, Cagalli thought desperately. They couldn't comprehend the resolve of the Minerva's crew, of Shinn and Athrun, who had risked their lives to save Earth. Some had even given their lives in the process. Yuna claimed to understand, but he was wrong. If he truly understood, he couldn't speak so callously. People so easily disregard what happens beyond their field of vision.

"Fortunately, Orb's damages were minimal," Unato's somber voice cut through the silence. "But that's precisely why we must be even more cautious..."

The implication was clear: if Orb were to defend PLANT now, they would be accused of being indifferent to others' suffering because they had escaped relatively unscathed.

"We must carefully consider with whom we share our pain... I urge you not to forget this, Representative."

Cagalli stared at the Prime Minister, dumbfounded. This was how the world was gradually being divided—into enemies and allies, sweeping up everything in between. She could feel it in her bones: the tide of history was shifting, and rapidly so.

"And you are?" Talia inquired, her gaze settling on the unfamiliar face before her.

The woman stepped forward with a warm smile. "My apologies. I'm Maria Bernes from Morgenroete's Shipbuilding Division B. I'll be overseeing the work here."

As Maria extended her hand, Talia noticed Eaves from the corner of her eye, seemingly captivated by the newcomer's refreshing demeanor and genuine smile. Talia found herself instinctively warming to Maria as well, clasping the offered hand.

"Talia Gladys, captain of the Minerva," she replied, matching Maria's friendly tone.

"Pleased to meet you."

The warmth of Maria's handshake mirrored her smile, and in that moment, Talia knew she would accept the woman's offer of assistance. She could already imagine Arthur's stunned reaction to her decision.

Once Maria took charge, things moved swiftly. Morgenroete engineers and workers swarmed around the Minerva, erecting scaffolding and bringing in necessary materials. Their approach suggested a company-wide effort dedicated to this single ship—likely at Cagalli's behest. Whatever the future might hold, Talia couldn't doubt the sincerity of their current goodwill.

Standing side by side on the platform, watching the bustling activity below, Maria remarked with a hint of amusement, "I heard the Minerva hadn't even had her launching ceremony yet, but she certainly looks like a battle-hardened veteran already."

"Unfortunately, yes," Talia sighed.

Indeed, viewed like this, the once-smooth armor was now badly scarred, further marred by the intense heat of atmospheric entry. Talia shuddered, realizing anew how close they had come to disaster. The ship's designers would likely be dismayed to see her current state.

A week ago, Talia could never have imagined she'd be in this situation. Yet, she faced it with her characteristic pragmatism. "I certainly didn't expect things to turn out this way, but... well, what can you do? We are where we are."

The Minerva had been designed to test-run the second-stage series mobile suits like Chaos and Impulse, with her eventual assignment still undecided. Everyone, Talia included, had assumed her actual commissioning was far in the future. In peacetime, warships were little more than ornaments. But now, events were moving at a breakneck pace.

"You can never predict the future," Talia mused, a note of gravity entering her voice. "Especially not now."

"True enough," Maria agreed, her gentle features clouding slightly.

Talia studied the other woman's face, her gaze probing. "To be honest, Orb can't really afford to be helping repair a ZAFT vessel right now, can it?"

Maria looked up, startled by Talia's directness. Meeting the captain's piercing gaze, she responded with equal frankness. "You might be right. But in the end, it's the same for us. We can't see the future either, so all we can do is act on what we believe in right now."

Her soft demeanor belied the strength in her words as she continued, "If we find out later that we were wrong... well, we'll cry, we'll rage, and then we'll figure out what to do next."

Talia found herself drawn in by Maria's words, catching a glimpse of an unshakeable core beneath her gentle exterior. As if sensing Talia's scrutiny, Maria turned to meet her gaze, offering a quiet smile. Talia returned it, feeling an unexpected kinship with this woman—as if they were old friends reuniting after years apart.

Athrun guided his car along the coastal road, the evening sky above him gradually staining blood-red. He wondered grimly if clear skies would become a rarity in the days to come.

Below the road, waves lapped at a sandy beach where several figures caught his eye, prompting him to slow down. Amidst the small silhouettes of playing children, he spotted a figure with long pink hair fluttering in the breeze. A short distance away, a boy sat facing the sea. Athrun pulled over to the shoulder, giving a light honk. The children, recognizing him, rushed over with excited shouts.

"It's Athrun!"

"No, it's Alex!"

"It is Athrun!"

"Hey, where's Cagalli?"

As Athrun stepped out of the car, he found himself mobbed by the enthusiastic kids. Over their heads, he saw two figures approaching slowly: a girl with flowing pink hair, smiling as she held it back from the wind, and behind her, a boy with a gentle expression that still held traces of childhood.

"Athrun..." The boy's face broke into a warm smile.

At the sound of his friend's voice, Athrun felt the tension he'd been carrying suddenly release. He hadn't even realized how on edge he'd been.

Kira Yamato—Athrun's childhood friend who had fought on the Earth Alliance side during the last war. The pilot of the "Strike," which Lunamaria had called "the strongest." Back then, Athrun could never have imagined a day when they'd face each other so peacefully, with mutual understanding.

"Welcome back. That was quite the trip," came the light, melodious voice of Lacus Clyne. Once a popular songstress in PLANT who had led the moderate faction to end the war, she now lived quietly on Earth under the care of the religious leader Malchio.

"What about you all?" Athrun asked, concern evident in his voice. "I heard your house was washed away and you had to come here. Are you alright?"

The children immediately burst into excited chatter.

"Yeah, our house is gone!"

"We didn't see it, but a big wave came and destroyed everything!"

"We had to hide in the secret base for a while!"

"We're moving until we get a new one!"

The "secret base" was likely a shelter. Evacuation, losing their home, relocating to Onogoro Island—it had been a series of major events for them too. Many of the children were war orphans, living at Malchio's missionary house on an island near Orb. Seeing Athrun overwhelmed by the excited reports, Lacus let out a gentle laugh.

"Now, now, everyone. Let's give Athrun some space to talk."

She tactfully led the children away from Athrun and Kira. Athrun watched them go with relief, grateful that all the children were safe.

Left alone, Kira asked abruptly, "To see Malchio?"

Athrun nodded, his expression hardening. "Yes... though it might be too late."

Few words were needed between them; Kira seemed to already understand Athrun's concerns. They watched in silence as the children, laughing and chattering, made their way down to the beach. Lacus turned back to wave at them.

"Kira, please go on ahead. I'll bring the children back from the beach later!"

The two waved back before heading to the car. A metallic green bird swooped down from somewhere, perching on Kira's shoulder—Torii, the robotic pet Athrun had made for Kira when they were children.

"What about Cagalli?" Kira asked once they were in the car.

"At the government offices. She must have a mountain of work," Athrun replied. Kira gave a wry smile. They both knew Cagalli wasn't the type to sit still. After all, she was Kira's twin sister.

They were heading to the Athha family's villa, which had been offered to Malchio after the island mission was washed away. After a moment, Athrun asked, "Everyone knows by now what really caused that thing to fall, don't they?"

Kira's expression clouded. "Yeah..."

The fact that Coordinators were responsible for Junius Seven's fall had spread worldwide. Now, events were accelerating in the direction they had feared most.

"One of them said to me," Athrun continued bitterly, "'Why have you forgotten the sorrow of the lives mercilessly thrown away here?! Why do you live in a fabricated world, laughing with those who caused this?!'"

Kira turned to him, startled. "You fought them?"

"They were there when we went out to break up Junius Seven."

Athrun's voice was low, tinged with a hint of guilt. Kira, sensing his friend's mood, fell silent.

The car turned onto a private road, winding slowly through a grove of trees. As a secluded mansion came into view, Athrun pulled to a stop just short of it. He sat quietly for a moment, hands still on the wheel. The cooling engine ticked in the silence.

Finally, Athrun spoke. "Remember that time, here on Orb, I asked you?"

He sensed Kira turn towards him.

"I asked, what should we really be fighting against, and how?"

"Yeah," Kira's soft reply carried a note of nostalgia.

Two years ago—it felt like a lifetime. Athrun narrowed his eyes, as if the memory was too bright to look at directly.

That day in Orb, surrounded by Atlantic Federation forces, when they had first defied Athrun's father's orders and fought together to protect Orb. Athrun had asked that question, full of doubt.

"And you said, 'We can all search for that answer together.'"

"I did..."

Back then, they had believed that with comrades by their side, they could overcome anything. That they would surely find the answer. Even in the depths of despair, they had glimpsed a faint light of hope and raced towards it together.

Athrun's gaze fell, his voice heavy with dejection.

"But... I still can't find the answer."

Their comrades were still by their side. So why, he wondered, did their presence no longer offer comfort? Unlike before, they couldn't even see which direction to run. They knew things couldn't continue as they were, yet every path forward seemed to lead to an impenetrable wall.

Kira's hand gently rested on Athrun's shoulder. For a long moment, they remained motionless, sharing in each other's pain and uncertainty.

Shinn lay sprawled on his bed, a pink cell phone open in his hands. The small screen displayed a series of photos stored in its memory: himself, his parents, his sister's friends, cookies his sister had proudly baked, her face caught in a playful expression. Fragments of daily life from their time on this island.

I'm back in Orb...

The thought sent an involuntary shiver through his body, a restlessness that seemed to well up from deep within.

He hadn't imagined returning like this. This homeland he had sworn never to set foot in again—and yet, now that he was back, an emotion that could only be described as nostalgia surged within him. Shinn struggled to reconcile these conflicting feelings.

The door opened, and Rey entered. He glanced at Shinn lying on the bed, then wordlessly made his way to his own space. When they had first become roommates, Shinn had worried that Rey's silence meant he was angry. Now he understood this was simply Rey's standard behavior. Once you got used to it, Rey was an easy roommate—he never interfered and wasn't bothersome.

Still, sometimes Shinn craved meaningless small talk. He muttered, almost to himself, "I wonder if we'll be allowed to go ashore?"

Rey briefly turned his gaze back to Shinn, his expression unchanged. "Who knows," he replied flatly, before continuing his interrupted motion of stripping off his uniform and heading to the shower room. Conversation over.

Shinn rolled over, turning his back to his roommate, and returned his attention to the cell phone. From the screen, his sister's smiling face looked back at him.

Cagalli hadn't returned yet.

As Athrun parked the car in front of the house, he glanced up at the darkened windows, feeling a twinge of irritation. Didn't those bureaucrats at the administrative office have any consideration for their newly returned Chief Representative's well-being? Especially that Yuna Roma.

The thought only fueled his annoyance, and Athrun stepped out of the car, his expression grim.

He was well aware that the other representatives viewed him unfavorably. Being a Coordinator was problematic enough, but as the son of Patrick Zala? It was hardly surprising. There were likely concerns about the future, whispers that he was a bad influence on Cagalli.

As he entered the foyer, a door opened and Mana emerged. She was a maid in the Athha household, but to Cagalli, who had lost her mother at a young age, Mana was practically a mother figure.

"Welcome back, Athrun," she greeted him.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

"I won't be able to sleep until I see Lady Cagalli's cheerful face!" Mana declared indignantly, seizing the opportunity to vent. "Government work or whatever it is, I don't care! To keep her so late on the very day she's returned, without even letting her come home! And she's still just a young lady!"

Usually maintaining a somewhat aloof attitude towards Athrun, Mana now seemed to subscribe to the 'enemy of my enemy' principle. After all, any man who got close to her "precious princess" was subject to intense scrutiny. Athrun listened patiently to her complaints before giving a small nod and heading for the stairs.

Cagalli was likely still fighting her battles, caught in a difficult position. All alone...

Exhausted, Athrun entered his room without turning on the lights and sank onto the bed.

He had sought out Reverend Malchio and Kira, trying to find something he could do to help. Malchio, who had worked tirelessly during the last war to mediate between Naturals and Coordinators, hadn't been able to provide Athrun with any clear direction. It seemed there was little he could do there beyond serving as a bodyguard. Which was essentially what he was doing here.

Kira hadn't said anything, but Athrun understood his stance. Don't fight—neither the world nor themselves. But in the current situation, could pacifism and silence really change anything?

He wanted to do something. No, he needed to do something.

The world was careening down a steep slope. If left unchecked, the consequences would be unthinkable. How could he just sit still when he could see it happening? He had to act. This was partly his responsibility, after all.

Because he was the son of Patrick Zala.

The weight of that legacy, the final words of the terrorists, clung to him like a ball and chain, threatening to drag him into the abyss.

As anxiety gnawed at him, a face suddenly appeared in his mind's eye—a gentle, smiling visage.

"Athrun!"

Athrun, who had been scanning through news channels after breakfast, turned at the flustered call. Cagalli burst into the dining room, looking surprisingly alert for someone who had just woken up.

"Good morning," Athrun responded flatly, his eyes quickly returning to the computer screen.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Cagalli apologized, hurriedly circling the table to approach him. "I was stuck at the administrative office all day... Ah, and there's another cabinet meeting this morning, so I don't have much time to talk, but..."

She was clearly bothered by yesterday's events. Yuna Roma Seiran was her childhood friend and current fiancé. Though Cagalli wasn't enthusiastic about the arrangement, having lost her father and relying on Unato for governance, she couldn't outright refuse him.

"It's fine, I understand. Don't worry about it," Athrun said, feeling a twinge of sympathy for Cagalli, already working up a sweat so early in the morning.

Besides, he thought with a hint of smugness, no matter how hard Yuna tried, there was no way Cagalli would fall for such a weakling.

"Tell me, what's the situation with the Orb government?" Athrun asked, trying to change the subject.

Cagalli, who had been in a flurry of motion moments ago, suddenly fell silent. Athrun looked at her, noting the conflicted expression on her face, and understood the situation.

"I see..."

Cagalli turned away dejectedly and began recounting yesterday's cabinet meeting. "Given how things are moving, maybe it can't be helped. Compared to others, Orb's damages were minor, but we still suffered... I understand what the other representatives are saying."

She clenched her fists, frustration evident in her voice. "But! Sharing in the pain—that doesn't mean we should join those crying for revenge and hating PLANT!"

Athrun felt a sense of helplessness wash over him. Cagalli was right. She was always right. Yet somehow, her sound arguments weren't getting through. But what could he do? He was just a bodyguard, "Alex Dino."



Athrun switched off the news and walked around the table to stand in front of Cagalli. Her eyes, on the verge of tears, met his.

"I'm going back to the PLANTS," he said abruptly.

Cagalli's eyes widened in surprise. Athrun continued, his voice filled with quiet determination. "I'm sorry to leave Orb at a time like this, but I can't just sit here idly anymore."

"Athrun... but that would mean..." Cagalli's voice trailed off in confusion.

Athrun pressed on. "I'm concerned about the PLANTS' position on this. I don't think Chairman Durandal would choose the worst path, but as we saw..."

"Athrun..." This time, Cagalli's eyes filled with clear anxiety. He understood her concern. He wanted to stay by her side and support her during these difficult times.

"But there are still people dancing to my father's—to his words. If I... if there's anything I can do to help, whether as Athrun Zala or as Alex—"

Cagalli swallowed her objections, seeing the intensity in Athrun's expression. He continued, his voice growing more passionate.

"If PLANT and Earth continue down this path of animosity... everything we've fought for until now will have been for nothing!"

The world was veering towards a dangerous precipice. They might not be able to stop it. But Athrun couldn't bear the thought of standing by and watching helplessly.

Cagalli bit her lip hard, recognizing the resolve in Athrun's eyes. Tears threatened to spill over, and she blinked rapidly to hold them back. Athrun gently reached out and pulled her close. He felt guilty, but he couldn't change his decision.

They had always fought together. That wouldn't change. They would just be fighting in different places for a while.

The helicopter touched down on the Athha family's private helipad. Athrun, having packed a few personal items into his briefcase, left his room. In the entrance hall stood Cagalli, her eyes shadowing with concern as she took in Athrun's travel attire. He paused before her.

"I do understand your situation with Yuna Roma..." Athrun began abruptly, catching Cagalli off guard. He averted his gaze, his hand slipping into his pocket as he continued, "I still don't like it."

In one swift motion, he took Cagalli's left hand and slid a ring onto her finger. Cagalli raised her hand, staring at it in stunned silence for a full five seconds before erupting.

"Wha... WHAT?!"

Athrun kept his eyes averted. After a moment, he cautiously glanced at Cagalli, only to find her gaping at him in astonishment. Suddenly self-conscious, he quickly looked away again.

"Y-you... I mean... um..." Cagalli's mouth opened and closed, struggling to form a coherent response. When she finally managed to speak, her words were not what either of them expected.

"This is no way to give a woman a ring, you know?!"

Athrun responded with a slightly disgruntled expression.

"Sorry 'bout that."

The exchange was so wildly inappropriate for the situation that they couldn't help but meet each other's eyes and burst into laughter. Athrun was incapable of spouting romantic platitudes, and Cagalli was equally ill-equipped to respond to them. This awkward, genuine moment was perfectly suited to their relationship.

Cagalli's cheeks flushed as she gazed at the ring, then looked up at Athrun with a smile. "Take care. And keep in touch, okay?"

"Yeah. Hang in there, Cagalli."

Athrun pulled her into a tight embrace, then planted a quick kiss before stepping back. He picked up his bag and began walking towards the helicopter, Cagalli's eyes following his every move. The rotor blades began to spin, stirring up a strong wind.

Athrun's last glimpse of Cagalli was of her looking up at him anxiously, her hair whipping around her face in the gusts. Her right hand protectively cradled her left, where the ring now rested against her chest.

Shinn walked alone towards the harbor, the sea breeze feeling heavier than he remembered.

The captain had granted shore leave to the crew. Vino, Youlan, and the others had eagerly headed into town, while Rey remained on the ship, uninterested, likely engrossed in target practice. Only Shinn had hesitated. The thought of going ashore filled him with reluctance, but staying aboard felt like a slow burn of agony with each passing second. If he was going to regret something, he'd rather regret taking action. With that resolve, he had set out on this path.

The military port that had been bombed that day was completely transformed. Asphalt had given way to cobblestone walkways, and the slope leading to the harbor was now covered in grass, a park with meticulously planted flowers. Shinn felt oddly deflated as he surveyed the neatly maintained area. As he continued to look, he realized that the now-gentle hill was the same slope he had tumbled down that day. There, Mayu's... his parents' mangled bodies had lain.

An uncontrollable rage and hatred welled up in Shinn's chest, bubbling and seething.

They've covered this place with a pretty mask, as if trying to erase what happened!

Shinn crouched down and opened the cell phone he had been clutching.

"Hi, it's Mayu! Sorry, I can't talk right now. I'll call you back later..."

The innocent girl's voice drifted through the empty park, carried away by the wind. The pain in his chest was as sharp as ever. Would there ever come a day when he could forget this pain?

Mingled with the wind, a faint sound reached him. A song?

Shinn stood up, as if shaking off his tears. Rounding a cluster of shrubs, he came upon a small stone monument by the sea, with someone standing before it. The figure turned, noticing Shinn. He had brown hair and soft features that hinted at Asian ancestry, appearing slightly older than Shinn. Perched on the young man's shoulder was a metallic green bird that tilted its head and chirped, "Torii?" It was impressively lifelike, but clearly a robotic pet. As Shinn approached, the young man stepped aside to allow a better view of the monument. The bird-shaped robot took flight from his shoulder.

"Is it... a cenotaph?" Shinn found himself asking.

The stranger answered in a quiet voice, "Yes...looks like it."

Shinn glanced at him, puzzled by the vague response.

"I'm not too sure myself. It's my first time, too. To actually make the effort to come here."

The young man looked around. There was a calmness about him that belied his age, an air of serenity. He spoke with a hint of sadness,

"It's a shame. It had become so full of flowers and greenery... but the waves came, and now it's withering again."

Now that it was pointed out, Shinn noticed the grass covering the gentle slope had turned reddish-brown, and the flowers had faded. This area must have been affected by the tidal waves too. Shinn stared at the landscape and muttered, "Perhaps it means they can't be fooled."

The young man looked at Shinn, as if asking for clarification. Shinn continued in a cold tone, "No matter how beautiful the flowers are, people will wipe them out again anyway."

"You...?" The stranger was eyeing him with suspicion now.

A song drew closer. The clear, beautiful voice seemed familiar somehow. A girl coming up the slope stopped singing when she saw Shinn facing the young man. She had pink hair that complemented her fair skin perfectly.

"Sorry. I said something strange," Shinn mumbled, suddenly feeling awkward. He turned on his heel abruptly.

Yet, he couldn't shake the feeling that what he'd said wasn't wrong. No amount of greenery or beautiful flowers could hide what had happened here. It was too naive to think they could forget by erecting one small monument.

He would never forget. Not what happened there, not the lives that were taken!

"This is utterly preposterous! What on earth could we possibly say to make them understand?!" One council member exclaimed, his indignation palpable.

Another responded with a sneer, "I doubt it'll make any difference, whatever we say. It seems they never had any intention of listening in the first place!"

An emergency session had been convened in PLANT. Moments ago, a document had arrived from the Atlantic Federation and its Eurasian allies, bearing what could only be described as an ultimatum.

At the center of the circular chamber, Chairman Durandal's face was etched with gravity.

"What nonsense is this about 'arresting and extraditing the terrorist group'?" one member spat, slamming the list of demands on the table. "Didn't the Atlantic Federation already acknowledge our report that all of them were killed?"

"And now they demand reparations, disarmament, dissolution of our current government, and dispatching Earth Alliance observers to our Supreme Council? They're absolutely insane!!"

Indeed, the document was filled with one-sided and unjust demands. Compliance would mean surrendering their hard-won autonomy, reducing the PLANTs to nothing more than a slave state of the Earth Alliance.

PLANT – a nation born of technological advancement and the struggle for ethnic liberation. To abandon this name, adopted upon their independence, and revert to being a mere territory of self-serving superpowers? To be ruled by Naturals who were clearly inferior not only in ability but, as this document proved, in judgment as well? It would mean days of utter humiliation.

There was no way anyone here – no, any citizen of PLANT – could accept such terms.

The document's opening left no room for ambiguity:

Should the following demands not be met, PLANT will be deemed an extremely malicious enemy state to the people of Earth, and we will not hesitate to eliminate it by force.

It was, in effect, a declaration of war.

This was the swift and decisive final push they had feared.

One council member voiced his anger and distrust towards their enemies. "Naturally, they don't believe we'd accept these terms. It's just an excuse. As usual, there are factions itching to attack PLANT, stirring things up. 'Those in space are the evil enemies of Earth!' – that's what they're saying."

There was precedent for this. In the previous war, an ideological group called "Blue Cosmos" had manipulated the Alliance, constantly expanding the conflict. The current situation – from the release of information about the terrorist group to the media bashing and manipulation of public opinion – bore all the hallmarks of a carefully orchestrated path to this conclusion. Otherwise, how could they be on the brink of war at a time like this? Most nations on Earth should still be reeling from the massive damage caused by Junius Seven's fall.

"But surely this is too reckless," one council member interjected, his expression one of utter bewilderment. "Does the Alliance truly intend to

open hostilities like this? If they do so now, wouldn't they be the ones to suffer most?"

The general consensus was that this declaration of war was nothing short of insanity.

"They've made it clear – comply or face war! It's right there in black and white!"

"The equatorial regions suffered the most damage. The lunar forces are intact, and the Atlantic Federation and Eurasia are still going strong."

"War expands consumption, and having a clear enemy to hate motivates people... It's the same old human nature we've always seen."

One member lamented, prompting a grimace from the one who had earlier expressed confusion.

"Even so, this is..."

"They're the ones threatening war, not us!"

As anger drove everyone to heated arguments, Durandal surveyed the room and spoke up.

"Everyone..."

But with the commotion showing no signs of abating, he stood up, raising his voice in frustration.

"Please, I implore you all to calm down! I understand your feelings, but if we let ourselves be swept up in this, we're merely repeating the cycle!"

The council members fell silent, taken aback by the sight of their usually composed chairman leaning forward, his pale face slightly flushed. Durandal met each of their gazes in turn, his tone admonishing.

"No matter what the Alliance says, we must continue to seek a resolution through dialogue."

He spoke with sincere conviction. "If we don't, how can we face the sacrifices made in the last war?"

Indeed, no one here wanted conflict. No one wished to become a second Patrick Zala.

"But there's already movement at the Earth forces' lunar base!" Takao, the head of the National Defense Committee, interjected, his voice thick with anxiety. Learning from the mistakes of the last war, military officials were now barred from holding council seats. Given the current administration's moderate stance, it was natural for military personnel to be concerned.

"Principles are all well and good, but the current situation is undeniably at red alert! We must prepare our defenses!"

Durandal frowned at this, his expression troubled. "If we mobilize our forces, it will unsettle our citizens and provoke the Earth forces..."

"Chairman!" Takao rose from his seat, protesting Durandal's apparent lack of urgency.

Durandal sighed, as if resigned. "But I suppose it can't be helped. After all, the terror of the Bloody Valentine still lingers in our collective memory..."

A ripple of dread passed through the council at the mention of the Bloody Valentine. Even Takao, still standing, visibly stiffened.

The Bloody Valentine incident had involved nuclear weapons. The Earth Alliance's willingness to use such weapons, long avoided for humanitarian reasons, against the agricultural PLANT Junius Seven spoke volumes about their view of Coordinators. Although N-Jammers had subsequently forced a nuclear standstill, the Earth forces now possessed the secret of the N-Jammer Cancellor. While the Junius Treaty prohibited its military use, could they really trust a party making such outrageous demands to honor any agreement?

Seemingly oblivious to the fear he had awakened, Durandal continued, his expression pained. "While I'll leave defense measures to the National Defense Committee, we must redouble our efforts to seek a peaceful resolution through dialogue..."

The chairman's words remained rational and peace-oriented. While some council members found his stance frustrating, most agreed with his sentiment. They prided themselves on not losing their reason.

"If war breaks out like this, it would play right into the hands of the ghosts who dropped Junius Seven. Please, I urge you all to remember that."

The council members signaled their agreement, at least for now.

They could not allow another catastrophic war like the last one.

"Alex!"

An Orb embassy staff member waved, spotting Athrun amidst the bustling crowd at the spaceport. As Cagalli's special envoy to PLANT, this was Athrun's current official capacity. He struggled to extricate himself from the throng, jogging towards the embassy official. Athrun had already seen the Earth Alliance's joint statement during his shuttle flight.

"Thank you. What's the current situation?" he asked without preamble.

The embassy staff member shook his head, his expression grim. "Not good at all. The citizens of the PLANTs are furious."

Athrun could understand their anger. From PLANT's perspective, the Junius Seven catastrophe was caused by a handful of criminals, unrelated to the will of their people. Moreover, it was PLANT that had taken action to prevent the disaster, saving Earth from annihilation when not a single person living on the planet had been able to do anything effective. Even after the fragment impact, they had extended a helping hand as friends. To then be hit with these one-sided, almost nonsensical demands and threats of invasion—anyone would be outraged.

As they made their way to the exit, the staff member provided more details. "The Chairman insists on pursuing a resolution through dialogue and continued negotiations, but... voices are beginning to criticize this as a weak stance."

Entering the shaft elevator, Athrun's face clouded over. Still, at least the Chairman was still seeking a peaceful solution. He hadn't been wrong to come here, Athrun thought. Or rather, he wanted to believe he hadn't been wrong.

"I've requested an urgent meeting, citing your status as Representative Attha's special envoy, but... given the current situation, it's hard to say how that will pan out," the embassy staff member added, his words carefully noncommittal to avoid raising false hopes.

Athrun nodded, his gaze downcast. "I understand..."

He had rushed to PLANT, driven by a sense of urgency. But even here, he might not be able to change anything. Long waits and fruitless exchanges of words—just like what he and Cagalli had been doing all along. In fact, he might not even get the chance for a meeting at all.

What am I supposed to do?

Athrun's dark eyes fell on the artificial landscape approaching outside the elevator, a reflection of his own uncertainty.

"Well then... when does it begin?" Djibril asked casually, lounging comfortably in his shelter as he glanced at the monitor. "The attack, I mean. When does it start exactly?"

His tone was as light as if he were inquiring about the start time of some entertainment event, but the topic at hand was the commencement of war. Djibril, a black cat curled in his lap, gazed at the man on the screen who seemed visibly discomfited.

"It's not that simple, Djibril. You're being impatient," the middle-aged man retorted irritably. He was the current president of the Atlantic Federation.

"The PLANTs are still pushing for continued negotiations through various channels, and some nations are opposed to our declaration and alliance. To take forceful action at this point would..."

"Oh my, didn't I tell you before?" Djibril interjected, cutting off the words of a nation's president with an exasperated tone. The black cat yawned and leapt from his lap.

"Once we crush the PLANTs, everything else will fall into place."

The president's expression soured at being lectured like a child, but he merely sighed in silence. The fact that the representative of Earth's largest nation couldn't rebut Djibril, a man at least a decade his junior, spoke volumes about the power of Blue Cosmos and the massive force lurking behind it.

Djibril, as if taunting him, pressed on. "Once they're no longer around, who could possibly stand against us? The Equatorial Union? The Kingdom of Scandinavia? Oh, you must be afraid of Orb."

The president's face twisted bitterly at the mention of that nation.

"That nation... well, yes."

He was likely recalling the damage his nation had suffered from Orb's counterattack during their previous invasion, and their subsequent withdrawal without any substantial gains. But Djibril snorted dismissively.

"Hmph, a tiny nation like that?"

He stood up and ambled towards the upper level. As he retrieved a bottle from the cabinet, he spoke leisurely.

"The world, you see, is a system. That's why we need those who build it and those who manage it."

His long fingers selected a glass, dropping ice cubes into it.

"Without management, even a garden grows wild. Everyone would prefer to plant their favorite trees, keep the grass green, and grow beautiful flowers on their lawn, right? Pull the weeds... but to plant grass wherever they please?"

The president listened to Djibril's monologue with a sour expression. Ignoring his audience, Djibril continued as he poured a soft amber liquid into the glass.

"Would you call it beautiful if grass grew wherever it pleased? Would you call that freedom?"

"Djibril..." The president tried to interject, bewildered, but Djibril cut him off, speaking with smug satisfaction.

"Everyone likes such things, you know. Places and things that are well managed, and that are safe. Hasn't humanity always strived to make the world that way? Building cities, creating tools, establishing rules."

What people have always aimed for is an orderly world. To make their lives easier, humans reshape their environment, create various networks, and establish rules to ensure those networks function smoothly.

"And now, we have the chance to do this on an unprecedented, grand scale."

Djibril laughed with delight. To him, even this recent calamity was merely convenient groundwork for creating a new order. And once they uprooted the Coordinators—mere weeds sullyng his garden—the foundation for building a new system would be complete. It must be such a rewarding task, he mused, to rebuild the world from scratch.

His mind was now consumed solely by this grand project.

"So, let's hurry up and defeat them, and move on to the next exciting step. The creation of a beautiful garden for us, Logos—the construction of a new world system."

"I must make an announcement to the people of the world, about a very serious and unfortunate situation..."

The emergency statement from the Atlantic Federation's president was received with bated breath by people in every nation, both on Earth and in PLANT. The Minerva's crew, including Shinn, were jolted awake by alarms to hear this announcement.

"We have engaged in numerous negotiations to resolve this crisis. However, we have yet to receive a satisfactory response. The current PLANT administration, which continues to harbor the terrorist group responsible for this unprecedented act of terror, clearly poses a threat to us all."

On the monitor, the president addressed his presumed audience with an expression of betrayal. His message was clear: the enemy is at fault; this



course of action is unavoidable. But to Shinn and the others who knew the truth, this was nothing but a farce. The terrorists had died to the last man. It was impossible to hand over the dead. Surely, the Bogey One that had been present must have surmised this. If the fact that the perpetrators piloted GINNs was made public while the other truth was ignored, it could only be seen as deliberate manipulation.

"Therefore, we have given notice to the government of the PLANTs. As forewarned, the nations of the Earth Alliance will exercise force to eliminate this threat at midnight tonight."

"War?" Shinn glared at the man on the screen, his anger rising. "No way!"

Once again, they're picking a fight with unreasonable accusations!

It was the same as two years ago when they invaded Orb. The Atlantic Federation, wielding the prestige of a superpower, pushed forward with reasons that couldn't convince even a child, trying to forcibly subdue their opponent through sheer might. Faced with such an enemy, Shinn felt his hatred rekindled anew.

Shortly before the declaration of war, a steady stream of battleships and mobile suit squadrons launched from the ZAFT military station positioned at the forefront of PLANT. Compared to the ring-shaped military headquarters, which resembled a short, stubby pipe, even the 170-meter-long Laurasia-class ships looked like toys. But what emerged slowly behind them was a structure so massive it could hardly be called a ship.

The super carrier Gondwana—its 1200-meter length more akin to a moving fortress. This behemoth boasted sixteen catapults for mobile suits alone and could even house smaller ships within its cavernous interior. It was aboard this giant carrier that Yzak Joule and his team waited, deployed in response to the Earth Alliance forces advancing from their lunar base towards PLANT. While the Supreme Council had been pursuing various diplomatic avenues to defuse the situation, they had no choice but to mobilize as the enemy steadily approached. When they departed, there was a possibility of either immediate combat or a prolonged standoff lasting days.

In reality, the alarms blared throughout the Gondwana far sooner than anyone had anticipated.

Yzak burst out of the officers' quarters, making for the mobile suit deck. Dearka, who joined him en route, called out with a grim expression.

"Hey, this has got to be a joke, right?"

Yzak shot his old friend a sharp glance but said nothing as he headed for the pilot lockers. He, too, had been praying this deployment would end without incident. It had been barely two years since the last war. After both sides had suffered such tremendous losses, to be at war again—how he wished it was just a bad joke!

But no amount of wishing would retract the declaration of war or make the enemy vanish. As soldiers, their duty was clear: protect their homeland

from the invaders. Yzak changed into his pristine white pilot suit and, along with Dearka, rushed to his machine.

"So this is how it all ends up after all! Damn it!"

Suppressing his bitter thoughts, Yzak called out to control.

"This is Sierra Antares One, Joule Team, Yzak Joule, launching!"

Yzak's Slash ZAKU Phantom shot out from the catapult. Its backpack was equipped with the MMI-M826 Hydra Gatling beam cannon, while an MA-MR Falx G7 beam axe was mounted on the rear waist for close combat. Dearka's Gunner ZAKU Warrior followed close behind. They weren't alone; mobile suits poured out of every hatch on the carrier, wheeling around to face the approaching Earth Alliance fleet.

"First battle wave about to enter firing range. All units, weapons free," came the controller's voice through the static.

Almost simultaneously, the converging mobile suit squadrons from both sides opened fire. Countless beams of light sliced through the pitch-black void between the two forces. In an instant, several of the deployed mobile suits were pierced, scattering in brilliant explosions. Yet all of this unfolded in absolute silence, the vacuum of space swallowing even the screams and explosions.

In the vacuum, beam weapons didn't diffuse, their power devastating regardless of distance. The initial exchange was more a matter of luck than skill, determining life or death in seconds. But Yzak pressed forward fearlessly, weaving through the rain of beams to close in on the enemy. The enemy line approached in the blink of an eye. He drew his beam axe, slicing through the torso of a lead Dagger L as they passed. As the explosion lit up his rear view, his next target was already in his sights—a GAT-04 Windam, the Alliance's next-generation mobile suit. The enemy machine couldn't match Yzak's speed and was shredded by his Gatling beam cannon.

An orange-colored ZAKU cut deep into enemy lines with breathtaking speed. Beams from its assault rifle licked the massive hull of an enemy battleship. In the next instant, the ship erupted into a massive fireball as its engine was pierced.

"Heine Westenfluss beat us to it!" Dearka shouted jubilantly, having just shot down two Dagger Ls in quick succession.

Pilots of their caliber were nearly untouchable to the Naturals relying on OS assistance. However, the Alliance mobile suits and ships kept coming, seemingly endless in number.

"Damn it! What the hell? This is never-ending!" Dearka cursed as he took aim at a battleship with his long-range beam cannon. The beam streaked across the void, piercing the ship's flank, but as the stricken vessel spewed flames and retreated, even more ships advanced to take its place.

The sheer amount of force the Earth Alliance had committed to this battle was staggering. No matter how superior ZAFT pilots were in quality, they were at a severe disadvantage in terms of numbers.

"Shit! Don't let them break the defense line!" Yzak shouted, feeling the pressure mounting as he rallied his troops. "Show them who space belongs to!"

Even from the distant reaches of space, faint signs of the conflict's outbreak could be discerned.

On PLANT's polar orbit side, several battleships lurked in the shadow of an asteroid. They were Earth Alliance Agamemnon-class vessels. On the bridge of one such ship, the Netanyehu, an operator reported to the captain.

"The plan is proceeding as scheduled. Operation approved. The main force has engaged in combat."

"Excellent. It's our turn now," the captain declared, a satisfied smile playing across his lips as he contemplated his role in the unfolding drama.

"This time, we'll make them understand once and for all—there's no place for Coordinators in this blue and pure world!"

Mobile suit squadrons poured out of the Netanyehu and its sister ships. The formation, comprising several dozen units, consisted entirely of Windams. Each machine was equipped with massive missile launchers on both shoulders. This unit was known as the "Crusaders." Etched on the nose of each missile nestled in the launchers was an unmistakable symbol—the mark of nuclear warheads.

A long-range reconnaissance GINN on patrol in the nearby sector noticed the stealthily advancing formation. And it didn't miss the enormous missiles they carried.

The information was immediately relayed back to its mothership.

"All city ports have now been closed."

"What about the alert system?"

"We must also call on the military police to standby in case of panic!"

A flurry of commands and reports ricocheted between council members and secretaries. This was Chairman Durandal's office in the Aprilius City Council Building, now a hive of frantic activity.

"Get me the Defense Force commander—what's the status of the final defense line?"

Durandal, his face taut with tension, fired off instructions to his secretaries in rapid succession, receiving reports through his receiver and responding to each new development.

"No, hold off on the evacuation advisory until the very last moment. Even if we flee, we have nowhere to go."

Durandal's words cast a pall of desperate resignation over the room. Sensing this, the chairman spoke with firm resolve, as if to rally their spirits.

"We must protect PLANT at all costs!"

At that moment, a secretary's voice cut through the chaotic atmosphere like a knife.

"Mr. Chairman!"

Every head in the room snapped towards the source, their eyes falling on the ashen face of the secretary clutching the receiver. In that instant, they all knew. The scenario they had all secretly dreaded, the fear they had kept unspoken, had just become reality.

"A nuclear strike force?! From the polar orbit?!"

Yzak could scarcely believe his eyes as he read the transmission ordering all forces to intercept an enemy nuclear attack squad approaching from the polar orbit.

It meant a separate unit armed with nuclear weapons was closing in on PLANT from a complete blind spot. Yzak instinctively scanned the surrounding space, packed with mobile suits and fleet vessels.

"So all of this... was just a decoy?!" Dearka growled, shooting down a Dagger L.

"Damn it all!" Yzak roared, pushing his thrusters to maximum. Ignoring the intense G-forces crushing his body, he accelerated even further. Other ZAFT units, including Dearka, were also trying to break away from the battle line, all headed in the same direction. A Windam attempted to give chase, but Dearka swiftly turned and shot it down.

"Yzak! Go!" Dearka's voice crackled over the comm. "Don't let them fire on PLANT!"

"You don't have to tell me that!" Yzak shouted back, desperately racing through space in search of the true enemy.

It won't be long now, gentlemen," the captain of the Netanyehu announced on the bridge, watching the mobile suit squadron approach PLANT.

"This time, we'll end it all. For a blue and pure world."

He was already certain of their success. The nuclear missiles, equipped with N-Jammer Cancellers, had PLANT within their range. Even if the enemy noticed now and rushed to intercept, they would be too late to stop the launch.

Soon, those space monsters that had been such an eyesore would all perish under the divine hammer they were about to unleash. Yes, in just a few minutes—

The captain's certainty was shaken by an operator's report.

"Three Nazca-class ships at Red 22 Beta! But one has unfamiliar equipment!"

The captain glanced at the optical image on the monitor. It was likely a fleet that had noticed the nuclear attack squad and sortied to intercept. But surely three battleships couldn't stop all the mobile suits, let alone intercept every launched missile.

Indeed, the Nazca-class ship in the center, protected by the others, bore equipment he'd never seen before. A long protrusion extended from the bow, lined with slender, wing-like structures. The device, resembling multiple helicopter rotors stacked together, was likely some kind of weapon. However, no one aboard the Netanyehu could even begin to guess its purpose.

The neatly aligned blades of the unknown equipment began to vibrate minutely.

"Is that them?!" Yzak cried as he finally spotted the silhouettes of mobile suits approaching PLANT. In that instant, the lead Windam released its payload.

"Damn it! We won't make it!" Yzak groaned, still desperately trying to target the missile. But it was too far. The projectile slipped past the barrage of intercepting fire, hurtling towards its target. Ahead lay the cluster of massive, rotating hourglasses—home to hundreds of thousands of his compatriots. The outer walls that shielded them from cosmic rays and the absolute zero of space would be no match for a nuclear explosion. Just like the tragedy that befell Junius Seven.

"No!" Yzak let out an anguished cry, already imagining the horrific scene about to unfold.

There seemed to be no recourse left. Those who had once appeared like comets to save them were nowhere to be found now!

Suddenly, a brilliant white light erupted from the bow of the approaching Nazca-class ship.

The moment the light was unleashed, the nuclear missiles detonated in a flash, mere moments before reaching PLANT's outer wall. But it wasn't just the launched missiles—all the missile launchers carried by the mobile suit squad were engulfed in white light. Even the Earth Alliance ships behind them released similar white arrows from their hulls. Expanding spheres of light swallowed up mobile suits and battleships alike in an instant.

Yzak stared in disbelief, unable to comprehend what he was witnessing. "What... What just happened?"

As the blinding white flash faded, nothing remained in the space where the enemy forces had been deployed.

In the executive office, everyone shielded their eyes from the white light emanating from the monitors.

The N-Stampeder—the device equipped on that Nazca-class ship had detonated all the nuclear missiles in the vicinity.

Everyone was too stunned by what they had just witnessed to notice the fleeting expression that crossed Durandal's face—a composed smile, oddly out of place in this tense moment.

"All nuclear missiles have been neutralized. The enemy forces have been completely annihilated!" A secretary's voice broke the silence, relaying the report from the front lines. The council members let out a collective sigh of relief. Once again, they had narrowly averted a nuclear crisis.

"The Stampeder's quantum fresnels have melted and activated the breaker. The system has now stopped functioning."

Nuclear fission occurs when neutrons move at high speeds within nuclear material. The N-Stampeder could trigger this fission to run out of control, essentially forcing nuclear bombs to detonate prematurely from a distance. However, it had limited range and primarily functioned in zero-gravity environments. Even now, it had shut down after a single use, leaving them vulnerable to a potential second wave of nuclear attacks—a clear indication that the technology still lacked stability in practical application.

Nevertheless, the significance of this device was immense. Not only had it thwarted this attack, but it would likely deter the Earth Alliance from attempting nuclear strikes in the future. Approaching carelessly with nuclear weapons would mean risking self-immolation. They had once again found a way to neutralize what was perhaps their greatest threat.

"Good grief... This is too much!" One council member exclaimed, his voice tinged with exasperation as he contemplated the tragedy they had narrowly avoided.

"Thank goodness the Stampeder made it in time," another sighed.

"But it'll only work once. They'll know better the next time."

As relieved comments circulated among the group, Durandal's voice cut through, concluding the discussion:

"I just hope this'll put an end to things. At least for now."

Athrun had been waiting for hours in a room within the same building, hoping for an audience with the Chairman. The ports were closed, and martial law had been declared in the city. It seemed that combat with Earth Alliance forces was underway, but information was scarce. The embassy staff member accompanying him had been pacing the room like a caged bear. Athrun sighed and stood up.

"I'm going to... wash my face for a bit."

He needed to cool his head. He had rushed here in the heat of the moment, but given the circumstances, it was unlikely Durandal would be free anytime soon. Perhaps it would be better to try again tomorrow...

After refreshing himself in the washroom, Athrun stepped into the hallway, feeling somewhat reinvigorated. He could hear voices in the distance. Suddenly, a familiar, melodious voice reached his ears.

"Yes, it's fine. I understand completely. How much time do we have left?"

Athrun found himself moving past the waiting room, drawn towards the source of the voice. It was unmistakable—could it really be...?

"Then we can confirm once more, right?"

As he turned the corner, a flash of pink hair caught his eye, and Athrun froze in astonishment.

"Lacus...?!"

The pink-haired girl, who had been speaking with two men at the top of the stairs, turned at the sound of his voice. Smooth white skin, soft and delicate features, even the red Haro by her side—it was undoubtedly Lacus. Recognizing Athrun, her face lit up with a smile as she gracefully descended the stairs.

"Athrun!"

Even her call was quintessentially Lacus. The girl leapt towards him, and Athrun reflexively caught her in his arms, his vision filled with pink hair.

"Oh, I'm so happy! You finally came!"

"Ah, um... what?" Athrun was bewildered. No, Lacus should be with Kira in Orb. They had just parted ways in Onogoro. How and why was she here?

Athrun finally managed to ask, "You... why are you here?"

Lacus laughed joyfully, hugging him tightly. "I've been waiting for you all this time, for you to come..."

Athrun felt an inexplicable sense of unease. Lacus had never acted this way towards him, not even when they were engaged.

Before he could collect his thoughts, one of the men accompanying her spoke up hesitantly. "Lady Lacus."

"Ah, yes, I understand," she replied, reluctantly releasing Athrun and flashing another bright smile. "Well then, until next time... But I'm so glad. I'm truly happy, Athrun."

With that, she turned on her heel and left with her escorts, the red Haro bouncing along behind them. Athrun stood rooted to the spot, too stunned to call after her.

"Well, hello there, Alex?"

Startled by the sudden voice behind him, Athrun jumped. He turned to find Chairman Durandal's refined smile greeting him.

"Ah yes, we had an appointment, didn't we? I'm terribly sorry to have kept you waiting for so long."

"Ah... no, it's... um..." Athrun began, intending to ask about the girl he had just seen, but for some reason, he hesitated. Durandal's expression turned quizzical.

"Is something the matter?"

"No... it's nothing," Athrun mumbled, suddenly feeling as if the girl he had just encountered might have been an illusion.

"No... it can't be!"

Athrun's voice cracked as he finally faced Chairman Durandal, who had just informed him of the Earth Alliance's use of nuclear weapons. Durandal sighed wearily.

"I'd like to think so myself. But it's a fact."

He activated a wall monitor with a remote. A news broadcast appeared, the announcer's voice tense:

"Once again, our top news. Yesterday afternoon, the Earth Alliance nations, led by the Atlantic Federation, declared war on the PLANTS. Approximately one hour after the start of hostilities, they launched a nuclear missile attack..."

As Athrun watched, the screen switched to recorded battle footage. After scenes of mobile suit combat, Earth Alliance mobile suits equipped with nuclear missiles appeared. Athrun held his breath. In the next instant, all the missiles fired by the Windams were engulfed in white light.

"However, ZAFT forces, under the command of Supreme Council Chairman Durandal, intercepted and destroyed these at the final defense line—"

Athrun was speechless, torn between disbelief and the incomprehensible explosion footage. The broadcast continued:

"Currently, Earth forces have retreated to their lunar base, and attacks have ceased. However, the situation remains tense."

How could they do this... Athrun struggled against a feeling of utter helplessness. He knew war was like this, but seeing it firsthand was still shocking. The Earth Alliance was willing to use any means necessary to annihilate PLANT in one strike.

After such an attack, PLANT citizens wouldn't stay silent. There was no going back now. He had arrived too late.

"Please, have a seat, Alex," Durandal's compassionate voice brought Athrun back to reality. He offered Athrun a chair.

"It's over for now. Try to calm down."

Still reeling from the shock, Athrun sat across from the chairman.

"While not entirely unexpected, it's still a shock... For them to force through a declaration of war the way they did... and then immediately fire nuclear weapons at us!"

Durandal's bitter words barely registered in Athrun's numbed mind.

"Starting a war in this situation is already beyond reason. And this... This isn't even a proper war anymore."

Athrun nodded mechanically. This was one-sided brutality. But isn't that what war always is? There's no such thing as a just and righteous war. If there seems to be, it's only because one or both sides are cleverly pretending.

"The Alliance has withdrawn their forces for now, but I doubt this is the end..."

Durandal continued, seemingly thinking aloud.

"Now it's our side that's in an uproar. Even though we intercepted them, we were suddenly faced with nuclear weapons again..."

Those words pierced Athrun's heart.

Why would they do such a terrible thing? — The words of those who suffered from Junius Seven's fall. Those who have been hurt cry out, hating those who hurt them.



And now it would be PLANT's citizens crying out: Why would they do such a terrible thing?!

"The real problem starts now..." Durandal sighed.

Athrun's head snapped up. "Chairman, I...!"

Durandal turned to him as if just remembering his presence. Athrun searched desperately for words.

"After this attack, and with them declaring war against you, what steps do the PLANTs intend to take to cope with this?"

Seeing Athrun's pleading expression, the chairman sighed deeply.

"If we retaliate, the world could once again become a quagmire of conflict... I understand that. Of course, I don't want that either..."

A fleeting hope kindled in Athrun's chest. This man understood. He shared their concern about the world spiraling into chaos.

But Durandal's next words extinguished that hope.

"However, there's no way to hide what happened. When they learn of it, all our citizens will cry out in anger — 'Unforgivable!' What would you have me do?"

Athrun, unable to answer, hung his head under Durandal's gaze.

"How can we stop the hands of the clock from moving towards another great war? We've already been struck by nuclear weapons again."

His words were reasonable. Athrun understood why the citizens wouldn't be satisfied with inaction. Still, knowing it was futile, he pleaded desperately.

"But... even so, please! Chairman...!"

Faced with the chairman's seemingly cold expression, Athrun's mind flashed back to two years ago. When he had stormed the Defense Headquarters alone, trying to change his father's mind. Would his feelings fail to reach his audience now, just as they had with his father?

Fighting the urge to give up, Athrun poured out his heart.

"We can't just start shooting at each other out of anger and hatred! If we do that... the world will again become a place of endless fighting, with nothing to gain! Please, anything but that...!"

"Alex..."

"I'm... I'm Athrun Zala!"

Athrun burst out, brushing aside Durandal's admonishing tone.

"I'm the son of Patrick Zala, who expanded the war beyond all reason two years ago, spreading a hatred that can only be called foolish across the world!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, a flood of emotions broke free within him. Athrun continued, as if expelling the darkness that had congealed in his heart.

"I believed my father's words were right! I raced across battlefields, took enemy lives, fought to the death with friends... And even after I realized that I was wrong, I could not do a thing to stop him. And I lost everything!"

All his past experiences flashed through his mind. The deaths of his comrades, the hatred towards those who caused them, the moment he thought he had killed Kira—killed him with his own hands... Back then, Cagalli

had cried out, asking if peace would come after all that. It wouldn't. What awaits at the end of fighting isn't peace, but a barren wasteland where both friend and foe lie dead. Knowing this, he had tried to stop his father's foolish actions. But he couldn't change anything. Nothing at all.

"And yet! There are still people dancing to my father's words! And this is the result!"

Athrun cried out as if spitting blood.

It was his father who had brought about this situation. That man was the root of all this evil.

"We absolutely must not repeat this! Never again!"

Athrun finally fell silent, breathing heavily. Exhausted as if he had just run at full speed, he slumped in his chair, averting his eyes.

Durandal, who had listened silently to Athrun's outburst, spoke quietly.

"I heard about the perpetrators of Junius Seven from Shinn..."

Athrun tensed, listening. Durandal's voice was filled with sympathy.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you..."

"No, that's not it. I'm glad I found out," Athrun replied, as if rejecting the sympathy.

"Otherwise, I would have again, without knowing anything..."

"No, that's not it, Athrun. You have no reason to feel responsible for their actions," Durandal leaned forward, his deep voice soothing.

"It might be inevitable that you think negatively about your father, Chairman Zala, but..."

Athrun glared at him involuntarily. Was Durandal saying his father wasn't wrong? Hadn't he been the one who denounced his father's actions after the war and chose the path of reconciliation?

His father was wrong. How could there be any justice in a man who tried to wipe out everyone living on Earth?

But Durandal continued, as if trying to shake Athrun's rigid mindset.

"But Chairman Zala wasn't always like that, was he? He might have made some mistakes in his methods, but... at the root of it all, wasn't he trying to protect the PLANTs, to protect us, to create a better world?"

Athrun faltered slightly.

That... was true. His father had tried to choose the right path in his own way. At the very least, he loved PLANT and tried to protect it. Athrun didn't doubt that feeling.

"Many people end up making mistakes despite their good intentions. And the words they speak don't always reach their listeners as intended. The receiver also interprets things in their own way."

"Mr. Chairman..."

Athrun was about to reject this, thinking the other was trying to console him. But Durandal continued calmly, yet firmly.

"The perpetrators of Junius Seven merely used Chairman Zala's words to justify their own misguided feelings. They convinced themselves they weren't wrong because 'Chairman Zala said so too.'"

This was a perspective Athrun had never considered before. He found himself listening intently, eyes wide.

"So you shouldn't let yourself be swayed by such things. They are they, Chairman Zala is Chairman Zala—and you are you. Regardless of whose son you might be."

Strangely, these words seemed to permeate every corner of Athrun's heart. That's right... his father is his father, and he is himself. Athrun had rejected his father's path and chosen to oppose it. He should have understood this intellectually. But perhaps he had been waiting for someone to tell him this.

"You shouldn't feel guilty about such things. You yourself bear no such burden."

Athrun was now listening to Durandal's words with an open mind. Durandal smiled gently as he spoke.

"It's you who came here, wanting to stop the flames of war from igniting again. That alone is enough. Stop trying to shoulder everything alone."

Athrun, having lost his earlier fervor, hung his head like a child. Looking back, he realized he had been spinning his wheels, losing his cool while feeling as if he alone bore the weight of the world's evils. That way, anything he did would be mere self-satisfaction. This was no time to be driven by personal feelings.

"But I'm glad, Athrun. Glad that you came here like this."

Durandal's words lifted Athrun's sinking spirits, his smile genuine.

"No, I..."

"It's the feelings of each individual like you that will surely save the world. I might be seen as a dreamer, but that's what I believe."

Athrun's heart swelled at these words. If so, then they were dreamers too. This man truly did share their heart. Durandal's gentle face showed quiet determination as he spoke.

"That's why we must endure this moment..."

Athrun felt a sense of vindication. It was as if that day two years ago when he broke with his father had been rewritten with a new ending.

As Athrun sat there, filled with a contentment ill-suited to the situation, the news broadcast still playing on the screen was suddenly interrupted by a flash of pink hair.

"Everyone!"

Athrun almost rose from his chair. The monitor in the office now showed the delicate figure of Lacus.

"I am Lacus Clyne. Everyone, please calm your hearts and listen to what I have to say."

Athrun stared at the girl speaking on the monitor, speechless. Durandal watched him with a small smile.

"The latest incident involving Junius Seven, and the declaration of war and attack by the Earth Alliance yesterday that stemmed from it, are truly sad, tragic events. I share your surprise and anger at being suddenly faced with nuclear weapons again."

Was it really Lacus he had met earlier in this building? Athrun felt that strange sense of discomfort again and scrutinized the screen more closely.

"But please, everyone, calm yourselves now."

The pink-haired girl addressed the citizens with a dignified voice, much like when she had made guerrilla broadcasts during the last war while being pursued by Patrick as a traitor. And yet—

"Being driven by anger and crying out thoughts of rage will only lead to new conflicts."

—This wasn't Lacus.

Athrun was certain now, and turned to Durandal in shock at this realization. The chairman gave him a wry smile.

"The Supreme Council is still making every effort to avoid the worst-case scenario. So please, everyone. Trust in your representatives, the Supreme Council and Chairman Durandal, who have always loved peace and are now seeking a better path... Please remain calm for now..."

As the girl's words, reminiscent of an election campaign speech, continued, Durandal spoke with self-deprecation:

"You can laugh if you want."

He smiled, meeting Athrun's dumbfounded gaze.

"Of course, I'm sure you can tell?"

"Ah..."

Athrun looked back at the screen.

—Then... this girl is indeed...?

"I feel pathetic for resorting to such tricks, but... it can't be helped. Her influence is significant. Far greater than mine."

Athrun stared at the smiling Lacus on the screen, unable to believe what he was seeing.

—This is... a fake...?

The girl began to sing in a clear voice. Even her voice was almost identical to Lacus's.

Lacus Clyne's popularity had remained strong even after the war. As Patrick's reputation fell due to being labeled a war criminal, her image of opposing him and advocating for peace had relatively risen, earning her a charismatic following. Indeed, people would likely listen to Lacus more than anyone else. But to exploit that by setting up a fake Lacus to deceive the citizens?

"I know it seems foolish. But right now, I need her influence."

Durandal turned to the perplexed Athrun.

"Just as I need your strength as well."

"Mine?"

Caught off guard, Athrun momentarily forgot his distrust of Durandal. The chairman smiled and walked around his desk towards the door.

"Would you mind coming with me?"

As if spellbound, Athrun followed him.

Durandal led Athrun into what was clearly a military facility—a place where Athrun, officially a foreign national, shouldn't have access. Yet Durandal showed no concern, offering no explanation as he pressed on. Athrun followed, his hesitation growing with each step.

ZAFT soldiers, apparently forewarned, stood at attention before a gate. At Durandal's nod, they operated a card key, opening the gate wide. As Athrun stepped through, he froze in astonishment.

Bathed in light within the hangar stood a colossal humanoid weapon. Clad in the iron-gray of deactivate mode, its linear form sported a pair of horns and eyes, suggesting it was a new model in the same series as the Impulse. Horn-like protrusions adorned its head, with massive boosters visible on its back. Its triangular shoulders jutted out, tipped with what appeared to be beam sabers, while long gun barrels—likely beam cannons—extended from behind each shoulder.

"ZGMF-X23S Saviour," Durandal announced proudly, gazing up at the towering silhouette. "While its capabilities differ, it was developed around the same time as the Chaos, Gaia, and Abyss." He turned to Athrun. "What would you say if I told you I want to entrust this machine to you?"

Wariness rose within Athrun. "What are you implying? Are you asking me to return to ZAFT?"

Durandal tilted his head in a disarmingly casual gesture at Athrun's hard tone. "Well... not exactly. I mean it literally—I want to entrust it to you. Though, I suppose in terms of official procedure, it might amount to that."

It couldn't be that simple. Athrun was wanted for desertion, and despite the Chairman's words, he was still Patrick Zala's son. How could someone like him be qualified to receive such a machine?

Moreover, Athrun still harbored a strong aversion to piloting mobile suits again. And then there was the matter of the fake "Lacus Clyne."

Seeing Athrun's cautious gaze, Durandal spoke as if confiding in him. "My feelings about recent events are exactly as my Lacus Clyne stated. But when dealing with various people and organizations, each with their own agendas intricately intertwined, it's not easy to make things go as one wishes..."

This was a reality Athrun knew all too well. Even in Orb, the opinions of various factions often drowned out Cagalli's voice.

"That's why I want those who share my ideals to stand with me," Durandal continued, looking earnestly into Athrun's eyes. "If possible, I want to avoid war. But we can't allow ourselves to be unilaterally destroyed without taking up arms either. For times like these, I want you to be someone with power, Athrun."

"Mr. Chairman..."

Athrun understood what Durandal was saying. But he didn't want to wield power again. It wasn't fear of the battlefield, nor just an aversion to killing. The very act of possessing power terrified him. He still didn't know for what or how he should fight. If someone like him gained power, he feared he might again hurt someone by mistake, as he had when he tried to kill Kira.

But Durandal continued, his voice filled with quiet conviction. "Having experienced the last war and struggled with the legacy of your father, I believe you won't lose your way, no matter the situation."

Athrun looked up at him, startled. Durandal's eyes seemed to see right through him.

"If we start down the wrong path, I want you to correct us... But to do that, you need power, don't you? Unfortunately."

Power is necessary because conflicts persist—words Athrun had once spoken himself.

In the midst of conflict, no one listens to those without power. Perhaps if conflicts were to disappear from this world, people might agree with sound logic. But that's impossible now.

That's what Durandal meant.

And Athrun's heart was stirred by his proposal. He wanted power—Athrun had indeed wished for it. When all he could do was sit on the Minerva's bridge. When he could only stand silently behind Cagalli as she lamented the world's fate—yes, he had longed for power then.

Athrun still couldn't fully trust Durandal. But that's precisely why Durandal was telling him to correct them if they erred. To use this power then.

Athrun looked up at the machine called Saviour with new eyes.

"It's sudden, I know. I'm not asking you to decide right away," Durandal said, his voice remaining gentle. "But what you can do, what you want to do—you should know that better than anyone."

His voice was filled with trust in Athrun. Something within Athrun was deeply shaken, beginning to move.

Lost in thought about Chairman Durandal's proposal, Athrun entered his hotel, oblivious to his surroundings. The cheerful voice that suddenly rang out in the empty lobby startled him from his reverie.

"Ah! Athrun!"

He looked up to see a pink-haired girl rushing towards him.

"Welcome back! I've been waiting for you!"

The girl—Lacus, or rather, the one playing Lacus—joyfully threw herself into Athrun's arms as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Wha... ah, you... um..." Athrun stammered, caught off guard.

The girl smiled brightly and whispered, just loud enough for him to hear, "I'm Meer. Meer Campbell. But call me Lacus when others are around."

Athrun's confusion gave way to dismay as he grasped her meaning. He had no desire to play a part in this charade. But Meer, oblivious to his discomfort, tugged at his arm.

"Hey, you haven't eaten yet, right? Didn't think so. Let's go for a bite!"

"Eh? No, I..."

Before Athrun could protest, Meer had pulled him into the elevator.

"You're Lacus's fiancé, right?" she chirped.

"No, that's... that's in the past," Athrun managed.

It was true that he and Lacus had once been engaged, arranged by their parents. But that had changed when their fathers took drastically different paths, with Patrick Zala branding Lacus and her father Siegel Clyne as traitors. Moreover, they had each found their true partners, transforming their relationship into something more akin to a close alliance.

Athrun realized that Meer's behavior towards him stemmed from her complete immersion in the role of Lacus, including acting as his "fiancée."

"So, Athrun, do you prefer meat or fish?" Meer asked cheerfully as they were shown to a VIP room in the hotel's restaurant.

Athrun was inwardly exasperated, but he couldn't help looking at her face. Her soft features, delicate expressions, and clear voice were identical to the girl he had once been engaged to. Unable to coldly reject her, he sat silently across from her.

"Oh, did you see my performance today?" Meer leaned across the table, her expression earnest. "How was it? Did I really look like her?"

Athrun was at a loss for words, feeling as if he was betraying the real Lacus and everyone being deceived just by sitting here.

Meer was indeed nearly identical to Lacus. Her face might have been surgically altered, but she had perfectly copied Lacus's voice, expressions, and even small mannerisms. While her impression differed slightly when she was being herself, anyone who only knew Lacus from broadcasts would easily be fooled by her performance. Yet Athrun was reluctant to acknowledge this.

Seeing his hesitation, Meer's shoulders drooped.

"Or was I not even close?"

"Ah, no, that's not it..." Athrun felt a pang of guilt at her crestfallen expression.

"Really?!" Meer's eyes lit up with hope, leaning in closer.

Athrun nodded, feeling cornered. "Yes, you were very similar. Almost... indistinguishable from the real one."

As he spoke, Athrun felt increasingly complicit in the deception, falling silent again. But Meer's excitement brushed aside his discomfort.

"You just made my day! I'm so glad! Coming from you, I couldn't be happier!"

Her joy seemed to activate the red Haro, which spun around excitedly. Even this ball-shaped pet robot was likely based on the one Athrun had given to Lacus. The attention to detail was unsettling.

While Athrun had been starting to trust Chairman Durandal, this situation left him deeply uncomfortable. Did this girl feel no guilt about deceiving everyone and impersonating Lacus?

"You know, I've always been a huge fan of Lacus," Meer confided, her speech now slightly less refined than when she was in character.

"I loved her songs and often sang them. People always said I sounded like her..."

She beamed at Athrun as she enjoyed her meal, while he picked at his food, reluctantly engaged in the conversation.

"Then one day, the Chairman suddenly called for me..."

"And that led to this?" Athrun's tone conveyed his disapproval, but Meer nodded without hesitation.

"Yes! He said my power was needed now—for PLANT. So..."

It was the same thing Athrun had been told. A bitter feeling welled up inside him as he looked away. "Not yours. Lacus's power is what's needed."

"That's true, but... it's not just now. Lacus is always needed by everyone," Meer's voice carried a warmth that seemed like a pure prayer, causing Athrun to look at her anew.

"She's strong, beautiful, and kind..." Meer gazed at her reflection in the glass, then added wistfully, "Meer isn't really needed by anyone."

"Ah..." Athrun regretted his words, but before he could speak, Meer's bright expression returned.

"That's why I'm happy to help, even if it's just for now. If I can assist the Chairman and everyone else in Lacus's place, that's enough for me."

"Miss Meer..."

Athrun's perception of her shifted slightly. She too was doing her best, trying to stop the hands of the clock from moving towards war. Regardless of the method, her sincerity touched him.

"I'm really happy to meet you too, Athrun," Meer said, blushing as she leaned across the table again.

"You know a lot about Lacus, right? Please tell me. How she usually is, what she likes... um, what she's not good at, what she excels at..."

Athrun's heart wavered again. Even this girl was doing her utmost for the same goal. What she was doing wasn't exactly praiseworthy, but perhaps the end justified the means. The same could be said for him.

At the very least, he was needed here.

Shinn's challenging question echoed in his mind: "What are you doing here?"

Cagalli was waiting in Orb. But there was nothing Athrun could do there.

Chairman Durandal's words resonated: "What you can do, what you want to do—you know that better than anyone."

Athrun continued to waver, caught between duty, desire, and doubt.



## Phase.05

"This is no laughing matter, Djibril," the men on the monitor sneered, their faces contorted with contempt as they looked down upon him.

"What in blazes is this disgraceful spectacle?"

The once immaculate and elegant interior of the shelter now resembled the aftermath of a violent tempest. Shattered crystal lay strewn across the floor, while spilled liquor from overturned bottles seeped into the plush carpet, leaving dark stains in its wake. Djibril, his already pallid complexion turning ashen, sank deeper into his chair.

"Well, I'll be damned," another chimed in, his tone eerily casual. "They certainly did a number on us, didn't they?"

"What in God's name was that weapon ZAFT unleashed?" a third demanded, his curiosity piqued despite the gravity of the situation.

The men continued their discussion, seemingly indifferent to Djibril's ominous silence.

"So, you strut out there, chest puffed with bravado, only to come crawling back with your tail between your legs after one solid punch to the nose!" The speaker's laugh was cold and mirthless. "Tell me, Djibril, was this farcical outcome part of your grand strategy?"

Djibril's fingers dug into the arms of his chair, his knuckles turning white under the weight of their scathing rebuke.

This wasn't how it was supposed to unfold. His carefully crafted plan had called for a swift, decisive victory—a knockout blow delivered the moment war was declared. It was this promise of a quick resolution that had finally swayed the reluctant Atlantic Federation to join the fray. A protracted conflict could spell disaster for the weakened Alliance, still reeling from the devastating impact of Junius Seven. The crux of this offensive lay in its brevity.

"I'd wager that young upstart running the Atlantic Federation must be beside himself right about now," one of the men mused, casually referring to the leader of the world's most powerful nation as if he were a mere schoolboy.

"I assume the units dispatched to assault ZAFT's terrestrial strongholds are still awaiting orders?"

The strategy had been to launch a simultaneous attack on both the PLANTs and ZAFT's Earth-based facilities, with forces poised to encircle Carpentaria and Gibraltar. The original plan called for an immediate assault on these "remnants" following the nuclear strike on the PLANTs. However,

with the space operation in shambles, the ground forces now found themselves in limbo, impotently awaiting further instructions.

"You've raised your fist with such bravado. Surely you don't intend to slink away now? The whole world would laugh us to scorn."

The men's mocking conversation persisted. One of them fixed Djibril with a piercing gaze.

"Well then... what's to be done?"

"Who should we turn to now, and what course of action should we pursue? — What say you, Djibril?"

The underlying menace in that voice sent a chill down Djibril's spine. He knew all too well that for these men—whose faces filled the monitor before him—deposing him as the leader of Blue Cosmos and consigning him to oblivion would be child's play. They were the true puppet masters, the shadowy figures who pulled the strings of this world—representatives of the organization known as Logos. Even Djibril, who could mobilize the Alliance forces at will, was but a pawn moved by the invisible hand of their influence.

But it was all the Coordinators' fault! Whatever sorcery they had employed to neutralize every single one of their nuclear warheads—once again, they had resorted to their insidious tricks! It was because of those space-dwelling monsters that he now found himself in this humiliating predicament!

In an instant, Djibril's momentary fear transmuted into a white-hot fury. Forgetting his earlier trepidation, he lashed out at the assembled men.

"How dare you suggest such nonsense!" he roared, his face contorted with rage. "This is just one more reason for us to win this war, no matter what! We cannot falter now!"

His sudden outburst gave the men pause, and emboldened by their silence, Djibril pressed on.

"That weapon... that abomination that annihilated our nuclear arsenal in the blink of an eye! How can any of us rest easy knowing such an abomination exists in the hands of those... those *monsters* lurking above us?!"

Though intelligence on the mysterious weapon was still frustratingly scarce, one chilling fact had been confirmed—it had not only detonated the launched missiles but had somehow triggered those still safely stored in the ship's holds, all without direct contact. The terrifying implication was that these creatures might possess the power to detonate any nuclear material on Earth at will. For those living on the surface, it was a nightmare beyond imagining.

"We will continue this fight!" Djibril declared, his voice rising to a fever pitch. "We'll return to our original plan—no, we'll intensify it!"

His face was a canvas of conflicting emotions—wounded pride, disgust, and an all-consuming hatred for the enemy intermingling in a twisted tableau. With a final, impassioned cry, he sought to rally the men before him.

"We will crush them utterly, strip them of their power, and ensure they can never threaten us again!"

I will not let this humiliation stand!

In Djibril's mind, any semblance of cool calculation had long since been overwhelmed by an all-consuming hatred for the enemy who had dared to thwart his designs.

In the hallowed chambers of the PLANT Supreme Council, a momentous decision had just been reached. The air was thick with tension, a palpable mix of relief and apprehension.

"The PLANT Supreme Council hereby approves the motion put forth by the National Defense Committee, with the unanimous consent of all council members," the announcement reverberated through the chamber, its finality hanging heavy in the air.

Chairman Takao of the National Defense Committee allowed himself a brief moment of reprieve, his features softening with visible relief. In stark contrast, Chairman Durandal, who had fought against this resolution until the bitter end, wore an expression of profound anguish, the weight of the decision etched into the lines of his face.

The die had been cast. PLANT, too, had chosen the path of military action against the Earth Alliance.

As the council members began to relax, their voices a low murmur of discussion, Durandal's voice cut through the chamber once more. "However!" he interjected, his tone sharp enough to snap all attention back to him.

"I implore you all to remember," Durandal continued, his gaze sweeping across the assembly, "that this decision is solely an exercise of our right to proactive self-defense. We must never lose sight of this crucial distinction!"

His words hung in the air, a sobering reminder of the gravity of their choice. "Should we allow our emotions to run unchecked, should we let this conflict spiral out of control, we risk nothing less than a repeat of the last great war!"

The council members shifted uncomfortably, their earlier relief giving way to a more somber mood. They knew Durandal spoke the truth – even in wielding the sword of war, they must do so with utmost precision and control. In that moment, they truly believed such restraint was within their grasp.

As the session drew to a close, Chairman Durandal offered a final, almost prayer-like entreaty. His voice, usually so commanding, now carried a note of quiet desperation.

"As we once again take up arms, I fervently hope... that this time, the weapons we wield will serve to end all battles, once and for all."

"No, no, NO!" Cagalli's voice reverberated through the chamber, a desperate cry against the tide of inevitability. She stood alone, a solitary

figure of defiance before the assembled cabinet ministers. Her face was a mask of fury and frustration as she continued her impassioned plea.

"You can't be serious! How can you even consider forming such an alliance now, regardless of what anyone says?"

Since the Earth Alliance's declaration of war, Cagalli had exhausted every avenue, desperately seeking a way to avert the looming conflict. But her efforts had been in vain. The first shots had been fired, and now events were spiraling out of control with frightening speed. The next crucible she faced was determining Orb's place in this new world order.

To her utter disbelief, Unato Ema Seiran and the other ministers were still adamant about aligning with the Atlantic Federation. As Cagalli steadfastly refused, Unato's face contorted with exasperation.

"But Representative..."

"Have you all gone blind?" Cagalli cut him off, her voice trembling with righteous anger. "You saw with your own eyes what the Atlantic Federation did! A unilateral declaration of war, followed by a nuclear assault!"

The young leader's entire frame shook as she continued her tirade. "And you speak of security guarantees from such a nation? They're the very ones threatening global stability right now! Why in the world should we join hands with them?"

As the ministers attempted to placate her, Yuuna rose to his feet, his movement smooth and deliberate.

"I implore you to cease this childish complaints!" His voice cut through the clamor like a knife. He regarded Cagalli with a look of barely concealed disdain before addressing her earlier question.

"You ask why? I'll tell you why? It's because that's the kind of nation they are, Representative."

Cagalli stood dumbfounded, surrounded by a chorus of agreement from the other ministers. Yuuna continued, his tone dripping with condescension.

"The Atlantic Federation's methods are indeed heavy-handed. With all due respect, Representative, we're well aware of this fact without you pointing it out."

Cagalli found herself at a loss for words. It wasn't just Yuuna's sudden change in attitude that threw her off balance, but the incomprehensibility of his logic. If they understood the situation, then why...?

Yuuna pressed his advantage, his words sharp and cutting. "So what? What course of action do you propose for Orb, Representative? Would you have us reject this alliance, turn our backs on the nations of Earth, and call the distant PLANTs our friends? Do you intend for us to stand alone on this planet once again?"

"That's not what I—"

"Are you saying that as long as our own country remains peaceful and safe, we should turn a blind eye to the suffering of other nations ravaged by disaster? That we shouldn't even extend a helping hand?"

"That's not it at all!"

Cagalli's frustration mounted. How had her words been so twisted? This wasn't what she meant at all. Yet the ministers all regarded her with expressions of weary exasperation, as if she were nothing more than a petulant child.

Why couldn't they grasp something so simple? Why were they willing to stand idly by—no, actively participate—as others divided the world into enemies and allies, repeating the same foolish mistakes of the past, heedless of the consequences? The urge to scream in frustration nearly overwhelmed her.

"Then what would you have us do?" Yuuna's stern voice cut through her thoughts.

Fighting against the pressure of his gaze, Cagalli struggled to articulate her position. "Orb should... Orb should maintain its neutrality, forge its own path, just as we always have!"

"And watch our nation burn again? Like Lord Uzumi did?"

The low, cutting remark came from Tatsuki Mashima. Cagalli felt as if she'd been physically struck, reeling from the shock of his words.

"That's not what I'm saying at all!" she cried, slamming both hands on the table. The very idea that someone would speak of her father in such a way was intolerable.

"Perhaps not intentionally, but given the current situation, we could very well end up facing such a scenario again," Unato interjected smoothly, seizing the moment. "Representative, we all share your desire for peace and national security. That's precisely why we're advocating for this alliance."

"Unato..."

With a sinking feeling, Cagalli realized the truth. Not a single person in this room truly carried on the legacy of her father—the ideals that Uzumi Nara Athha had given his life to uphold.

"The Atlantic Federation isn't making any direct demands on Orb at the moment. But what happens if we continue down this path? Can't you see that an alliance, even if it's not ideal, is still preferable to the alternative?"

Unato's words took on a threatening edge as he continued to press her. "Surely you understand how dangerous it would be to stubbornly make enemies of others, especially a superpower like the Atlantic Federation?"

"But...!"

What would become of her father's dying wish? Of Orb's pride?

As Cagalli struggled to resist, Unato delivered the coup de grâce. "The one thing we must never do again is allow this nation to burn."

Cagalli lowered her head in defeat. In her mind's eye, she saw a flash of Shinn's crimson eyes. If she said no now, how many more children like him might be created? The weight of that responsibility bore down on her shoulders like an immense, crushing force. Could she make a decision that would rob her people—the children, parents, and citizens of this country—of their lives? And if she did, could she look those orphaned children in the eye and tell them that the path she chose was the right one, that they shouldn't blame her?

Cagalli found that she couldn't.

"Please, Representative," Unato's voice fell heavily upon her, "before you go on about tradition, justice, or ideals, think of the immediate safety of our nation and its people..."

His words settled over Cagalli like a shroud, smothering the last embers of her resistance.

"Cagalli!"

The cheerful voice from behind startled her, and Cagalli turned, her face a mask of exhaustion. The cabinet meeting had just concluded, ministers filing out of the room in a steady stream. From among them, Yuuna emerged, making his way towards her with a smile that seemed jarringly out of place given the recent tension.

"Are you alright? You look awfully tired," he said, his tone light and familiar.

Cagalli felt an instinctive wave of revulsion at his casual manner, as if the heated arguments from moments ago had never occurred. Sensing her discomfort, Yuuna quickly adopted an apologetic air.

"I'm sorry about earlier. But you know, it's my duty to voice my opinions to you clearly in those situations."

"Yeah, I know... It's just me. I still have a lot to learn," Cagalli conceded, her voice hollow.

She understood, rationally, that he had merely fulfilled his role by expressing his views. She couldn't fault him for that. And yet, a profound sense of isolation gnawed at her—the feeling that no one truly understood her position.

"At this rate, I can just see the ministers laughing about me again..." she murmured, more to herself than to Yuuna.

If only Father were here, Cagalli thought, immediately chiding herself for entertaining such a futile wish. The harsh truth was that it was her father's presence, not her own, that was needed in this moment of crisis. Lord Uzumi would have known how to silence the dissenting ministers, keep the Atlantic Federation in check, and navigate them through these treacherous waters.

"Don't worry," Yuuna said, falling into step beside her. "Everyone understands. It's just that this particular issue is... well, a bit too big for you to handle alone."

His words, meant to be comforting, only served to underscore Cagalli's feelings of inadequacy.

"Mashima didn't mean to speak ill of Lord Uzumi, you know. He's just concerned that you, as his daughter, might end up repeating the same... difficult choices."

"I know..." Cagalli's voice was barely above a whisper.

Yuuna opened the door to her office, ushering her inside with a solicitous air. "Come on, you should rest a bit. Would you like something to drink? Or perhaps a light snack?"

"No... I'm fine. Thank you," Cagalli declined, sinking into the sofa and closing her eyes, her posture a picture of defeat. Yuuna's attentiveness, which would normally have been appreciated, now felt suffocating. In her fatigue, she found herself wishing for Athrun's presence. He wouldn't need to do or say anything; he would simply understand her feelings without a word.

"Poor thing... You're just an eighteen-year-old girl, after all," Yuuna's voice came from much closer than Cagalli had expected. She hadn't noticed him sit down beside her. His hand gently brushed a strand of hair from her face, causing her to open her eyes in surprise. Yuuna's face was mere inches from her own.

"But don't worry. I'm here for you..." he whispered soothingly, leaning in to place a soft kiss on her forehead.

Cagalli blinked, momentarily stunned, unable to process what had just transpired.

What... what does this mean?

Unconsciously, her hand rose to touch the spot where his lips had been, confusion etched across her features.

No, it probably doesn't mean anything, she tried to rationalize. This is just how Yuuna is. He's just trying to comfort me because I look so dejected. That has to be it.

Yet as her left hand moved, the ring on her finger caught the light. For a brief moment, Cagalli could have sworn she saw a cold glint in Yuuna's eyes as they focused on that small, but significant piece of jewelry.

"But Captain! We're already at war! They've declared it, for heaven's sake!"

Arthur's booming voice carried down the corridor, reaching the officers' mess where Shinn and his comrades were having their meal. They instinctively paused, looking up from their plates.

"I'm well aware of that," came the captain's measured response. Their voices grew louder as they approached.

"But what can we do? We haven't even finished loading supplies yet."

"That's precisely why we can't afford to—"

The pair burst through the mess hall doors, prompting everyone present to stand and salute. Captain Talia returned the gesture with a casual nod, making her way to an empty table.

"I understand your urgency, Arthur," Talia cut him off with her characteristic bluntness, "but tell me, what exactly would we accomplish by rushing out there half-cocked?"

Shinn couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for the vice-captain. As unreliable as Arthur could be at times, Shinn was grateful he didn't have to fill those shoes.

"It's a precarious time, Arthur," Talia continued, seemingly oblivious—or indifferent—to the fact that everyone in the mess was hanging on her every

word. "The Earth forces must be in shock after their nuclear first strike was miraculously thwarted. Even their assault team at Carpentaria seems to be at a standstill, merely maintaining the siege."

"But that's exactly why we should—"

"If we make any rash moves now, it could be the spark that ignites this powder keg. Is that what you want, to be the one who fans the flames of war?"

Arthur blanched, shaking his head vigorously.

"Of course not!"

Despite the gravity of the situation, Shinn had to stifle a laugh at Arthur's over-the-top reaction. He recalled Meyrin once describing the vice-captain as "cute," but moments like these made Shinn question whether the Minerva was in capable hands.

"If anything, the unstable situation means we need to ensure our ship is in peak condition before we deploy," Talia stated, her composure a stark contrast to Arthur's agitation.

"Fortunately, Orb hasn't aligned with the Earth Forces yet. We can afford to wait a little longer and see how things develop before setting sail. Besides, we haven't received any new orders from headquarters."

Defeated once again, Arthur slumped his shoulders with a heavy sigh.

"How much longer do you think we have?"

Talia's voice dropped slightly, a hint of grimness creeping into her tone.

"Who knows? But I doubt it will be too long."

A chill ran down Shinn's spine. The implication was clear—the captain and her officers believed it was only a matter of time before Orb threw in its lot with the Earth Alliance.

Shinn's gaze fell to his plate, his appetite suddenly gone. He couldn't help but wonder what path his former homeland would choose in this new conflict. And what of that woman with the fierce golden eyes—the head of state barely two years his senior? What decision would she make?

As Athrun opened the door to his hotel room, he found himself face-to-face with Yzak Joule's all-too-familiar scowl.

"Yzak?!" The name escaped Athrun's lips in a gasp of surprise.

Before he could fully process the situation, Yzak had grabbed him by the collar, his face contorted with anger. "You bastard!" he snarled, pulling Athrun close. "What the hell is going on here?!"

"W-wait a minute! Hey!" Athrun protested, more confused than ever.

Behind Yzak, Dearka stood with an exasperated expression, as if to say, "Why do these two always end up like this?" When Yzak finally released his grip, Athrun's own temper flared.

"What's the big idea, barging in like this?!"

"That's my line, Athrun!" Yzak jabbed an accusatory finger at him. "We're up to our necks in work, and suddenly we're summoned by the Council. And for what? To be your damn babysitters?!"



"What?" Athrun blinked, caught off guard once again.

"Why the hell am I being pulled from the front lines for this crap?!" Yzak continued his tirade.

"Babysitters?" Athrun echoed, dumbfounded.

Dearka, seizing the moment of confusion, poked his head around Yzak.

"You made a request to leave the premises, right?"

"Dearka..." Athrun turned his bewildered gaze to his other old comrade.

With a casual salute and a wink, Dearka explained, "Long time no see. But you know, given the current situation, even a citizen of a friendly nation can't just wander around the PLANTs freely."

"Ah, right... I was told that," Athrun nodded, recalling his conversation with the authorities the day before. "They said someone would accompany me, but... you guys?"

Yzak, still fuming, spat out, "You're damn right!"

As Yzak turned away in a huff, Athrun felt a laugh bubbling up inside him and quickly stifled it. This guy really hasn't changed a bit, he thought.

As they walked through the hotel corridor, Dearka mused, "I guess someone who knows the situation set this up, huh?"

Athrun immediately thought of Chairman Durandal's refined features and let out a weary sigh.

Yzak maintained his sullen silence, his face set in a perpetual frown. The scar he'd received in battle two years ago had been removed, and he now wore a dark green suit. While his appearance had matured somewhat, his personality seemed unchanged. Athrun felt a twinge of concern, wondering how Yzak managed as a team leader. He supposed the surprisingly nurturing Dearka probably kept things running smoothly.

Speaking of Dearka, it seemed he hadn't been charged with desertion during the war. While that likely wasn't the only factor, Athrun was certain Yzak had played a role in protecting him. For all his gruffness and awkwardness, Yzak cared deeply for his comrades.

As the gravity of their reunion finally sank in, Athrun felt a warmth spread through his chest as he walked alongside his old friends.

"So," Dearka asked, breaking the comfortable silence, "where did you want to go?"

Yzak's glare returned full force. "If you say shopping, I swear I'll kill you."

"Not even close," Athrun replied with a wry smile, relieved he wouldn't be incurring Yzak's wrath further. "I just... wanted to visit Nicol and the others' graves."

At the mention of their fallen comrade, a shadow of pain crossed Yzak and Dearka's faces.

"I don't get to come to the PLANTs very often," Athrun continued softly. "So I thought... I should go while I have the chance."

Nicol Amalfi—a name etched in smooth stone, a silent testament to a life cut tragically short at merely fifteen years old. Once a comrade, just like Yzak and Dearka, now nothing more than a memory and a gravestone.

The three young men stood in the vast cemetery, laying flowers at the graves of their fallen comrades. Miguel Aiman, Rusty Mackenzie... So many young lives extinguished far too soon, their remains scattered across distant battlefields. For many, not even a single strand of hair remained for their families to mourn over.

This was the cruel reality of war—limitless potential snuffed out in an instant, young lives ended senselessly.

Nicol had loved the piano. In a world without that war, he might have become a brilliant pianist. Instead, that gentle, music-loving boy had taken up arms to protect his nation, only to be killed—by Kira. Athrun's best friend.

It was for this reason that Athrun had hated Kira, demanding his life as compensation even though it could never bring Nicol back.

Such was the nature of war.

And now, history threatened to repeat itself.

"The exercise of proactive self-defense rights..." Athrun muttered bitterly. "So ZAFT will take action as well..."

Yzak responded with a grimace, as if Athrun had touched a raw nerve. "What choice do we have? After being attacked with nuclear missiles, we can't just sit idle..."

Dearka added reluctantly, "We intercepted their first wave of attacks, you know. I think... I think they were really trying to annihilate the PLANTs this time."

Athrun tilted his head back, exhaling deeply. Why did this cycle of violence persist? Every time it began anew, more innocent lives like Nicol's would be sacrificed. Even knowing this, why did it continue?

In the end, I couldn't do anything to stop it...

"So?" Yzak's irritable voice snapped Athrun back to the present. "What about you?"

"Huh?"

Yzak's tone was accusatory, laced with frustration. "What are you doing here, of all places?"

The question felt more like an indictment of Athrun's perceived inaction. He averted his gaze, discomfited. What was he doing here, in the PLANTs? If he returned to Orb now, he'd have gained little more than insight into Chairman Durandal's true thoughts. He had failed to prevent this crisis from unfolding.

"What about Orb? What will they do?" Yzak pressed, his words cutting.

"...I don't know yet," Athrun replied, his expression turning bitter. Unato Ema Seiran leaned towards the Atlantic Federation. It was possible that Orb might abandon its long-held neutral stance. Everything now depended on their efforts—no, on Cagalli's efforts. Athrun couldn't even attend cabinet meetings.

Nothing was going as it should—a sense of urgency and futility washed over Athrun once more.

"Come back to us, Athrun!"

Yzak's sudden declaration jolted Athrun from his spiral of self-doubt. He looked at his former comrade, startled by the clarity in Yzak's voice. Despite his perpetually angry expression, Yzak's gaze was intense and sincere.

"I know you have your reasons, but I'll sort things out. So come back to the PLANTs, where you belong."

"Yzak..."

The depth of Yzak's sentiment touched Athrun deeply. Despite his brusque demeanor, a current of profound trust flowed between them.

"No... but..."

Athrun hesitated, Cagalli's face flashing in his mind. Yzak continued, undeterred.

"By all rights, Dearka and I should have been dead long ago."

Yzak's gaze lowered, pain evident in his eyes. Dearka nodded silently in agreement. Dearka had committed offenses that should have led to his execution. He had deserted ZAFT, choosing to act independently alongside Athrun and the others.

Yzak bore no such official guilt. Not according to the letter of the law. But all three of them carried an unforgivable sin—following orders, they had thrown themselves into misguided battles, taking countless lives. While this might be considered an unavoidable part of military service, the rigidly principled Yzak would never accept such an excuse.

The three of them were bound by the same burden of guilt.

"But Chairman Durandal said this," Yzak continued, meeting Athrun's gaze as he relayed Durandal's words:

"If we condemn and dispose of these young people for mistakes made in a war started by adults for their own convenience, who will be left to shoulder the future of the PLANTs? I want those who have endured these painful experiences to build a peaceful future..."

"That's why I still wear this uniform," Yzak concluded, his expression uncharacteristically earnest. His voice carried a deep trust in the Chairman. Even here, the seeds Durandal had sown were taking root.

Each person's feelings, when united, will surely save the world.

Athrun recalled the Chairman's words. The voices of those who shared concerns for the future could easily be drowned out by the masses. But if they gave up and fell silent, the world would once again hurtle down the same perilous path towards destruction.

I want those who share these ideals to stand with me.

And Yzak and Dearka had risen to that call, armed with their convictions. Yzak spoke to Athrun with unwavering sincerity.

"It might not be much, but it's something we can do. For the PLANTs, and for our fallen comrades..."

"Yzak..."

Athrun realized he was in the same position. This was all he could do. No matter how skilled he was with a gun or piloting a mobile suit, those abilities served no purpose in his current situation.

Yzak fixed Athrun with an intense stare.

"So you need to do something too! Are you really going to let all that power go to waste?"

The piercing blue gaze carried an almost painful intensity. It was a force strong enough to shake Athrun from his indecision.

Yuna Roma Seiran looked up from the report he had been studying, exhaling softly as he met his father's gaze.

"It seems we're out of time," he remarked, his tone measured but laden with implications.

The document before him detailed ZAFT's latest movements. The world was rapidly shifting gears, and the time for decisive action had arrived. Everyone would soon be forced to choose a side.

Unato Ema Seiran nodded briefly before asking a simple yet loaded question: "Are you certain?"

Yuna didn't need clarification to understand the true nature of his father's inquiry. A smile of absolute confidence played across his lips as he responded.

"Cagalli may seem out of it at times, but she's pretty clever, Father. She's merely... young."

His words, ostensibly diplomatic, carried an undercurrent of condescension towards Cagalli. It was clear that beneath his placating tone lay a deep-seated disdain for the young leader.

Of course, Yuna harbored a certain fondness for Cagalli. True, she lacked the typical feminine allure and had a tendency to be overly boisterous, but he saw potential in her. With the right polish, she could shine. What truly appealed to him was her status as a popular hero and the heir to the prestigious Athha family, the most influential of Orb's ruling houses. Any perceived flaws paled in comparison to these assets. After all, in Yuna's worldview, a woman could be molded to suit a man's desires. And he was confident in his ability to reshape Cagalli to his liking.

"Everything is under control, Father. I'll persuade her. The matter of our marriage will certainly play in our favor..."

His father showed no sign of doubt in the face of his son's self-assured declaration. Between them, it was a foregone conclusion. The son would assume the role of the Representative's husband, while the father would support him as Prime Minister. In essence, the Seiran family would be the true power driving Orb's future. With the passing of Uzumi, the man they called "the Lion of Orb," there remained no one with the strength to oppose their ambitions.

And yet—a flicker of annoyance crossed Yuna's mind—there was still that cheap ring adorning the third finger of Cagalli's left hand. It was a troublesome presence, a thorn in his side.

"It's high time she came to terms with her position," Yuna concluded, a hint of irritation coloring his voice.

"Captain..."

At Bart's call, Talia's face snapped to attention, tension etched in every line. However, Bart's expression betrayed not urgency, but confusion. Intrigued, Talia approached his station. Without a word, Bart switched to the speaker system and increased the volume.

"...Minerva, do you copy? There's no time left..."

A deep male voice, distorted by static, filled the bridge. Now it was Talia's turn to look perplexed.

"It's a secure channel, Captain. It's been like this for a while now..." Bart explained, his voice low.

Talia's expression hardened as she processed this information. This frequency was known only to a select few within ZAFT. Yet there were no ZAFT units in the vicinity, and any official military communication would have clearly stated its origin.

"...ZAFT will soon commence descent and landing operations on Gibraltar and Carpentaria..."

The sudden influx of highly sensitive information made Talia lean in, her focus sharpening. The man's gravelly voice continued, his tone almost nonchalant despite the weight of his words.

"When that happens, Orb won't be able to maintain its current stance. A white piece surrounded by black will be flipped to black. Escape. Before that happens. -- Minerva, do you copy?..."

Talia's expression grew increasingly grim as she listened. The mysterious caller was using a game of Othello as a metaphor for Orb's precarious position. But who was this man with access to ZAFT's internal information—information even Talia and her crew weren't privy to? And what did he stand to gain by sharing it with them?

With a swift motion, Talia switched the comm system to respond, ignoring Bart's startled look.

"This is Captain Talia Gladys of the Minerva," she stated, her voice firm and authoritative. "Who is this? What's the meaning of this communication?"

The crisp female voice that suddenly came through the speaker brought a smile to the man's face, glad to finally end the repetitive transmission. Just as he had been told, Talia Gladys seemed to be quite the capable woman. A less competent captain would have ignored such a mysterious communication.

"Well, well! It's a pleasure to hear your voice, Captain. Pleased to make your acquaintance," the man replied cheerfully, reaching for the coffee cup beside the communication device with his right hand. His left—well, it was useful enough, but not quite suited for delicate movements.

At the doorway stood a woman with chestnut hair—Maria Bernes—watching him with a slightly exasperated expression. Ignoring her gaze, the man savored the aroma of his coffee before taking a sip. His sun-weathered, rugged face bore a prominent scar, yet it didn't evoke fear or pity. Instead, his carefree demeanor seemed to transform even the scar into part of his charisma.

Setting down the cup, he continued nonchalantly, "It's exactly as I said. If you dawdle, you'll find yourself in quite a pickle."

His friendly warning, however, was met with a cold response from the speaker.

"You can't expect a soldier to listen to someone who won't give us his name. Who are you? What's your objective?"

"Hmm, so that's how it is," the man mused, scratching his chin before leaning towards the microphone. "Ever heard of a fellow named Andrew Waltfeld? Consider this a message from him."

Upon hearing this, Maria Bernes behind him couldn't suppress a giggle. No wonder—the "message" was being delivered by none other than Andrew Waltfeld himself.

The man currently seated at the communication device was indeed the former ZAFT commander once known as the "Desert Tiger."

There was a moment of stunned silence from the other end of the line. Perhaps Captain Gladys had figured something out.

"Anyway, consider yourself warned," Waltfeld continued, his tone becoming more serious. "Once the descent operation begins, the alliance with the Atlantic Federation will be pushed through. Representative Athha is doing her best, but..."

Dropping the playful act, Waltfeld concisely conveyed the situation.

"If you choose to stay, that's your call. The decision is yours, Captain. I wish you luck."

With that, Waltfeld cut the transmission. As he turned around, he met the concerned brown eyes of the woman.

"Do you think she'll believe us?" she asked, her voice tinged with worry.

Maria—or rather, Murrue Ramius, her true name—had served as the captain of the Earth Forces ship Archangel during the previous war. Through a series of events, she had fought alongside Lacus, Kira, Athrun, and Cagalli in the Second Battle of Jachin Due. After the war, like Athrun, she had changed her name and settled in Orb to avoid charges of desertion. Many of her former comrades had done the same.

Murrue seemed genuinely concerned about the Minerva's fate. Having experienced a similar situation of isolation in Orb, she likely couldn't help but empathize with Talia Gladys.

"Who knows?" Waltfeld shrugged, picking up his cup again. "But I think she'll be fine. She sounded like someone with quite a bit of luck on her side. Just like you."

Murrue shot him a skeptical glare in response to his casual remark.

On the bridge of the Minerva, Captain Talia Gladys stood deep in thought before the now-silent communication console. The mysterious informant had claimed to be relaying a message from Andrew Waltfeld. The name "Desert Tiger" was not unfamiliar to her—indeed, there wasn't a soul in ZAFT who didn't know of him.

Waltfeld was a hero who had once piloted the BuCUE mobile suit, leading ZAFT to victory in the Battle of El Alamein. Though he had later been defeated by the Strike at Talbadiya, his miraculous survival had only added to his legendary status. The uproar when he and Lacus Clyne had absconded with a cutting-edge battleship was still fresh in the military's collective memory.

"Captain..." Arthur and Bart were looking at her with expressions of mingled confusion and concern.

"Can we establish contact with Carpentaria?" Talia asked Bart, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

In the years following the war, Waltfeld had vanished without a trace. But with Cagalli and Athrun—fellow heroes of Jachin Due—present in this country, it seemed highly probable that Waltfeld too might be hiding in Orb.

Which meant it was entirely possible that the recent communication had come from someone who knew Waltfeld—or even from the man himself.

After attempting various communication methods, Bart shook his head. "It's no use, Captain. The Earth Forces must have raised their alert level. The interference is too strong—we can't even reach Carpentaria with laser communication."

Though she had anticipated this response to some degree, Arthur's face still fell at the news. But by this point, Talia had already made her decision.

"Very well. Despite the lack of orders, the Minerva will set sail tomorrow morning."

"Captain...!"

Arthur and the others snapped to attention at her words. Talia began issuing orders with crisp efficiency.

"Inform the entire ship. Once we leave port, we may find ourselves in combat before long. Tell everyone to stay alert."

"No... it can't be..."

The words died on Cagalli's lips as she stared at the document before her, struck speechless. The stark reality of PLANT's move towards military action lay bare on the page, shattering her last desperate hope that Chairman Durandal would refrain from such a foolish choice.

As the gravity of the situation sank in, Cagalli felt the world darken around her, a suffocating weight pressing down on her chest.

"They may call it 'exercising the right to proactive self-defense,'" Yuna's voice cut through her daze, his tone sharp and unyielding, "but war is a living thing. Once the fire is lit, no one can predict how far it will spread."

Cagalli listened, unable to tear her eyes away from the damning report. The day she had dreaded had finally arrived. Despite all their efforts, the world seemed determined to repeat the same tragic history.

She had fought so hard, believing in the righteousness of their cause. But now, even that conviction was slipping through her fingers like sand.

Was I wrong all along?

The thought hit her like a physical blow. Were Yuna and the others right? Had her father been mistaken when he chose to act on his beliefs, even at the cost of their nation? Had everything she'd believed in been nothing more than the naive idealism of a girl who understood nothing of the real world?

Lost in her spiraling thoughts, Cagalli's gaze fell to her left hand, resting atop the damning documents. The ring on her finger caught the light, a bittersweet reminder of promises made and hope for a different future.

What was Athrun thinking now, in the PLANTS? Was he, too, grappling with the bitter taste of powerlessness?

"Orb will sign an alliance treaty with the Atlantic Federation."

Yuna's declaration snapped Cagalli back to the present. She looked up, only to find herself pinned by the collective gaze of the assembled ministers.

"To prevent the tragedy of our nation burning once again," Yuna added, his words hanging heavy in the air.

It wasn't a proposal. It was a fait accompli.

Cagalli's shoulders sagged under the weight of defeat. She had no words left, no arguments to make. In this moment, surrounded by people yet utterly alone, she felt the full burden of her position and the cruel realities of leadership.

As soon as the cabinet meeting concluded, Cagalli rushed to Onogoro, making her way to the Minerva's dock with a sense of urgency. The impending alliance meant the Minerva would soon be classified as an enemy vessel. Though its crew might already be aware of this development, Cagalli felt compelled to convey the news personally and offer her apologies. It was the least she could do to demonstrate her sincerity.

Guided by a soldier through the corridors, Cagalli suddenly found herself face to face with Shinn and his companions as they emerged from a side passage. She instinctively tensed, unprepared for this encounter.

"What are you doing here?" Shinn's voice cut through the air like a knife, his piercing gaze fixed on Cagalli with undisguised hostility.

"So, you're allying with the Earth Forces that once attacked Orb? How much more inconsistent and self-serving can you people be?!"



Cagalli couldn't meet his eyes, her gaze dropping to the floor. Once again, she found herself betraying him. And having been forced to deviate from the path she believed in, she had no words to counter his accusations.

"If you're going to become our enemy, then this time, I'll be the one to destroy this nation!" Shinn's parting words echoed in the corridor as he brushed past her.

"Shinn...!" Cagalli called out reflexively, her voice catching in her throat. She knew she was in the wrong. But all she wanted was to prevent creating more children like Shinn, orphaned and scarred by war...!

Yet even this rationale felt like a selfish excuse. In the end, Cagalli could say nothing, watching helplessly as Shinn's retreating back disappeared down the corridor. Lunamaria passed by with a noticeably cooler gaze, while Rey offered a perfunctory salute before following his comrades.

The reality of her situation crashed down upon Cagalli with crushing force. In their eyes, she had become the enemy.

"Operation Spear of Twilight, T-minus 360 seconds..."

"No enemy presence detected within a 600-kilometer radius. Continue countdown."

The massive monitor on the wall displayed a fleet of descent landing ships converging in space. In the tense atmosphere of the command center, the countdown ticked inexorably forward.

Following the Supreme Council's decision, the descent operation was now underway. Observing the proceedings from PLANT's forward military station, one officer remarked with a wry smile, "What a turn of phrase. 'Exercise of proactive self-defense rights,' indeed."

As the commander scoffed at Durandal's chosen expression, Defense Chairman Takao shrugged beside him. "Don't mock it. It's political speak. A necessary evil."

Takao understood that for the moderate Durandal, using the term "attack" was out of the question. Curiously, employing the word "defense" seemed to soften the aversion to resorting to military force once again.

We're not the bad guys. We're only doing this because they're firing at us. If they'd just stop, we'd withdraw immediately.

Yet the commander overseeing the actual military operation looked far from pleased. "It's all well and good to drive the Earth Forces out of Gibraltar and Carpentaria in the first wave, but what then?"

Takao exhaled deeply. "Well... we'll see how it unfolds..."

The commander shot him a reproachful look at such a vague response, prompting Takao to continue defensively. "Of course, we have no desire to repeat a war like the last one."

Even Takao, who had pushed Durandal for the attack order, didn't relish the prospect of conflict. But remaining passive could lead to the fall of the PLANTs this time.

"We'll need to find a satisfactory resolution that appeases public sentiment, end the fighting, and then engage in political maneuvering..." The Defense Chairman sighed, his expression grim. "The hatred towards the Naturals who once again launched nuclear weapons at us... it won't easily fade."

"Indeed," the commander agreed dispassionately.

"I suppose we'll have to see how the Chairman handles it from here on out," Takao mused. Political maneuvering—in other words, a mutual compromise that fizzles out. He couldn't shake the unease that such an outcome might not smoothly resolve the situation.

"T-minus five, four, three, two..."

Before Takao's eyes, descent capsules containing mobile suits began separating from the landing ships one after another. The operator announced the commencement of the operation with calm efficiency.

"Descent initiated!"

No, a fizzled-out end is fine, Takao reconsidered as he watched the scene unfold. The citizens may be angry now, but they'll eventually come to accept it. The alternative is a repeat of the quagmire from two years ago. This time it's different. Surely it won't escalate into a full-scale war like before.

Defense Chairman Takao struggled to shake off his vague sense of unease.

Of course. No one wants to repeat the horrors of war...

"FCS contact, power bus online. Gate opening—"

The Minerva's engines roared to life under the gentle morning sun, creating ripples in the dock as the forward gate slowly opened.

"Ahead slow. Minerva, launching."

At Captain Talia's command, the pale grey behemoth eased its way into open waters. Talia watched the receding silhouette of the island on the monitor, a mix of emotions playing across her face.

I truly am sorry, she thought, recalling Cagalli's deep bow before her. The 18-year-old head of state had looked utterly exhausted, shadows of fatigue etched deeply on her young face. Talia suspected this alliance wasn't Cagalli's will, but the girl had offered no excuses, enduring the piercing gazes of the crew without complaint.

Cagalli's ideals were pure and righteous, but politics didn't run on ideals alone. Upholding justice required power, something the young leader lacked. This decision, while regrettable, was understandable.

Still, Talia had grown fond of Cagalli. If only all leaders were cut from the same cloth, perhaps wars would be a thing of the past.

"We'll be leaving Orb territorial waters shortly," Arthur announced, his voice carrying a hint of excitement. Despite the tense situation, setting sail after being docked in a foreign land for so long lifted everyone's spirits. The beauty of the South Pacific only added to the sense of adventure.

"I wonder how the descent operation is progressing," Talia mused. "Still no contact with Carpentaria?"

Meyrin shook her head. "No, ma'am. We've been hailing them continuously, but..."

Suddenly, Bart's sharp intake of breath drew Talia's attention.

"Multiple heat signatures detected! 20 degrees off our bow!" Bart's voice was tight with urgency. "It's... it's a fleet! An Earth Alliance fleet!"

Talia's eyes widened in disbelief as Bart continued his report.

"Four Spengler-class, eight Danilov-class... and about ten other medium and small vessels confirmed! They're deploying to our front, port, and starboard!"

"What?!" Arthur's face paled as Talia struggled to process this information. An Earth Alliance fleet of over twenty ships, including four carriers, positioned as if lying in wait for them.

"What's going on?!" Malik groaned from the helm. Chen cursed, "Were they waiting for us? I thought the Earth Forces were supposed to be gathered at Carpentaria!"

But Bart's next report plunged the crew into even deeper shock.

"Aft... Orb fleet deploying along their territorial waters line!"

Bart's voice betrayed his own disbelief as he added, "Their gun turrets are rotating... targeting us!"

"You're kidding! Why?!" Arthur's kind face contorted in confusion, unable to grasp the situation. But Talia understood all too clearly.

"They're not letting us back into their waters—that's what this means. It seems we've been offered up as some sort of... gift!" Talia spat out the words, anger rising in her throat. She could imagine the exchange between Orb and the Atlantic Federation: 'Here's an enemy ship as a token of our submission.' The very thought made her skin crawl.

"I don't believe they've officially signed that treaty yet. Orb sure knows how to play dirty."

For a moment, Cagalli's face flashed in Talia's mind. Had that earnest expression been nothing but a mask of deception?

"Captain..." Arthur looked at Talia, completely at a loss.

"Enough! Speculation won't help us now!" Talia barked, pushing aside her tumultuous thoughts.

"Upgrade to Condition Red! Bridge, battle stations! Prepare for anti-ship and anti-mobile suit combat! This is an atmospheric battle, Arthur! You understand?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

Galvanized by Talia's fierce demeanor, Arthur took his seat and began battle preparations. The rest of the crew followed suit, the bridge suddenly a flurry of activity.

Seated amidst the chaos, Talia bit her nail. The crew hadn't yet realized that faced with such overwhelming force, barring a miracle, there were only two possible outcomes: surrender or destruction.

And Talia had no intention of surrendering.

Shinn stood in silence, gazing down at the hangar. The pilot alert had summoned him, Rey, and Lunamaria to standby. Rey was absorbed in data checks on his computer, while Lunamaria, after several failed attempts at conversation, had resigned herself to quietly sipping a drink. Shinn wasn't in the mood for talk, and Rey... well, he was his usual self.

A sense of betrayal gnawed at Shinn. Coming to Orb had been a mistake, he realized bitterly.

This nation had consistently betrayed him. First, it had taken his family in the name of grand ideals. Now, it had turned against him. Worse still, it had abandoned the very principles for which his family had been sacrificed. What meaning was left in their deaths now?

Yet—Shinn suddenly realized—to feel betrayed, one must first have trusted. You don't feel betrayed by those you never believed in. Cagalli's dignified expression, her earnest words, flashed briefly through his mind.

Had I... actually started to believe in her?

His introspection was shattered by the blaring of alarms.

"Condition Red! All pilots, stand by in your units!"

Shinn exchanged a startled glance with Lunamaria. Rey was already heading for the door. As they followed, Shinn's voice rose in confusion.

"Red? Why?"

Lunamaria's response was equally bewildered. "How should I know? Why are you asking me?"

They had known that leaving Orb's waters for Carpentaria would inevitably lead to confrontation with the Earth Alliance forces. But so soon?

As they rushed into the hangar, Captain Talia's voice resonated from the high ceiling.

"This is Captain Talia Gladys to all Minerva crew. We are currently faced with an Earth Alliance fleet, including four carriers, to our front. Behind us, an Orb fleet has deployed, ostensibly to guard their territorial waters."

The news sent shockwaves through the busy hangar staff.

"Four carriers?!"

"Orb's behind us?"

Shinn and Lunamaria echoed the information, struggling to comprehend the situation.

"It appears the Earth forces were aware of our departure and laid a trap. Orb has closed the door behind us," Talia's cold analysis cut through their confusion.

"Our only path forward is to break through the Earth Alliance fleet ahead. The battle we're about to engage in will likely be the most challenging we've ever faced, but we must push through at all costs!"

As the gravity of the situation sank in, Shinn felt a surge of anger rising from the depths of his being.

Orb has sold us out to the Earth Forces!

Talia's voice struck their ears with fierce determination. "Take pride in being a Minerva crewmember, and never give up! I'm counting on all of you to fight hard."

A look of grim resolve settled on the faces of the crew. They all knew the odds—a single ship against a fleet with four carriers was a nearly impossible fight. Talia's words, while urging them not to give up, carried an unspoken acknowledgment of their dire situation.

They were going to die here.

Betrayed by Orb.

In Shinn's mind, fury boiled over, suppressing his fear.

What a pathetic end for Orb, which once proudly upheld its ideals and fought to the bitter end!

"Damn it all!" Shinn roared as he leapt into the Core Splendor. He refused to die here, refused to play into their hands.

Hastily powering up the unit, he watched the indicators turn green.

"Shinn Asuka, Core Splendor, launching!"

Shinn's cry was filled with fierce determination as he launched. Rage fueled him, becoming the driving force behind his actions.

"Launchers Two and Seven, load all tubes with Parsifals! CIWS, Tristan, and Isolde, activate!"

The missile launchers were loaded with ground-attack missiles as the enemy fleet loomed ever closer. Captain Talia barked out orders in rapid succession, her voice sharp with urgency.

"Tell Shinn not to stray too far from the ship after launch! Rey and Luna, snipe at the airborne mobile suits from the deck! Concentrate Isolde and Tristan's firepower on the cruiser to port! We're breaking through on the left!"

"Yes, ma'am!" The crew responded, their faces taut with tension.

The Impulse launched, while Rey and Lunamaria's Zakus leapt onto the port and starboard decks from their hatches. Rey's Zaku Phantom was equipped with the Blaze Wizard pack, while Lunamaria's Zaku Warrior bore the Gunner Wizard configuration. Unable to fly in the atmosphere, the Zakus were limited to an interceptor role—essentially mobile turrets. At the very least, they could prevent enemy mobile suits from latching onto the ship's hull. However, the fact that Impulse was their only truly mobile weapon was an undeniable disadvantage.

The Minerva, having descended to Earth due to unforeseen circumstances, was understandably ill-equipped for atmospheric combat. As she watched the approaching enemy armada, Talia did something she rarely allowed herself: she regretted not heeding Arthur's suggestion to leave this country as quickly as possible. But such remorse was useless now. Defeat seemed all but certain, yet Talia had no intention of simply charging in for a glorious last stand. Giving up from the start would negate any chance,

however slim, of a miracle occurring. Besides, she had always been stubborn in the face of adversity.

Arthur's voice rang out, "Isolde, Launchers One through Four, Parsifals away!"

A barrage of missiles launched from the enemy fleet simultaneously, as mobile suits deployed from each ship closed in. The Windams, equipped with flight packs, were capable of atmospheric flight. The Force Impulse, similarly equipped, dove into the approaching enemy mobile suit squadron like a bird of prey.

And so, the curtain rose on this desperate battle.

"Go!" Shinn's battle cry tore through the cockpit as he plunged the Impulse headlong into the fray.

The sky was thick with enemy Windams, their numbers seeming to blot out the sun itself. The Impulse charged straight into their midst, its beam rifle spitting a rapid-fire barrage. Two Windams, pierced by the beams, plummeted towards the sea trailing black smoke.

The enemy mobile suit squadron's formation faltered at the Impulse's sudden intrusion. In such close quarters, return fire risked hitting their own units. But the Earth Alliance pilots quickly regrouped, spreading out to target the Impulse from multiple angles.

Shinn wrenched his controls, sending the Impulse into a sharp turn that barely evaded the converging beams. "Like hell I'm going down to something like this!" he roared, rage fueling his every move.

The Impulse's right hand flashed out, beam saber igniting, and cleaved through a Windam in a diagonal slash. For a heartbeat, the bisected mobile suit hung in the air before erupting in a violent explosion. Shinn had already whirled the Impulse away, leaving the enemy beams to cross harmlessly in empty space.

Below, the sea around the Minerva erupted in endless fountains as enemy ships pounded its position. The ship's interception systems worked overtime, swatting missiles from the sky while keeping the swarming mobile suits at bay.

On the Minerva's deck, Luna's Zaku braced its long-barreled Orthos cannon. A searing beam lanced out, impaling an approaching Windam. Nearby, Rey's Zaku unleashed a salvo of missiles from its back-mounted pods, each one finding its mark among the enemy units.

Yet for all their efforts, the encircling wall of enemies seemed undiminished. For every suit they downed, two more seemed to take its place.

"I see. It's quite an impressive ship indeed," the fleet commander mused, his eyes fixed on the monitor from his relaxed position on the flagship's

bridge. The screen displayed a pale grey vessel weathering an onslaught of mobile suits and missiles.

"Just as Roanoke reported, it seems." The commander's tone was tinged with disinterest as he mentioned the Phantom Pain squad leader. Turning to his executive officer, he continued, "What's the status of the Zamza-Zah? If we let our prey weaken too much, we won't get an effective demonstration."

The XO straightened, responding promptly, "Sir, it will launch as soon as preparations are complete."

As orders were relayed to the hangar and the launch sequence initiated, the commander returned his attention to the battle. His face betrayed no sympathy, neither for the lone enemy ship fighting against overwhelming odds nor for his own mobile suits being shot down in increasing numbers.

"It may be bias on my part," he remarked, "but I believe the future lies with new mobile armors like that one. Not these mosquito-like mobile suits we copied from ZAFT."

"Zulu Zero-One, lift up. B-80 deck crew, fall back to the bunkers after guidance is confirmed."

The flagship's rear heliport split open, revealing an unusual machine rising from below. The YMAF-X6BD Zamza-Zah was a sight to behold—its body a near-perfect hemisphere with four thick, short limb-like protrusions jutting out in different directions, reminiscent of a coconut crab. This unique Earth Alliance mobile armor stretched an impressive 47 meters in length.

Its armaments were equally formidable: M534 "Gamzatov" multi-phase energy cannons on its leg units, four Mk79 low-pressure guns on its body, and various other specialized weapons. It was a terrifying new addition to the Alliance's arsenal.

The fleet commander gazed at the massive dark green machine with undisguised admiration. With a deafening roar and violent tremors, the Zamza-Zah's colossal form detached from the ship.

For Orb, this battle was a demonstration of submission. For the Atlantic Federation, it was nearly meaningless. But for the commander, this conflict provided the perfect stage to showcase their newly developed weapon.

"Unknown craft approaching! This is...?!" Bart's ominous voice cut through the bridge of the Minerva as they continued their desperate battle.

"Optical image coming up!" Meyrin switched the monitor, revealing a squat machine skimming low over the waves.

Arthur's voice rose in disbelief. "What on earth is that?!"

"A mobile armor?!"

"How can it be so huge?"

Talia clicked her tongue in frustration. "If that thing gets a hold of us, we're finished! Arthur, activate the Tannhauser! We'll sweep it away along with the fleet to our left front!"

"What?! But in the atmosphere..." Arthur began to protest, but Talia's glare silenced him.

"Do you want to sink?!"

Arthur shook his head vigorously. "N-no! Of course not! Activating Tannhauser! Transferring firing axis control!"

What a spineless man, Talia thought. True, the use of positron cannons was discouraged on Earth due to the risk of radioactive contamination from gamma rays produced when positrons and electrons annihilated each other. But this was hardly the time for such considerations.

"Target: enemy mobile armor."

The cannon's barrel extended from the ship's bow as the Minerva rolled to align with the firing trajectory. Arthur's command rang out:

"Fire!"

A blinding white flash erupted in their field of vision. The positron cannon spewed forth a vortex of light, causing a steam explosion where it grazed the water's surface. The approaching mobile armor tilted forward sharply as if braking. The light engulfed its massive form. A small vessel just behind it exploded instantly, illuminating the sea with a crimson glow.

As the brilliance faded, Talia couldn't believe her eyes. The mobile armor continued its flight over the ocean as if nothing had happened. Its stocky, dark green body was without a scratch.

For a moment, stunned silence gripped the bridge.

"It... deflected the Tannhauser?" Arthur's dumbfounded voice barely registered.

Meanwhile, the mobile armor closed in on the Minerva. Talia snapped out of her shock, forcing strength into her voice as she issued orders.

"Hard to port, twenty degrees! Full speed ahead! Tristan, target the enemy warship to port!"

Arthur protested, "But Captain! What are we going to do about that thing?!"

"Help me think of something!" Talia snapped, then turned to Malik.

"Malik, evasive maneuvers are up to you!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Meyrin, what about Shinn? Get him back here!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

The crew's faces began to show even more signs of desperation.

"Where's Yuna Roma?" Cagalli asked her secretary via intercom, surprise coloring her voice at the response. Yuna was at military headquarters—a schedule she hadn't been informed of. An inexplicable sense of unease gripped her.

Rushing to headquarters, Cagalli entered the command center and froze in disbelief at the scene before her.

"Man, that weapon is incredible," one soldier remarked casually.

"To think it could deflect a positron cannon," another added, equally nonchalant.



The soldiers spoke with the excitement of spectators at a sporting event. Behind them, Yuna sat in a relaxed posture, as if watching a game. On the monitors, the Minerva fought alone against a sea of battleships.

Cagalli, momentarily stunned, finally found her voice. "What... what is going on here?"

The soldiers turned in surprise, standing at attention. Yuna rose from his chair, startled. "Cagalli?"

She approached, barely containing her anger. "Yuna, what is the meaning of this? Is the Minerva... fighting the Earth Forces?"

"That's right. Outside Orb's territorial waters," Yuna replied, his momentary discomfort quickly replaced by a smugness that made Cagalli's blood boil.

Her attention was drawn back to the monitor. The Minerva, surrounded by Earth Alliance mobile suits, desperately evaded incoming fire. Water erupted in massive plumes as missiles struck nearby. As they watched, a missile from a Windam hit the starboard hatch, exploding on impact.

"The Minerva... against such overwhelming forces..." Cagalli's voice cracked with emotion.

"No need to worry, Cagalli," Yuna said breezily, his tone mocking her concern. "We've already sent escort ships to the territorial line."

"You're not letting the Minerva back into our waters?" Cagalli's voice rose as realization dawned. "They have nowhere to run!"

Yuna dismissed her protest with a wave. "But that's Orb's policy, isn't it?"

Cagalli was dumbstruck. Orb's principles of neutrality—not invading other countries, not allowing invasion, and not intervening in others' conflicts—were sacred. But was this man willing to taint even those ideals?

"Besides," Yuna continued, "though we haven't officially signed yet, we've already decided to form an alliance with the Atlantic Federation. Surely you understand what stance we should take now?"

"But that ship...!" Cagalli protested. The ship that had saved Earth—the ship carrying Shinn, once an Orb citizen!

Yuna cut her off, a thin smile on his face. "That's a ZAFT ship. Our soon-to-be allies in the Atlantic Federation consider them enemies."

Just then, a soldier monitoring the situation reported, "The Minerva is approaching the territorial line. They'll violate our waters in minutes at this rate."

Yuna's response chilled Cagalli to the bone. "Issue a warning, then fire warning shots. Do not let them enter our waters. If they still don't stop, you have permission to attack."

"Yuna!!" Cagalli moved to countermand the order, but Yuna rounded on her, his face transformed by anger.

"The country is not your plaything! Stop making decisions based on sentiment!"

Cagalli fell silent, the breath caught in her throat.

So this is what it means to compromise our principles, she thought bitterly.

The weight of her earlier decision crashed down upon her. It didn't matter that she had been pressured into it. She had chosen to abandon the ideals Orb had long upheld in favor of protecting her people. And this was the result—unable to help those who had once saved them, forced instead to potentially fire upon them in their hour of need.

There was no going back now. Cagalli realized this with a sinking heart.

"So we're to side with the military that once burned our country, and fire upon the ship that fought so desperately to save the Earth..."

These were the words muttered by Colonel Todaka, commander of the Orb escort fleet, as he received orders from military headquarters. An old-school military man with a reputation for being somewhat difficult, Todaka nonetheless commanded deep respect from his subordinates.

His executive officer cast a sympathetic glance towards the battleship outside their window. Despite being vastly outnumbered, the *Minerva* was putting up a valiant fight. But it had already taken multiple hits, its once-smooth armor now punctured and billowing black smoke. Todaka recalled hearing that *Morgenroete* had repaired that very ship. The irony of destroying what they had fixed with their own hands was not lost on him.

"You know, I'd call this ingratitude," Todaka said, his craggy face etched with quiet indignation as he shook his head in dismay. "Though I suppose that's a word that doesn't exist in the world of politics."

After delivering this sardonic observation, he turned to his men with a command:

"Commence warning. Aim the guns at the *Minerva*'s bow. And make damn sure you don't actually hit them."

"Sir?" The weapons control officer's voice was tinged with confusion.

The executive officer interjected, his tone urgent. "Commander! But the orders clearly state—"

Their orders were explicit: if the warning was not heeded, they were to open fire. But Todaka merely snorted, his expression obstinate.

"To hell with that. I'm not a politician."

Shinn charged at the mobile armor as it deployed its gun turrets from its forward legs, aiming at the *Minerva*. Despite his fierce attack, the enemy's massive frame displayed unexpected agility, evading the beam saber's slash with ease.

"Damn it! What the hell is this thing?!" Shinn cursed, whirling the *Impulse* around to face the mobile armor as it too pivoted to confront him. It's fast! The sheer speed of the approaching behemoth nearly overwhelmed Shinn. Suddenly, massive claws unfolded from the armor's legs, attempting to ensnare the *Impulse* in its jaws.

Shinn barely slipped through the grasp, his heart pounding. "Guh...!"

As they passed each other at high speed, the mobile armor unleashed an intense beam from its rear leg cannons. Shinn jerked the Impulse into a steep climb to dodge, spinning in mid-air as he drew his beam rifle and returned fire. But his beams seemed to hit an invisible wall just before striking the enemy, deflecting harmlessly away.

"This is...!"

Shinn realized the four eye-like emitters on the armor's upper body must be generating some kind of force field to reflect beam attacks. Was this what deflected the Tannhauser earlier? If so, no amount of beam fire would damage it. As this realization sank in, the enemy's leg cannons opened up on him again.

"What kind of firepower and strength does this thing have?!" Shinn groaned. Alarms began blaring in his cockpit—energy levels were critically low.

Not now...!

Panic rising, Shinn narrowly avoided another barrage from the mobile armor. The beams that missed vaporized massive amounts of seawater, sending plumes of white smoke high into the air.

The Minerva was being pushed back. Though its guns still found their mark, sinking an Earth Alliance ship with a well-placed shot to its flank, it was a drop in the ocean. The gap in the enemy formation was quickly filled by another advancing vessel. Under the relentless missile barrage, the Minerva continued its gradual retreat.

Suddenly, a warning came from the Orb fleet lined up along their territorial waters:

"ZAFT battleship Minerva, be advised. You are approaching the sovereign territory of the Orb Union. We do not permit any incursion into our waters. Change course immediately..."

It was an order to withdraw.

"What...?!" Shinn's voice cracked with outrage at the callous warning, given their desperate situation. Is this how they treat us after calling us friends and promising hospitality just days ago? Have they forgotten why we even came down to Earth? He ground his teeth, Cagalli's face flashing in his mind.

But changing course was impossible in their current predicament. Moving forward now would mean certain destruction. The Minerva continued its combat retreat, being forced ever closer to Orb's waters.

"Minerva!" Shinn cried out, but he was too preoccupied fending off the mobile armor's attacks to provide cover. The alarms in his cockpit continued their incessant warning—his battery levels were approaching critical. Without a recharge, both his weapons and VPS armor would soon be useless.

As Shinn's frustration mounted, the Orb fleet opened fire. He froze in shock.

The shells landed around the Minerva, sending up towering pillars of water.

"Orb... they're really...?" Shinn's voice was barely a whisper. Only now did he realize the truth—he had still believed in Orb. Despite his claims of distrust and unforgiveness, he had continued to long for his motherland. Even as he dismissed Cagalli's ideals as naive, deep down he had held onto hope. His angry words towards her had been nothing more than a child's rebellion, lashing out from his own pain and demanding understanding.

Now, with guns turned against him by his homeland, Shinn finally recognized his own naivety.

This was reality. This was true betrayal.

Orb—Cagalli—had abandoned him.

Overwhelmed by despair, Shinn momentarily lost focus. When he snapped back to awareness, the enemy mobile armor was nearly upon him. There was no time to evade—its massive claws grabbed the Impulse's leg, flinging it about.

"No—!"

At that instant, his battery hit zero, and the VPS armor deactivated. It couldn't have happened at a worse moment. The weakened frame couldn't withstand the impact, and the captured leg was torn away with ease. As Shinn was flung through the air, the intense G-forces caused his vision to gray out. As he fell, the word "death" flashed through his mind.

Am I going to die? Here, like this—?

Betrayed by his homeland, his parents and sister killed, and now he too would be slain?

With the line of Orb ships before him—his own people—and not a single hand reached out to help, all alone—?

Suddenly, rage flooded through Shinn.

No!

It was a primal desire to live, a desperate yearning of one who had lost everything.

"I won't... I won't be defeated by something like this!" Shinn roared.

I refuse to die! I won't die as some pitiful, betrayed, abandoned orphan! I'll live! If my homeland wants me dead, I'll live out of spite! Anything less would be too pathetic!

Shinn felt as if something burst in the back of his mind. In that instant, his perception expanded in all directions, every movement around him becoming crystal clear, as if he could reach out and touch it. It was as if a switch had been flipped, time itself seeming to slow down.

With lightning-fast reactions, Shinn stabilized the Impulse just above the sea's surface and shouted into his comm:

"Minerva—Meyrin! Deuterion beam, now! And prepare to launch the Leg Flyer and Sword Silhouette!"

Even as he issued these commands, Shinn effortlessly evaded the barrage of beams the mobile armor had fired to finish him off, making his way back towards the Minerva. Despite the loss of power and a leg, he had never felt such control over his machine.

"Shinn?!" Meyrin's confused voice came back. Changing parts and armaments seemed impossible in their current situation. But to Shinn, even this moment of hesitation felt frustratingly slow.

"Hurry! You can do it, right?!"

"Y-yes!"

The Impulse skimmed the ocean's surface, dodging attacks as it raced towards its mothership. All the while, Shinn's fingers danced across the controls, preparing to receive the energy transfer.

"Deuterion chamber on standby. Targeting and tracking systems have locked onto the Impulse!" Meyrin's voice confirmed the Minerva's readiness.

"Firing Deuterion beam!"

As she spoke, the Impulse shot upwards. A beam lanced out from the emission port to the left of the Minerva's bridge, striking the receptor on the Impulse's head. Shinn watched as his power gauge began to climb rapidly.

The power from the Minerva's reactor was converted into a highly directional beam by the Deuterion accelerator. This beam was received by the power receiver built into the Impulse, converted to electricity by the internal M2-type converter, and stored in the power accumulator. This Deuterion beam transmission technology allowed mobile suits to replenish their energy without having to land. Currently, this recharging system was limited to Second Stage series units like the Impulse, which contained the necessary converter, and ships like the Minerva equipped with a Deuterion accelerator.

As power surged back into the Impulse, its frame flickered and regained its vibrant colors. Shinn, his senses razor-sharp, charged towards the enemy mobile armor, beam saber at the ready. The massive machine opened its leg-mounted cannons, targeting the approaching Impulse.

Shinn met the intense beam head-on with his shield, then in a split-second maneuver, discarded it and vaulted skyward. The Impulse's energy blade plunged straight down into the enemy unit's crown. There was no time for the reflector to activate—it was over in an instant. The beam saber sliced through the mobile armor's upper section and out the front. Sparks erupted from the gaping wound like spurting blood, and moments after Shinn leapt clear, the behemoth was engulfed in flames.

Now! Seizing the moment, Shinn shouted, "Minerva! Launch the Silhouette!"

Responding to his call, the Minerva's catapult fired the Leg Flyer and Sword Silhouette. With lightning-fast precision, Shinn synchronized, jettisoning the damaged parts and linking up with the new Leg Flyer. The Sword Silhouette module, bearing its imposing anti-ship sword, attached to the Impulse's back. The mobile suit's chest plate shifted to a deep crimson.

In the blink of an eye, the Impulse had transformed. Without pause, Shinn drew the massive Excalibur blade and dove towards the Earth Alliance ships deployed to their left.

"RAAAAAAHHH!" Shinn's battle cry rang out as he cleaved through a cruiser's bridge with the laser blade. A primal exhilaration coursed through

his veins. The Impulse leapt to the next cruiser, the anti-ship sword flashing. Crushing, slashing, obliterating—Shinn moved like an enraged colossus unleashing devastation upon the mortal world.

He lost count of how many ships fell to his blade. It was Meyrin's voice, calling for his return, that finally snapped Shinn back to reality.

"Impulse! Shinn! Return to the ship immediately!"

Startled, Shinn looked around. His eyes widened as he saw the enemy fleet scattering like spiders, beating a hasty retreat.

"Earth Alliance fleet is withdrawing!"

Only then did Shinn realize: he had won.

We... won?

Captain Talia Gladys watched in disbelief as the remnants of the enemy fleet retreated into the distance. Against all odds, they had witnessed a one-in-a-million miracle.

"Rey and Lunamaria's units have been recovered. Impulse has returned to the ship," came the report.

The two Zakus that had fought relentlessly on the deck were in terrible shape, riddled with damage. Then again, the ship itself was in no better condition, and the crew looked just as battered. Everyone slumped in their seats, expressions a mix of exhaustion and bewilderment at their own survival. But there was no time for prolonged shock. Talia straightened in her captain's chair and spoke with renewed authority.

"I'd like to think we're safe from further pursuit, but we can't be certain. Make sure the pilots get some rest. Arthur, I need a damage assessment ASAP."

"Yes, ma'am," Arthur replied, his face awash with relief as he began coordinating with various sections of the ship.

The rest of the crew snapped back to attention, returning to their duties with renewed focus. Talia observed them with satisfaction. She had doubted them at times, but they had all performed admirably. This battle had undoubtedly sharpened their skills significantly. And it was clear who had grown the most.

"There's no doubt we owe our escape to Shinn..." Talia mused aloud.

Arthur turned, nodding vigorously. "It's unbelievable! Six enemy ships, including two carriers!"

His voice brimmed with excitement as he repeated, "Six ships! I've never heard of such a feat! He's certainly earned himself a medal for this!"

Talia smiled at her enthusiastic XO before a thoughtful expression crossed her face. "So that's the true power of the Impulse... or rather, that boy. I always wondered why Shinn was chosen over Rey, but now..."

In terms of pure piloting skill, Rey had always seemed superior. He had better judgment, more composure. To Talia, Shinn still seemed like a child, his performance often swayed by his emotions. Yet Chairman Durandal had specifically chosen Shinn as the Impulse's pilot.

"Could it be that the Chairman foresaw this potential all along?" Talia wondered aloud.

Arthur nodded, clearly impressed. "It's possible. The Chairman is an expert in DNA analysis, after all."

He continued, still in awe, "It was truly incredible. To break through that situation... I honestly didn't think it was possible. I doubt even the legendary Freedom from Jachin Due could have managed such a feat."

Talia stifled a laugh at Arthur's comparison to the near-mythical mobile suit. With a teasing tone, she said, "Well, when we reach Carpentaria, we'll have to file a report and put in for a commendation. I'm sure headquarters will be quite surprised."

As Shinn descended from the cockpit, he was taken aback by the sight of not just Lunamaria and Vino, but every staff member present rushing towards him. He instinctively took a step back.

"Shinn! We heard what you did, you absolute madman!" Vino exclaimed, leaping at Shinn and clapping him enthusiastically on the back.

"Man, you really pulled through for us!"

"You saved our hides!"

Overwhelmed by the crowd surrounding him, Shinn blinked in confusion. It took him a moment to realize that everyone was praising his combat prowess. As he registered the warm smiles and excitement on the faces of those welcoming him, a sense of joy began to well up inside him, as if their mood was contagious.

However, when his gaze fell on Rey standing behind the crowd, a flicker of unease crept into Shinn's heart. Hadn't Rey and the others fought hard too? Was it right for him to bask in all this praise alone? Would Rey, widely regarded as the ship's top pilot, feel slighted by being upstaged?

These fleeting concerns were immediately dispelled when Rey's usually stoic face broke into a rare smile. Rey really was a good guy after all.

"Alright, alright! That's enough, you lot! Back to work! We've still got a way to go before we reach Carpentaria!" Chief Erica's sharp command finally dispersed the crowd, sending the staff back to their duties.

Shinn, his cheeks still flushed with excitement, was joined by Lunamaria and Rey as they headed towards the pilot's locker room.

"But seriously, what happened out there?" Luna asked, her voice bubbly with enthusiasm. "You suddenly turned into some kind of super ace. Was it like, a surge of adrenaline or something?"

Shinn pondered her question, recalling the strange sensation that had overtaken him during the battle. "I'm not sure... I don't really understand it myself. When I saw the Orb ships open fire, I just got so angry. I thought, 'I'm not going down like this,' and suddenly everything became crystal clear in my mind..."

Luna tilted her head, trying to grasp his meaning.

"So you just... snapped?"

"No, I don't think that's quite it..." Shinn frowned, struggling to articulate the experience.

Rey casually interjected, "Whatever it was, you protected the ship."

Shinn looked at him in surprise. Rey met his gaze with an unusually gentle expression and continued in his typical matter-of-fact tone, "Being alive has value in itself. It means there's a tomorrow."

He gave Shinn's shoulder a gentle pat before walking ahead.

Shinn was dumbfounded. Rey saying something like this? Rey, who usually spoke only the bare minimum? Having a personal conversation beyond just "yeah" or "no"?

Shinn glanced at Lunamaria in bewilderment, only to find her looking equally shocked. Their eyes met, and they both stifled a laugh.

"That was surprising," Shinn whispered, trying to contain his amusement.

Luna whispered back, "...I mean, Rey's words sounded kind of old-man-ish, don't you think?"

At this, they both dissolved into quiet fits of laughter. A warm feeling spread through Shinn's body, washing away some of the tension that had been lodged in his chest. They were alive—he was alive, and so were his comrades.

He wasn't alone. Here, he had friends he could laugh with.

After changing, Shinn made his way alone to the upper deck. The scars of battle were evident everywhere he looked—discolored patches and damage marking the intensity of the recent conflict. His gaze drifted aft, where the vast expanse of the ocean stretched endlessly beneath the heavy, overcast sky. The islands he had left behind were no longer visible. Shinn stared intently at the horizon, as if trying to pierce through the very curvature of the Earth.

This time, I've truly abandoned that country, he thought.

It wasn't that he had been abandoned—he had made the choice to abandon Orb. There was nothing left for him there. His family was gone, and now even the ideals that were supposed to have been worth their sacrifice had proven hollow.

The rage that had consumed him for so long was surprisingly absent. Perhaps he had left it behind in the wake of destruction he'd wrought during the battle. With a calm that surprised even himself, Shinn turned on his heel and began walking towards the door, back to the people who had welcomed him so warmly.

This ship, the Minerva, was now his true home.



# Epilogue

Athrun gazed pensively at the red coat held out before him. With renewed determination, he donned the uniform, fastening the collar. As he slipped his arms into the sleeves once more, he marveled at how unthinkable this moment would have seemed on the day the war ended. People change, shaped by the circumstances that surround them and the passage of time.

"Wow..." Meer Campbell's voice was filled with admiration. Athrun felt a twinge of discomfort but quickly dismissed it, turning to face the other person watching him—Chairman Durandal, whose eyes held a quiet approval. Athrun stepped forward, his doubts now vanquished.

In the end, one can only do what one is capable of. Meer plays the role of Lacus, while he takes up arms once more. Even as they stand here, the world inches towards its most dangerous precipice. There's no time left to be choosy about methods. If it meant stopping this madness, Athrun wouldn't hesitate to dirty his hands.

Durandal regarded Athrun's face with a thoughtful expression before presenting him with a small box. "Take this."

Athrun's eyes widened in surprise as he saw the silver badge nestled within. "This is... the FAITH insignia?"

FAITH—a special operations team directly under the Chairman's command, operating outside the normal chain of command. This qualification was given only to those recognized for their outstanding military achievements and character. Athrun looked up at Durandal, bewildered. He couldn't believe he deserved this badge, having once abandoned the military.

Durandal smiled reassuringly. "I don't want to fit you into the regular command structure, and I imagine you'd find it troublesome as well. This is a practical measure. While FAITH stands for 'Fast Acting Integrate Tactical Headquarters,' a unit swearing loyalty... for you, Athrun, it's enough to be loyal to your own beliefs and principles."

"Chairman..." Athrun murmured, touched by the deep trust evident in Durandal's expression.

"You're someone who can follow your convictions, resist corruption, and fight when necessary, aren't you?"

To follow one's own beliefs and principles—to answer to nothing else. It was freedom, but also a responsibility that carried immense pressure. Yet Durandal was saying Athrun could bear this burden. No, that he must bear it.

Athrun met Durandal's gaze with steely determination. "That is what I aspire to be."

He had to believe in himself. To live up to this man's trust, Athrun first needed to trust in his own capabilities.

"I know you can do it," Durandal continued. "So please, use that strength when it's needed. Not just for ZAFT or the PLANTS, but for a world where everyone can live in peace."

For the world. To stop it from repeating the same mistakes once again.

Athrun nodded, his resolve deepening. "Yes, sir!"

Meer beamed at Durandal, who wore an expression of quiet satisfaction.

"Given your concern about the situation in Orb, I'd like you to join the Minerva," Durandal said, issuing his first order. "I have high hopes for that ship. I believe it might play a role similar to the Archangel in the past. Lend them your strength, Athrun."

The Archangel—the name stirred a sense of nostalgia in Athrun's chest.

As he left Durandal's office and made his way to the hangar, Athrun reflected on the strange twist of fate that had once bound him to that legendary ship. Former enemies coming to understand each other, gathering under a single purpose that transcended military and national boundaries, fighting side by side. He fervently hoped for that miracle to occur once more.

The hangar staff seemed to have been notified of his arrival. Now clad in a deep crimson pilot suit, Athrun approached the mobile suit he had only admired from afar days ago.

ZGMF-X23S Saviour—this would be his new sword. As he entered the cockpit and began powering up the unit, an indescribable feeling washed over him. He was, after all, a mobile suit pilot at heart. The joy of encountering a superior machine transcended logic, an undeniable part of his being.

The monitor lit up with the letters "G.U.N.D.A.M." as the engine's rumble vibrated through his seat. Maintenance cables detached one by one. Like a titan freed from its restraints, the Saviour's eyes glowed to life.

The hangar gates opened before him. Athrun gazed straight ahead at the sea of stars, just as he had done so many times before. His voice, filled with unwavering resolve, rang out:

"Athrun Zala, Saviour, launching!"

# Afterword

I'm pleased to present the first volume of the novel adaptation of Mobile Suit Gundam SEED DESTINY. It's an honor to continue my work on the novelization following the previous series. This is Liu Goto speaking.

Today, I'd like to share the process of creating the SEED novel adaptation.

First, I receive the script from Sunrise and create what we call a "plot." This plot is essentially a blueprint for the novel, outlining the general flow of the story. I submit this to the Sunrise team for approval before I start writing. During this stage, I also clarify any questions that aren't answered by the script alone. Things like "What kind of person is Shinn?" or "What exactly is Logos?" Mr. Shimomura and the rest of the Sunrise team are always kind enough to answer my questions with a smile, no matter how edgy or, frankly, stupid they might be. I'm truly grateful for their patience.

Then, I write. With the script by my side and occasionally checking the visuals, I write continuously. Before I know it, regardless of how challenging or emotionally taxing it might be, I finish writing. My editor then rigorously checks the manuscript and sends it back. Without time to feel discouraged by the sharp critiques, I revise the highlighted sections, and then it's Sunrise's turn to review. They point out any issues, and I ask further questions if needed. "Um, I don't quite understand how the Flare Motor works!" and so on... Again, Mr. Shimomura and his team respond without frustration or mockery.

After that, I correct the identified issues, fill in any blank sections, and send the final draft to the printer. Simultaneously, the manuscript is sent to AS'MARIA, who's in charge of the interior illustrations this time, to begin their work. (The color illustrations are commissioned much earlier, as the color pages take longer to layout and print than the main text.) But the author's job isn't over yet. Proofreading remains... and of course, the afterword.

Which brings us to why I'm writing this now. I'm set to be deeply immersed in the world of SEED for another year. I'll do my best to ensure that fans can enjoy this world even more through the novel adaptation, so please stick with me until the final volume!

As I write this, many people are working hard to bring this book to you. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in creating this book. And to all of you, I look forward to working with you for the coming year.