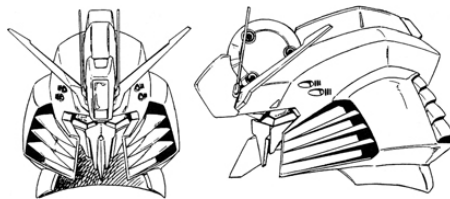


THE MAXIMUM PRESENTS

GUNDAM SENTINEL



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Prologue

THE GUYS

Over a half century has passed since mankind's burgeoning population caused it to emigrate to outer space. Under the guidance of ambitious men, the space colonies' desire for independence ignited the greatest tragedy in the history of mankind. These twisted ideals resulted in the so-called One Year War, and forever changed the political environment between Earth and the colonies.

Five years had passed since the War. The year is Universal Century 0085. The air was filled with the scent of fresh grass. It was not the smell of man-made, artificial grass, but rather natural grass covering natural soil. At the corner of a military base, two men in Federation Forces mobile suit pilot uniforms were lying on this big, green carpet. Giant mobile suit robots called GMs stood at the maintenance facility nearby, as if looking at the two men on the grass.

"It's real grass. I can't believe it only took them five years to rebuild this place." With a stern look, Stole Mannings grabbed a handful of grass and tossed it at the man next to him.

"Hum..." The man with the triangular-shaped face sat up and wiped the grass off his face.

"Sorry, Tosh, didn't mean to wake you." Mannings quickly began to help Tosh Cray dust the remaining grass off of his uniform.

"So what if it's real grass?" Cray stretched. "This canned colony is no match for Earth."

He looked up to the sky and saw the towns and streets on the opposite wall.

They were inside the a space colony in the Side 1 cluster. Humans had immigrated into these gigantic, spinning cylinders over half a century ago.

"Tosh, you've always been so picky about everything, even with your transfer applications."

"That unit is the cream of the crop. Didn't you apply for it too?"

"Me, in the Instructor's Corp.? Just look at me."

Mannings looked down at his right leg.

"You still..."

"This artificial leg here makes me feel uncomfortable about joining. Heh, maybe one day I'll be able to have a real one again."

Even though the artificial limb made out of steel bone and metal parts looked as real as one of flesh and blood, it still brought up painful memories from the One Year War for Mannings.

Cray looked somewhat uneasy about it.

"Hey don't worry about that. I never blamed you."

"My life was saved in exchange for your leg. I'll never forget that."

Cray thought to himself, *the way you see your leg is no different that the way I see this colony. It can never be as good as the real thing.*

"Stole, are you still planning on staying here?"

"There's nothing else for me. They're just gonna give me a desk job sooner or later anyway." Mannings forced a grin.

"If you ever change your mind, just go to the Instructor's Corp. You can always--"

A sharp beep rang from Cray's pocket.

"Damn! The shuttle's gonna take off. I wasted my break time on this depressing conversation."

"I'll see you later."

With a smile on his face, Cray hit Mannings on the shoulder as he got up.

Leaving Mannings behind him, Cray headed to the launching pad's elevator. Both men waved to each other without knowing that this would be their last farewell. The next time they met, it would be under vastly different circumstances.

* * *

Da da da da da da...!!

The Wyvern fighter's cockpit sounded off a series of electronic alarms. Ryu Roots looked in all directions, but found himself looking into nothing but black space.

"Cadet Roots, you've been shot down!"

As the words "return flight" flashed on the monitor, the instructor's yell came through the headset.

"How many times do I have to tell you?! The number one rule for space combat is that you have to find the enemies before they find you, idiot!"

The instructor's fighter pulled up behind Roots's.

"Shit! You're no better..." Ryu Roots mumbled. "This ain't a real battle! I didn't actually get shot down!"

Roots pulled on the control stick to cut a sharp, right-angle turn, catching the instructor's tail.

"Blam! Blam! Blam!" Roots emulated the sound of a machine gun with his mouth. "Just because you hit the enemy doesn't mean you beat him! If his armor is thick, and he doesn't go down, then what are you gonna do?"

Roots then pushed on the throttle and passed above the instructor's craft at a blinding speed.

"You little shit! You're gonna...!"

Before the instructor could finish, Roots's Wyvern blasted full speed into the distant darkness.

"I'm not gonna lose to anyone!"

* * *

After the simulated combat sequence, Roots was called into the base commander's office. He was on the Federation Forces' third training base on the Moon. The commander, sitting in his leather chair, was staring angrily at him.

"You're pretty damn full of yourself, aren't you, Cadet Roots?! Listen! No matter what organization you belong to, there will always be rules, especially in the military! If no one obeys the rules here, the whole place will go straight to Hell!"

"Yes, sir!" With that answer, Roots thought to himself, *You Earthnoids are the ones who make the rules anyway. They've got nothin' to do with someone who was born on Side 7 like me.*

"You've certainly earned yourself quite the combat record over the past year." The commander threw down a file folder on his desk. "Six counts of disobeying an officer, two counts of fighting, nine counts of disobeying orders, and fourteen counts of misbehavior! If we weren't so shorthanded here, I would've kicked you out long ago! However, your simulated combat skills have proven to be quite good and, in some cases, even excellent."

The commander ran his hand through his white hair.

"How should I say this...? While you're completely useless to have around, it would be a shame to have to get rid of you! Just make sure you keep in mind that, in the military, teamwork is of utmost importance!"

'Teamwork' my ass! Roots thought to himself. Why should someone from the colonies have to listen to an Earthnoid like you?! We only trust ourselves! Once I get my wings as a mobile suit pilot, I'm gettin' the hell outta here!

"Sir, all I want to do is to become an ace mobile suit pilot! I want to be just like the guy who singlehandedly turned the tides of battles during the--"

"You want to be a hero when you've got no skills?!" The commander cut him off. "It's good to have confidence, but confidence won't keep you alive in battle!"

As long as I win, who cares how I do it? I don't need to listen to your shit, asshole! Rebellious thought arose in Roots's mind.

The Commander took out an envelope and threw it at Roots.

"What's this?" Roots asked.

"Transfer papers. I'm tired of having you around anyway. And by the way, congratulations!"

"Huh?" Roots looked at the paperwork. "Experimental MS Unit? Never heard of them before."

"Get going!" the commander pointed at the door.

He saluted the commander and left, angry about not having been sent to the front lines.

"I want to go into the battlefield! I want to go fight a real war! What's so bad about wanting to be a hero?"

The commander heard his complaint from the hallway and sighed.

"What were they thinking? Why did they want that guy, anyway?"

* * *

The Federation Forces' primary training base in California, North America.

As the sword struck its target, Josh Offshore felt shockwaves travel through the handle. At the same time, the third light switched on, signaling his victory.

"Well done!" said his opponent as he exited the arena.

These days, fencing was no longer a form of combat training. It had become nothing more than a fancy sport. However, during this period of highly advanced weaponry, it did possess its own unique charm. A sword duel between men was still a style more fitting of a warrior.

Offshore understood quite well that not everything in the world could be replaced by more efficient means.

"Thanks." Offshore removed his mask and placed it under his arm. With beads of sweat still on his forehead, he bowed to his opponent.

"Impressive!" said his instructor. "Even though they say nobody's perfect, you do come pretty close."

"The Offshore dynasty is clearly a head above the rest," he continued. "Your skills have improved once again."

Ever since he was a child, Josh Offshore had always been surrounded by praise. His motives for joining the Federation Forces were not rebellion, but rather part of a planned path into the world of politics. His father was a member of the Earth Federation Assembly. Under his guidance, joining the military was just another stepping stone towards making Josh into a Federation Representative. Over the past sixteen years, Josh had lived this planned life.

The instructor's mention of his family invoked no reaction in Offshore. He was more than familiar with such compliments.

"I'm looking forward to our next lesson." Offshore then headed off to change his clothes.

Although locker room was clean and well ventilated, the air inside was still filled with the stench of sweat.

As Offshore stopped in front of his locker to change, another young man from his grade entered the room.

"Josh, did you hear?"

"What?"

"They're gonna be assigning our posts tomorrow."

"Yeah, I've heard." Offshore put his arm into his sleeve.

"Aren't you worried?" The young man fastened his belt. "Oh, wait, I forgot. With your family's influence, you've got nothing to worry about."

Offshore thought about the young man's remark as he looked into the mirror to fix his hair.

The young man next to him had been born into a below-middle-class family in the space colonies. It was quite possible that he would never be able to achieve the status of anyone in the Offshore dynasty. Like the old saying went, a poor man could never understand the problems of a rich man.

"Did I say something wrong?" The young man noticed Offshore's silence.

"No, not at all." Unable to come up with another answer, Offshore responded emotionlessly.

"So Josh, did you apply for a position at Jaburo?"

"I applied for the Instructor's Corp."

"Huh? You do know that the Instructor's Corp. trains mobile suit combat instructors, right? Are you sure you want to go there?"

"Why not?"

"Shouldn't you think about this a little more? Oh, I get it! You want to go there just to experience something different, right?"

"I don't have any specific reason for going there. But hey, who knows. Maybe I'll experience something new."

The next day, Josh Offshore was assigned to the Instructor's Corps.

* * *

"Honors Student Eton Heathrow!"

As the Student Council president called his name from the podium, Heathrow got up from his seat in the front row. All eyes were focused on the top honors student as he quietly walked up the steps. This was a highly lauded Federation Forces military school that specialized in training top officers. Only those who had over three years of service could apply to it. However, graduating from it was another story entirely. Among all of the officers who had entered the school with Heathrow, half of them had been unable to pass their courses. Heathrow's graduation from this institute meant that his future had been more or less secured.

Principal Brian Aeno stood beside many top Federation Forces officers on the podium. His thick eyebrows, hooked nose, and tight lips gave him the look of a hardened soldier. He had been the man in charge of the Principality of Zeon's surrender at Side 3 at the end of the One Year War. It was he who had declared that, if the Zeon forces did not surrender unconditionally, the Federation Forces fleets would be sent in to suppress and occupy all governments.

In order for the Federation to keep its war-loving military officials in check following the One Year War, Aeno had been reassigned here as the school's principal, even though he himself did not love war. He had only fought hard during the War's battles because he believed that it was a soldier's duty to do so. That was why many who had served with him still wished for him to return to active duty.

Now standing in front of Principal Aeno, Heathrow gave a perfect salute.

"Congratulations, Major Heathrow. It's hard to believe that the birdbrained Lieutenant I knew so many years ago could achieve such an honor."

Aeno placed emphasis on the word "Lieutenant" because Heathrow's first tour of duty on board a ship had been served under him. At that time, Aeno had captained the battleship *Bull Run*.

"Thank you, sir. Now I will too have my own bridge."

Principal Aeno handed him his diploma with a smile. Heathrow tried to smile back, but suddenly realized that his face was as tight as stone. After receiving the diploma, he started to walk down the steps. Now, Heathrow truly felt relieved. He was finally certain that his future was secured. It would definitely be bright and limitless.

* * *

Kazoom!

Blue flames blasted from the boosters of three green-colored Hizacks as they streaked across the darkness in formation. Hizacks were mobile suits developed from Zakus, which had been widely used by Zeon during the One Year War. Even though they shared similar appearances, Hizacks were purely Federation mobile suits, yet the Federation Forces markings on them still seemed out of place. Squadron leader Lieutenant Brave Cod sat inside his cockpit. He spun the mobile suit to the right by making adjustments with the mobile suit's limbs, trying to steer himself towards the giant floating rock in front of him.

The "giant rock" was the asteroid Pezun. It had formerly been a secret development facility set up by Zeon. After the One Year War, the Federation acquired the base, and now, only a small unit was stationed there. Zeon had developed an astonishing amount of mobile suit technology during the One Year War. After five years, the Federation's technicians and scientists were still in the process of recovering all of the data stored there.

"The second combat unit has completed CSP (Combat Space Patrol) and is requesting permission to land," Cod said in a monotone voice.

What good is CSP if there are no enemies? Cod felt rather empty about it.

He switched the laser communication controls to their first setting, close range, in order to receive commands from the base, then set the IMPC to landing mode. IMPC (Integrated Maneuver Propulsion Controls) was an automated system used to control the four basic functions of a mobile suit in flight: cruising, space combat, landing, and walking. All the pilot needed to do was select the mode, and the mobile suit would automatically adjust to the situation. The Federation had actually been the forerunner of this technology. By inputting an experienced pilot's records, their mobile suits' learning computers could adopt any and all maneuvers. This way, even a rookie pilot could perform difficult maneuvers with ease. However, if a

maneuver had not been pre-programmed, the pilot would need to compensate by taking over the controls in order to correct the problems.

"Roger, Unit Two is clear to land at Docking Bay E3."

The Hizacks circled around to the asteroid's east side. They then followed laser guidelines to enter the docking bay.

The numbers on the dashboard shifted back to zero as all of the display lights changed from red to green. The thrusters' loud noises began to die down, and the Hizack then locked its arms into the docking restraints on the ceiling, which then pulled the giant mobile suit slowly in. As the maintenance crew rushed to the Hizack to begin the cooling process, Cod turned to see the docking restraints slide back into position for the second landing.

"Hurry up, the next one's coming in!" Cod yelled into the communicator inside his helmet.

The clear signal was finally lit, and Cod opened his cockpit hatch. The pressurized air let out a hiss as it leaked into the outside vacuum. Even though there were plenty of people around, there was no sound inside the docking bay.

Cod kicked off of the side of the cockpit and glided towards the walkway under the weightless environment. At the same time, he noticed a mobile suit surrounded by a group of technicians on the other side of the docking bay. It was a model that he had never seen before. After landing on the walkway, Cod grabbed one of the maintenance crew, and touched their helmets together.

"Hey, that suit over there. Did the tech guys build it based off a Zeon design?"

"Partially, but it's mostly a new design." The maintenance man answered somewhat reluctantly.

"Anaheim?"

Anaheim referred to Anaheim Electronics Industries. It was a company formed under the Federation after they had acquired the primary developer of Zeon mobile suits, the Zeonic Company, following the One Year War. Anaheim Electronics was now the largest manufacturer of mobile suits. Most of the Zeon data uncovered here at Pezun was usually handed over to them.

"No, I heard it was our own design. It's supposed to be the X-series originally developed by Zeon to be their next-generation model."

"The X-series?"

"Yes."

Cod had never heard of the mobile suit called Xeku Eins before. However, as a pilot, he was unable to contain his interest to pilot a new mobile suit. After leaving the mechanic, he entered the airlock. After removing his helmet, he headed towards the debriefing room by grabbing the moving handgrip. As he moved down the corridor, Cod saw the base commander at the end of the hallway. He raised his hand to salute, but Commander Pad called out to him.

"Brave Cod, these are your orders." Commander Pad handed him papers ordering him to report to the Instructor's Corp.

"The Instructor's Corp. will be setting up their new base of operations here."

Another tour of duty in space? The thought made Cod feel depressed

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant Cod. I'll be heading back to my wife and kids after five years," said the Commander. "A new base commander will be reporting here later this week."

"I guess that means your mission to uncover all the Zeon data here is complete. Congratulations!" Cod replied. "It's too bad I'm still stuck here in this barren wasteland."

Pezun did have its places for entertainment and relaxation, but when compared to Earth or the Moon, it just wasn't that

exciting. The lack of women didn't help things either.

"Ha ha, don't look so down. I'll leave you and the Instructor's Corp. a nice going away present: a new type of mobile suit called--"

"The X-series?"

"You're pretty up to date."

Cod thought to himself, *Be a bit more patient with the new toys. Just hang in there a bit longer, and soon...*

* * *

"Dr. Karl, with the assistance of the other departments, we've gathered our list of potential Cheshire Cats."

The two middle-aged technicians talked casually as they approached the mobile suit hangar.

"It's hard to believe that Meith Roots's son is on the list of names."

The name and image of a female technician who had died in an accidental explosion appeared in Dr. Karl's mind. She was a woman who had given up everything in order to research and develop "The System." She left her family behind, and at the end, had even sacrificed her life shielding "The System" from the explosion with her own body.

"The System" was a machine capable of independent thought being developed under the Federation's new arms reinforcement project. In order to compensate for the loss of so many pilots following the One Year War, the Federation had decided to develop an extension of the IMPC system that could automate all of a mobile suit's system. Officially termed "Advanced Logistic and Inconsequence Cognizing Equipment," it was known as A.L.I.C.E. for short. By linking this system to the core learning computer inside a mobile suit, it would be able to analyze all potential battlefield situations and would also be capable of making tactical decisions on its own. Their final goal was to be able to use fully automated and unmanned mobile suits in combat. In order for A.L.I.C.E. to become a more complete "human being," everything had to be taught to her from scratch. The female technician who sacrificed herself had been responsible for teaching basic knowledge, while at the same time playing a "motherly" role for it. However, as A.L.I.C.E.'s intelligence began to grow, she also needed someone to fill the role of a "father." However, that person would also have to provide the role of a brother, friend, and lover throughout the developmental stages. Therefore, the project would have to find a man who didn't play by the rules, and would provide the challenges that would allow A.L.I.C.E. to achieve its goal. Thus, the nickname "Cheshire Cat" had been given to these candidates.

A.L.I.C.E. had been programmed with a female personality because the project wanted to develop an artificial intelligence capable of understanding its pilot. "She" would need to be able to fill the role of a capable and understanding woman who would respond to the needs of her pilot. The end result would be for A.L.I.C.E. to "marry" the pilot and evolve into a true Valkyrie, the goddess who carries the souls of fallen warriors to Valhalla.

The project, while brilliant in concept, had yet to gain mainstream support from the Federation military or Government officials. A.L.I.C.E.'s completion would cause a drastic cutback in military personnel, which would result in an imbalance of power between the military and the Government. The project had also suffered many setbacks and disasters throughout its development. The explosion that had occurred was rumored to have been an act of sabotage, but not enough evidence had been uncovered in the investigation to prove it. Now, all of the troublemakers within the Federation Forces had been brought to this base. The twelve men stood in line in the mobile suit hangar.

Dr. Karl saw two men caught in a heated argument as the drill sergeant gave his speech. The drill sergeant separated the two immediately, and punched them each in the face.

"State your names!"

"Ryu Roots," one of the men answered as he wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth.

"Shin Crypt," the other one answered.

"Listen up, you little dog shit!" the drill sergeant yelled. "This place is a madhouse! 'MS' doesn't stand for 'Mobile Suit' here! It stands for 'Mad Sanitarium'! All of you psychos are here because you're useless to the military!"

"Roots! Crypt! You're gonna follow all the rules here, and you're gonna do as I say! When I tell you to fly, you better fly. And when I tell to die, you better die! Now lock these two up in isolation for three days!"

MPs grabbed the two men from behind and hauled them away.

"Now, the rest of you, go to your cells!" the drill sergeant continued to yell. "Your briefing will take place in an hour! Dismissed!"

Dr. Karl felt rather disheartened observing the situation. He thought to himself, *do we really have to hand over A.L.I.C.E. to these guys? Meith Roots's son is also in the group. His father died during the One Year War, and his mother died in an explosion. He probably blames the Federation Forces for the deaths of both of his parents.*

Looks like A.L.I.C.E.'s future will be filled with obstacles.

Two years later...

Chapter 1

REVOLT IN PEZUN

IN UNIVERSAL CENTURY 0083, Brigadier General Jamitov Hymen established the Titans branch of the Earth Federation Forces. The purpose of this elite unit was to use military force to hunt down the Zeon remnant. As time passed, the Titans began to broaden their operations to suppress all anti-Federation movements.

Such overzealous policing ultimately triggered the “30 Bunch incident” on July 31, 0085. The Titans responded to a civilian riot by pumping poison gas into Side 1's Colony 30, killing all of its inhabitants. As anti-Federation movements continued to break out everywhere, the Federation officers' backing behind the Titans' actions grew deeper. Many even saw the Titans as the true embodiment of justice.

It is now UC 0087. The fire of space is about to be ignited once again.

The Earth Federation Forces' Instructor's Corp. was formed to develop mobile suit combat technologies. The Corp.'s members were handpicked from among the best pilots in the Federation. Their records and studies would be mass-produced and entered into all Federation Forces IMPC (Integrated Maneuver Propulsion Controls) systems. The results of their efforts would augment the Federation's mobile suit fighting capabilities.

The Gryps War fought between Titans and AEUG (Anti-Earth Union Group) was an internal struggle within the Federation forces. As an elite unit within the Federation Forces, the members of the Instructor's Corp. had easily embraced the Titans' ideology of Earthnoid supremacy. On the far side of the Moon, two blue mobile suits had just completed their CSP (Combat Space Patrol), and were on a return course to Pezun. The pilot inside the blue mobile suit Xeku Eins, designated RSM-141, switched on his radar communication system.

"Colonel Cray, is what we've heard true? The rumors are getting to the guys back at the base," said Lt. Offshore.

"According to the message I received two days ago, General Jamitov Hymen's death has been confirmed. He may have even be assassinated. That's why Brave, Derek, and I have decided that Mother Earth must not be allowed to fall into the hands of those outsiders."

Two months ago, the AEUG occupied the Federation Assembly in Dakar and denounced the Titans before the entire world. This caused the Titans' political status to be shaken, and the AEUG's movement became legitimized. Afterwards, the Titans lost support from the Federation, and were forced to confront the AEUG on its own.

A Baoa Qu, the Zeons' asteroid fortress from the One Year War, was transferred under the Titans' control in UC 0087. The Titans relocated the asteroid to Side 7 and renamed it the Gate of Zedan, where it became their primary base.

Although the death of General Jamitov Hymen at Gate of Zedan was kept a secret, rumors nevertheless spread quickly throughout the Titans forces and supporters. However, the death of the Titans' leadership did not bring about its end. Their ideals remained strong among many soldiers. When the order came for the Instructor's Corp. to be reabsorbed back under the Federation's control, there were many reservations among its members. A small number agreed to return, but many still supported the Titans. The return to Federation control would mean the cessation of the conflict with the AEUG and the surrender of the Titans' ideals.

January 25, 0088.

High-ranking officials agreed to transfer the Instructor's Corp. under Federation control. Members of the Instructor's Corp. opposed to the action seized control of Pezun with military force following the decision. They believed the confrontation with the AEUG and the Federation must continue. This incident occurred three days ago, one week after General Jamitov Hymen's death.

* * *

"Shit!" Ryu Roots slammed his fist into the dashboard.

"This is the seventh time you've died today, Cadet Roots," The Instructor's voice patched into the cockpit.

"The bastard won't shut up." Roots kicked open the hatch door.

"Died again, Hero?" Shin Crypt smiled at Roots as he prepared to enter the simulator.

"Asshole!" Roots kicked the hatch of Shin Crypt's simulator.

In preparing for the arrival of new mobile suits, the Experimental Mobile Suit Unit had been conducting training sessions day and night at the Federation's Nevada base. The latest model had been rumored to be a Gundam, but so far no one had seen it. Additionally, because all of the training had so far been conducted inside simulators of Zeta Plus B-types, many suspected the new mobile suit did not even exist. At the same time, an important meeting was taking place in the base's conference room.

"This is the man chosen for A.L.I.C.E."

Dr. Karl looked at the personal file in front of him. "Ryu Roots. What an interesting coincidence."

"And the second choice?" The man in the Federation uniform asked as he peered out the window.

"Shin Crypt, but he'll be in charge of the other model."

"The experimental ZZ? That thing may be classified as a standard model, but it has never been tested in real combat. It's nothing more than a paper tiger!"

"That's the best we can do. Mannings, the real purpose of this mission is a show of force, not to engage in actual combat. As long as we can scare off our enemies, paper tigers are good enough."

Stole Mannings turned around. "This is war. A show of force is not going to end it. If we had fleets of Gundams, then it might actually work. But right now, we're stuck with a bunch of punk kids on our hands, and pitting them against the Instructor's Corp. was not the best of ideas."

"From what we currently know about Axis, er, Neo Zeon's movements, we need to cash in all our chips. Even though the S Gundam's enrollment has been canceled, we still have a handful of trained pilots. Under these circumstances, we can use them."

"Calling that bunch of washouts 'pilots' is an overstatement," replied Mannings.

"The mobile suits and equipment can compensate for their lack of skill. This will be a simple mission. If you don't accept, we can always have you removed for disobeying orders."

"Alright. Do what you want."

"No more complaints. The mission will begin a month from now."

Mannings clenched his teeth. He knew that this would not be a simple show of force. This was because Tosh Cray was on the other side. The confrontation would take place on February 25, and there would be no stopping it.

* * *

"Death."

The signal shut off as Shin Crypt saw the ominous word flash on the screen in front of him.

* * *

Fear. Never-ending fear. Tosh Cray stared into the cockpit monitor, looking through the endlessness of space. He felt small. "Offshore, do you like space?"

Josh Offshore was caught off guard by the question. "Huh? Oh... the existence of space. I feel like space can send a man into a thoughtless state. The fact that both Earth and the space colonies can breed life in this vacuum makes one see the true value of existence."

"A rather old fashioned statement. So, do you like space?"

"I'm saying that I like space in its purity."

"What do you mean?"

"Once man exists here, it is no longer pure. Man should leave his feet on the ground."

"Which means those outsiders that can't understand the value of life on Earth should all go to hell. And what we're fighting for here is the future of the Earth."

"That's correct, Sir!"

The two blue mobile suits homed in on the laser guide coming from Pezun and switched into landing position. Flames jetting out from the forward thrusters, combined with the AMBAC (Active Mass Balance Auto Control) system, slowed its speed. While traversing the floating junk piles surrounding Pezun, the next pair of patrolling Xeku Eins passed them by.

"First CSP (Combat Space Patrol) unit is prepared for landing."

"The tower will now assume control of the landing procedures. Please switch IMPC to autopilot mode."

"Roger. You are in control," Cray answered. The Xeku Eins slowly glided into the docking bay. After locking into its docking restrains, it continued to glide for another thirty feet until it came to a complete stop. Upon landing, Cray immediately went to the command room. Brave Cod was waiting for him inside.

"Good work. Now take a look at this." Cod pointed to the monitor on the table. The image appeared to have been filmed by a hidden high-resolution camera. It showed an officer behind a computer.

"An officer assigned to return to Earth. He's downloading all of the combat files here."

"A poor rat caught in a mouse trap. They fight all their battles based on combat data. No wonder they need this stuff."

"This was your plan, Josh."

"Heh, heh. So, Brave, when are they planning to return to Earth?"

"1600 hours Earth Standard Time today. They don't even have a hundred men, so one transport ship should be enough."

"And the announcement?"

"We will let them know that the New Desides will oppose them to the bitter end."

"Did that name come from the word 'decision'?"

"No, it's a newly formed word. It stands for Dis-side. Anti-colony."

"Alright. You're now in charge. Do as you wish."

* * *

February 22, 0088.

Following Operation Maelstrom, the AEUG successfully defeated the Titans' fleet with the Colony Laser, and ended the first stage of the Gryps War. Even though the forces of Axis and Neo Zeon had been suppressed, they still posed a great threat to the Federation. The Federation would not be able to take another hit from them until it could resolve the conflict between the Titans and the AEUG. Because of the situation, the Federation's main focus was to unify all of its troops to suppress Neo Zeon. However, the Titans' supporters and rebels on their Lunar city posed a significant obstacle.

Because of its combat capabilities and capacity for mobile suit production, the Instructor's Corp. on Pezun had to be dissolved. This decision was made prior to Operation Maelstrom, when the Federation Forces began to form a small unit to counter the New Desides. Because of the conflict with Neo Zeon, it was impossible to use official troops for such a minor task. The Federation's leaders decided to send in the newly built *Argama* class assault space cruiser, *Pegasus III*, along with four *Salamis* class battleships. The unit was officially named Task Force Alpha. It was placed under the supervision of the Federation fleet in charge of cleaning up the aftermath of the battle for the Colony Laser.

While Task Force Alpha may at first have seemed like an elite unit, it was composed of inexperienced captains and prototype mobile suits that lost military contract bids—a unit of paper tigers.

February 22, 0088.

Task Force Alpha's launching point would be located at the Federation's Lake Baikal spaceport in Russia. It would take place at sundown. Gigantic liftoff boosters were attached to the five ships, along with oval-shaped shields installed on their outsides. When the preparations were complete, the ships looked from a distance like five high-tech pyramids.

Slowly, the sky turned from red to blue to complete blackness.

The control room began the countdown in a monotone voice.

“60. 59. 58. 57. 56. 55. 54. 53...”

Eton Heathrow, the *Pegasus III*'s new captain, stared at the countdown monitor on the bridge. Like everyone else, he was tightly strapped into his chair. There was very little to do during this stage. They were to take control only once the ship was in orbit.

Suddenly, the five pyramids were engulfed in white smoke.

“...Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One...”

As the numbers hit double zero, the loud noise of metal colliding with metal sounded. The world around Heathrow rattled violently in a brilliant light. The five pyramids began to rise slowly, pulling away from Earth's gravity. Upon reaching Earth's orbit, the shields and liftoff boosters were jettisoned. The *Pegasus III* and the *Salamis Kai* class battleships emerged from the Earth's shadows. The paper tiger task force took its first steps into the realm of space. Their future remained unknown.

Chapter 2

SKIRMISH

PEZUN AIRSPACE.

A brilliant red light exploded across the cockpit monitor, the last thing the GM III pilot saw before his death. A mobile suit carrying a gigantic backpack floated motionlessly in the distance. It appeared to be a discarded suit without a pilot. An EWAC (Early Warning And Control) Nero. At that moment, it was monitoring all nearby activity and taking in the combat data from all sides. The electronic warfare officer inside the EWAC Nero studied the situation display consoles.

The green dots on the screen disappeared one after another. In the end, only two red dots remained.

"They all got wiped out in five minutes!" yelled the electronic warfare officer.

"We better get outta here!" the pilot replied.

The EWAC Nero came alive as blues flames shot out from the boosters. The two red dots on the screen started to move towards them.

"Shit! We've been spotted!" The pilot executed a back flip and began to quickly retreat. Multiple red dots showed up on the screen, and some even flew past them at a high speed.

"Good God..."

The electronic warfare officer downloaded all of the Ada-F files from the EWAC Nero's system as the pilot continued to mumble to himself.

"All files are now transferred into the data pods!"

"Right. Let's do it!" The pilot punched the button on his right-hand control pad. Four data pods launched from the EWAC Nero's backpack and disappeared into the darkness just as two red beams penetrated the EWAC Nero's waist. A furious blue explosion illuminated the two blue mobile suits nearby.

"A new electronic reconnaissance type. Looks like they were able to launch the data pods." Tosh Cray declared.

"Does that mean the GMs we fought before were only decoys while they gathered data?" Josh Offshore asked.

"It's common practice to make sacrifices for information in a war. Remember that."

Offshore nodded. He had not realized the deaths he had caused. To him, war was no different from a sports game.

* * *

Penta was the Federation Forces' main relay station orbiting the Earth. Docking bays for military ships were located at the ends of five massive circular columns that extended from its center. After leaving Earth, Task Force Alpha had stopped here for a final maintenance check before the mission. Its remaining crew, mobile suits, and equipment were brought aboard as well. Ryu Roots, at the moment, was absolutely thrilled. His original job at the Experimental Mobile Suit Unit had been to run simulation tests on new mobile suit controls and safety systems. However, he was now a designated mobile suit pilot with Task Force Alpha. The first good thing that had happened to him after being transferred to the task force was the change in his rank. Originally an Ensign, he had been promoted to Second Lieutenant, because, according to field mission rules, only officers could pilot mobile suits. However, in the back of his mind, he still wondered why they had chosen *him*.

Upon arriving from Earth in a shuttle, Roots searched for his unit's briefing room. He looked it up on the automated information system. After entering "Task Force Alpha, MS unit, Briefing room", the computer monitor displayed a 3D map

with a yellow line to direct him.

A female voice from the system asked, "Would you like a copy?"

"No, thank you!" Roots hurried off.

"You're welcome."

"I am Captain Stole Mannings. I will be in charge of Task Force Alpha's mobile suit corps. Everyone, please take a seat."

The pilots inside the briefing room quieted down and looked up at him. Roots saw Shin Crypt and sat down next to him.

"Hey Shin, what do you think of the old guy?"

"He's got the stench of a soldier. Its gonna be hard to get along."

"I think he'll be fun."

"When did you become interested in men?" Shin arched an eyebrow.

"Idiot, I mean to go up against him!"

Despite their speaking under their breath, Mannings still could hear them. He looked in Roots's direction. Roots caught Mannings looking his way and put on a serious face.

"Quiet. I will now brief you on the mission."

The door suddenly opened. A big, tall man stood outside, looking somewhat confused.

"Oh... Uh... Excuse me."

"Are you with this unit?" Mannings asked.

The large man nodded.

"Then come in and sit down!"

"Yes, Sir. Uh... There aren't any seats left..."

Mannings was somewhat annoyed.

"Then sit on the floor! What's your name?"

"I'm Lieutenant Tex West."

Mannings looked at the list of names. "Oh, you're from Karaba."

During the Gryps War, Karaba had been one of the AEUG's allies. All of their operations were restricted to Earth. Many in the room chuckled. Task Force Alpha was set to carry out a space mission. Why bother sending in a guy that could only crawl on the ground?

Once West had sat down at an empty spot, the monitor displayed an image of the asteroid Pezun and its orbital route.

Mannings continued to speak. "A month ago, members of the Instructor's Corp. stationed here defected to the Titans and seized control of Pezun. They then used nuclear pulse thrusters to push the Pezun asteroid to Lagrange point L4. Based on our analysis, it is unlikely that their goal is to drop Pezun onto Earth. Their objectives are unknown as of now, however we do expect them to take up a position against the Federation and AEUG."

The image on the monitor changed.

"A week ago, the 127th Combat Unit stationed at Side 2 was sent to Pezun for a reconnaissance mission. This is the information we gathered before they were wiped out. Unfortunately, we were able to retrieve only one data pod."

The monitor displayed two red dots approaching six green dots. One by one, the green dots disappeared.

"Four minutes and 35 seconds?! You're shittin' me!" Roots exclaimed. The other members in the room shared similar reactions.

"This is no joke. It's real. This is who we're up against. Remember that."

The image on the monitor divided into six sections, each replaying the mobile suits' movements.

"You all should know that our opponents were responsible for the development of the combat data on the IMPC (Integrated Maneuver Propulsion Controls). Their IMPC capabilities are far superior than what we currently have on hand."

"Our only chance of success lies within the latest combat data brought back by members of the Instructor's Corp. that have returned to Earth."

"That means we'll only live a little longer than that GM team," Roots jokingly whispered.

It took Mannings another three hours to explain further details and instructions pertaining to the mission.

"Task Force Alpha will depart from Penta at 0300 hours Earth Standard Time. All members are to board their designated ships at 2200. Dismissed."

* * *

0300 hours, Earth Standard Time.

With all its officers on board, the *Pegasus III* and the four *Salamis* class cruisers set out on their mission. After meeting all of *Pegasus III*'s officers, Roots and Crypt went to the mess hall for a cup of coffee.

"Dammit, we're stuck with the old guy!"

"The mobile suit commander is supposed to be aboard the flagship."

"How'd you get promoted to First Lieutenant?" Root was a tad jealous of the fact that Crypt outranked him.

"Because I've been placed in charge of the FAZZ (Full Armor ZZ Gundam) unit."

"I don't get it. Why don't we trade places?"

"This is the military. You'd better do as you're told."

"That's bullshit."

Text West walked in. He piloted a Z-Plus.

"Hey, Captain Mannings is gonna begin training. He wants everyone in the waiting room."

"Training? I haven't even unpacked yet. Tell him I can't come." Roots waved his hand, signaling for West to get lost.

"But..."

"No buts. Just go tell him that." Roots threw his coffee container at West.

The container floated past West and hit Mannings, approaching from behind West, in the face.

"If you think your luggage is more important than your life, then don't bother training." Mannings then pulled up his right pant leg. "And if you want to end up like this..."

Roots saw his artificial leg.

"This is the lesson I learned during the One Year War. Luckily, the price was *only* one leg. You want to have one attached to you? Maybe you've got more confidence than me, but I just hope you won't bring trouble to the others on the team!"

Roots felt uncomfortable.

"Fine. Let's go! I'll show you what I can do!" Roots rushed out of the mess hall.

You little shit! If you weren't the chosen man for the S Gundam, I would've choked you to death already, Mannings thought. *I've heard all those Newtypes are the same. Could this punk be a Newtype too?* The thought made him feel uneasy.

* * *

As the mobile suit combat training progressed, the ships began to enter the range of Pezun's radar.

"The Federation fleet is in range. Five ships have been identified," the operator reported to Cray. Pezun had been working day and night preparing its defenses, but they were not yet complete.

"We're not completely ready for them yet. Do we have a file on their fleet commander?"

"I'll check. The data we have may be a bit outdated, since we're no longer connected to the Federation's computer system."

"Looks like a rookie from some esteemed Federation academy. He's probably pretty by-the-book. This fleet is most likely another decoy. Any information on the mobile suit units aboard?"

"It's a brand new ship. We've got no combat data on it."

"Alright, it's probably a bunch of rookies as well. Send out the mobile suit team. Tell Lt. Offshore and his unit to delay the enemy's approach."

Upon receiving a direct order from Brave Cod, Offshore and his team began preparations inside the hangar. The maintenance crew installed secondary long-distance assault armaments onto the Xeku Eins.

"Josh Offshore, first assault team, move out!"

The Xeku Eins headed toward Task Force Alpha.

"Hold off the enemy and find out what their capabilities are. Don't overexert yourself," Cod's voice patched through into the cockpit. Offshore smiled.

* * *

"First Lieutenant Shin Crypt, report to the mobile suit deck."

The speaker next to Crypt's ears went off at 0060 hours.

"Shit, I hate this kind of wake up call."

Crypt scratched his head as he loosened himself from the harness on the bed. After changing into his flight suit, he headed to the pilots' waiting room on the mobile suit deck. When he entered the waiting room, he saw a serious-looking Mannings.

"It's time for battle, Lt. Crypt."

Crypt too turned serious.

"The target?"

"Our fleet is in the range of Pezun's radar. The enemy has sent out their mobile suit unit to intercept. From this distance, they won't have enough fuel to reach us, so they'll most likely launch a long distance assault from afar. It would be ineffective for the ships to take down such small targets with cannons or missiles, so it's up to your FAZZ unit to attack with its long-range beam weapons."

"Understood!"

"Don't be too eager to get results. Just do your best."

Crypt saluted and headed to the hangar. Once inside the cockpit, he switched on the laser communication controls. A small window opened up on the 360 degree panoramic monitor. Crypt saw Lt. John Grissom on screen.

"You awake?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Where is Aldrin?"

"He's on standby. He'll be our backup."

"Right!"

Crypt switched the monitor to the *Pegasus III*'s control room.

"FAZZ unit, ready to launch!"

The two FAZZs, equipped with hyper mega cannons, shot out into space. The moment they entered firing range, Crypt noticed red lights blitzing towards him.

"Pull back! Maximize search range!" Crypt broke radio silence.

Both FAZZs backed out of firing range with their counterthrusters.

"Do you know where the shots are coming from?"

Crypt checked the monitor for the previous readout.

"Four targets are within firing range! Keep your eyes open for more!"

"We weren't aiming before. We should have a greater firing range than them," Grissom replied calmly.

"Alright! Grissom, I'll take the first shot. You will then follow up with adjustments of plus or minus five degrees."

Crypt set his hyper mega cannon into position. A ferocious blue beam shot into the darkness and lasted for a full three seconds.

"Shit! I missed!"

Grissom immediately made adjustments and fired the second shot. Due to the long recharge time of the hyper mega cannon, 2 FAZZ units were used in rotation to make up for the time between each shot. When executed properly, this attack was considered the most powerful beam attack the *Pegasus III* had to offer.

"What?! Are they firing with the ship's main guns?!" Josh Offshore was startled by the blue beams passing above him.

Judging from the power and distance of the beams, they could have been fired from the ships, Offshore thought. But ships don't have the ability to make the precise adjustments necessary to target small objects like mobile suits...

That left only two possible conclusions: either the enemy possessed a gigantic mobile armor, or they had mobile suits equipped with heavy beam weapons.

"So, they want to engage in long range combat too."

Both sides launched beam attacks at each other. Streaks of red and blue lights raced past one another, leaving trails of evaporated space dust glowing in their paths. However, because they were miles apart, both sides' accuracies were too low to score a hit.

"Dammit! I'm outta ammo!" Crypt was unhappy with his display.

"Same here. Should we call in Aldrin for reinforcements?"

"No, that won't be necessary."

Crypt noticed the enemies had retreated from their firing range. All of the red dots had disappeared from the display.

On the other side, Offshore received a code that stated, "The Garden has been decorated."

He returned to Pezun with his unit, satisfied with the successful completion of his mission.

Chapter 3

SORTIE, S GUNDAM!

“THE DEVIL'S GARDEN.”

The phrase originated during the second World War that took place during the 1940s of the Old Century. It referred to the minefield the German volunteer troops set up to defend El Alamein in their battle for North Africa. The Pezun installation's defense system was set up in a similar formation, and thus was given the same nickname.

The defense system consisted of three stages. Firstly, highly accurate, satellite-guided missiles, used by the Principality of Zeon during the One Year War, were deployed around the Pezun base. Asteroids and other space debris drifting in the region were fitted with thrusters, allowing them to be launched into enemies. These asteroids were not capable of exploding by themselves, and thus relied on the impact of the crash to do damage. They were used mainly against smaller craft operated by opposing forces to reduce the amount of nuclear warheads that would need to be used.

Secondly, weapon platforms from old *Salamis* class cruisers, left behind when the vessels were upgraded, were retrofitted into space-use mobile gun platforms and placed in empty territories to compliment the Pezun installation's main cannon.

Although they had been refurbished, a *Salamis* class's main cannon was still quite powerful. Each platform's firing power was drawn from the SOL7804 power generator satellite. Therefore, when Cod told Offshore that “the Garden had been decorated,” he had notified him that the floating gun platforms had linked with the satellite.

Following the One Year War, countless satellites and colonies in the area between the Earth and the Moon had been abandoned. Many of them were power generator satellites. The SOL7804 power generator satellite had originally been located at Lagrange point L4, and had provided electricity for Side 2 during the One Year War.

The space colonies' power generator satellites had suffered little damage compared to the colonies themselves, and were still usable. Thus, the New Desides had decided to make full use of them to strengthen the defense of Pezun. They had moved Pezun to L4 in order to make full use of the large amount of power that was freely available.

The final stage of Pezun's defense was the New Desides fleet, and their sharp mobile suit team. Task Force Alpha consisted of barely five cruisers, and would have no chance of trampling the “Devil's Garden.” They were more likely to be turned into a bouquet of petals of light.

“Let 'em fight until time runs out! Bastards...”

On the bridge of the Pegasus III, Mannings pounded angrily on the Combat Intelligence Control deck.

The FAZZ squadron returned to the deck. After hearing Crypt's report, an ominous feeling came over Mannings. He quickly headed to the cruiser's bridge.

In this era, where combat had once again become primitive, the CIC (Combat Intelligence Control) centers of Navy vessels of old had lost their value. But now, CIC had once again gathered on the bridge. The bridge was divided into a normal and combat bridge for safety measures. However, such a centralized model of combat management was quite dangerous during a real battle.

“Captain Mannings, immediate situation report! What do you mean by the ‘time limit?’” Fleet Commander Major Heathrow asked from the Fleet Commander's seat behind Mannings.

You blind idiot, were you even paying attention?! Mannings thought in his heart. Nevertheless, he patched the combat report through to the main monitor.

“This is the data we collected concerning the wreckage near Pezun, with orbital and free-drift rate factored into the images

we captured. From the looks of it, they have already constructed a fairly solid stronghold.”

Upon seeing the 3D map, Heathrow too was surprised. “How did that happen? Before the FAZZ squadron launched, we sent out an unmanned recon probe.”

“Yeah. It looks like debris, doesn’t it? In the final battle of the War, our forces met the Zeon here head on, so it's not surprising that this entire area is full of debris. Sir, that's what you and the navigation crew thought too, didn't you?”

“It’s not just debris”

“Right. That's what our enemies are probably thinking. I think the asteroids and debris around Pezun have already been converted into high-grade bombs. In other words, our assumptions are incorrect.”

“But isn’t there a chance that they haven’t done so?”

“That's an overly optimistic assumption. The mobile suit team that engaged the FAZZ squadron was clearly trying to buy enough time to let them set up and activate their defense network.”

Heathrow quickly ordered the communications crew to contact Side 5, then requested that the control crew turn the cruiser away.

“Fleet Commander, it’s too late to retreat! If the firing points indicated on the screen are functional, the largest one’s firepower is equivalent to that of three cruisers! Once we reverse, they'll definitely fire on us. We've been moving towards our destination without tightening our guard, and we've already reached the enemy’s effective firing range. Even if we fired our laser line towards Side 5 right now, it would take an hour to reach them, not to mention that it would take at least three days for reinforcements from Side 5 to reach us. By then, we’d be space dust.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“In order to survive at all costs...”

“Go on.”

Heathrow accepted Mannings’s survival plan. He ordered the fleet’s crew to open all of the cruisers’ automated thruster vents and slowly retreat from the enemy weapon platform’s firing range. While this prevented the New Desides from launching a surprise attack from behind, it consumed a large amount of fuel, and took a worrisome amount of time. In addition, the vents were designed to adjust the ships' flight position. Running them for an extended period of time could cause them to overheat and malfunction.

The red combat alert light was lit on each cruiser’s deck. All officers involved had donned normal suits. Suddenly, a spotter gazing at the blue monitor called out, “Fleet Commander! A small object is headed towards our cruiser!”

“Don’t panic! Judging by its path, its acceleration shouldn’t increase.” Mannings gambled and spoke before Heathrow.

“I am the commander of this fleet, Captain Mannings!”

Heathrow was not willing to let his status as a graduate of the Advance Officer’s School go to waste so easily. He ordered of the artillery officer, “Use whatever weapon you like! Open fire once it enters our effective firing range!”

The Pegasus III’s main cannon was aimed at the cluster of satellite-guided missiles heading towards the fleet.

The satellite-guided missiles were nothing more then insignificant dots of light to the naked eye, for their relative distance was still quite far. The gunnery officer controlling the defense system aimed at the cluster of missiles and fired the ship's mega particle cannon. Surrounding the Pegasus III in a circular arrangement, a formation with the key cruiser in the center, were the *Salamis Kai* class cruisers on level one combat alert. They, too, had begun to activate their targeting systems.

A few seconds later, the satellite-guided missiles, previously only flashes of light, exploded into massive balls of fire.

“First shot, direct hit! Six were hit by the crossfire!”

“Their accuracy has improved tremendously, compared to how it used to be.”

Hearing the artillery officer’s report had brought Mannings back to the days of the One Year War, where the accuracy of a cruiser’s cannon was pathetic.

However, against mobile suits with such high maneuverability, accuracy alone was not enough. Indeed, the accuracy of cruiser cannons had improved, but so too had mobile suit maneuverability and control.

“Ready the second main cannon. Load close range missiles!”

Just as Heathrow gave his order, the spotter again panicked and yelled, “Pezun has fired a beam weapon!”

“Change priority! All cruisers, fire beam interference missiles!”

Upon receiving the order, the gunnery officer immediately changed the weapons system firing sequence, then transmitted the instructions and data on the monitor to the weapon controller. The weapon controller then visually selected the sequence to execute the orders. This command system was known as a visual tracking model. The *Pegasus III*’s weapons platform sprayed out several wire-guided, unmanned drones, which were sent to the fleet’s rear and subsequently ignited. When they exploded, a large quantity of gas was released in a spherical shape. All of the vessels then gradually retreated into the sphere of gas. The gas functioned similarly to the anti-beam coating used in the One Year War, which reduced the intensity of beam weapons, and thus also the damage they caused.

“All hands, brace for impact! Evasive maneuvers!”

Although the gas weakened the beam damage, the force of the beam charging towards the vessels of Task Force Alpha still gave a strong jolt. On the faltering bridge, Heathrow continued to give his next orders. “All zones, report damage status! Keep firing beam interference missiles! Fire short-distance anti-missiles!”

* * *

“The enemies have fired beam interference missiles and have begun to retreat.”

The report from Pezun’s control crew satisfied Cod, who nodded his head. Cray, sitting beside him, gazed enthusiastically at the ongoing battle on the monitor.

“Tosh, the situation is not that serious. There’s no need to deploy the mobile suit troops.”

“Oh, I’m more worried about when the enemies fall out of the range of our beam weapons. That could give us some some trouble.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The enemy won’t dare try to do anything so reckless until their main reinforcements arrive. If they do try to break through the defense network, they’ll do it with mobile suits. But no mobile suit is capable of accelerating that quickly. Judging by their size and status, they seem to be just a standard dispatch fleet. I doubt they would have a mobile armor on board.”

“You’re too optimistic, Brave. I’ve seen such high speed interceptor-type mobile suits before.”

“You mean the Zeta? That’s not a mass-produced model. Besides, that was the Argama’s all-star, and it was destroyed during the battle for the Colony Laser.”

“No. I hear the Federation has developed a mass-produced variant, as well as several new models. If they tested them in secrecy...”

“Indeed. The enemy Josh fought earlier had the firepower of a capital ship.”

“If a suit like that attacked SOL, we’d lose all our combat platforms. I think we’d better strengthen SOL’s defense.”

“Heh. There’s no need to worry. Even if they do have a suit like that, there can’t be more than one of them. Besides, mobile suits with high firepower that usually have crappy maneuverability.”

“Let’s hope you’re right. I don’t want to regret it right before I die. Brave, it’s already been eight years since the War began. In eight years, technology can advance ten-fold. A mobile suit with both high firepower and high mobility isn’t out of the question.”

“One as good as our own Xeku Zwei? I’m afraid the only pilots who are capable of handling such a high performance suit are on our side. If the enemy deploys such a mobile suit, we’ll counter it with our Xeku Zwei alone!”

Cod was the kind of man who refused to change his opinion once he set his mind to it. Perhaps that was tied to the air of arrogance every elite pilot possessed. In this era, Cray’s character could be considered the opposite of Cod’s.

* * *

Task Force Alpha continued to fire beam interference missiles in an attempt to get out of the firing range of Pezun’s cannon. While the gas produced by the beam interference missiles weakened the intensity of beam weapons, hiding within the gas unfortunately also meant that returning firing with beam weapons was impossible. Thus, the upcoming battle could only be fought with missiles.

However, the missiles were practically unguided rockets, each volley lacking accuracy and confidence. The missiles were fired continuously, their ignition tubes set to explode at a specific time and form a web of explosions. When the missile exploded, the resulting shrapnel was its own defense mechanism. Achieving results with this kind of missile combat was near impossible.

“Two smart missiles have broken through the web! They’re heading for the *Geaong* and the *Chanty*!” The spotter screamed from the monitor. Two of the six satellite-guided missiles had somehow managed to survive the initial blast from the cruiser’s main cannon. The *Geaong* was located in front of the *Pegasus III*, the *Chanty* behind and to its left.

“Prepare to launch a second volley!” Heathrow ordered.

“It’s too late!”

On the bridges of the two targeted *Salamis Kai* class cruisers, the *Geaong* and the *Chanty*, the ships’ artillery officers hurriedly switched over their fleet defense systems to individual cruiser control. They loaded each missile point with anti-missiles, aiming them towards the approaching satellite-guided missiles. Because cruisers far less maneuverable than mobile suits, which were capable of quick directional changes, it was too late for the cruisers to change their flight paths. Their only remaining option was to meet the challenge head on.

“C’mo...!”

The other cruisers’ crew members, including those on board the *Pegasus III*, were praying for the safety of the two endangered cruisers.

The continuously-fired anti-missiles hit their targets, gradually tearing away at the satellite-guided missiles’ coverings. However, it was impossible to slow their acceleration.

“If only we could alter their flight pattern just a bit...”

The fleet crew’s hopes were in vain. Even though the satellite-guided missiles were slowly being torn apart, they continued to charge towards the two cruisers. The control center on the *Geaong*’s bridge took a direct hit. The firing point on the *Chanty*’s front-left hull was pierced, and the shrapnel from the impact struck the cruiser’s main body.

The crew on board the *Pegasus III* shook their heads and sighed. For a moment, the communication channels were filled with sighs. *Kaboom...* the satellite-guided missiles continued to pierce deep into the cruisers’ hulls. Although they were cruisers, the armor plating of space vessels was paper thin compared to that of old Naval vessels.

Space vessels' primary defenses consisted of beam interference missiles and their hulls' anti-beam coating. The web of fire produced by the anti-missile missiles (AMM) protected against incoming enemy missiles. Another method of avoiding incoming missiles was to simply accelerate past them. The ships had practically no ability to absorb damage, and thus were in critical condition if struck by a large object. Although the conditions of battle on board a space cruiser appeared similar to those at sea, in reality they were closer to that of a submarine battle.

"The *Geaong* and *Chanty*... have been sunk," the spotter reported to Heathrow in an unnatural tone.

Two of the cruisers under the lead cruiser's command, under the attack of satellite-guided missiles, had begun to retreat. Upon moving to the lead cruiser's rear, these two unfortunate vessels had become two large globes of fire.

"Hurry to save the survivors of the *Geaong* and the *Chanty*."

"Commander, there can't be any survivors," Mannings said through his helmet, his eyes closed tightly.

"What a tragedy. Two vessels' worth of troops sacrificed, just like that."

"I disagree. For your first time commanding a fleet in battle, Major, to have lost only two of five cruisers is considered almost too good a result.

"Only two cruisers?! How are you counting?! Don't you know how many men have died?! Are all you old veterans this heartless?!"

"Major, you still don't understand the battlefield. This isn't a battle with plastic models. If you insist on maintaining such ancient views, then don't expect to live very long. If the main command cruiser had been hit instead, the entire fleet would have lost its ability to communicate. *That* would've been a true tragedy."

"We are now out of the enemies' effective firing range," the navigator interrupted their conversation.

"Commander, it's time to commence the second stage of our survival plan," Mannings said emotionlessly.

"Do you want to cause even more damage?"

"We need to do it so no more sacrifices will have to be made."

"No. I want to wait for the main reinforcements to arrive."

"We should instead concern ourselves with the opportunity that's now in front of us, Fleet Commander. This is the perfect time for a surprise attack. Our enemies are currently belittling us. If we're daring enough, and seize this chance, we can defeat them easily."

Mannings's forthcoming tone made Heathrow feel as though he was being laughed at by the entire crew for his uselessness. His face turned red with anger.

"Alright, Captain Mannings, we'll follow your plan. Get ready. You'll take the responsibility of commanding the mobile suit troops for this battle."

Trying to push away responsibility? No wonder he's a graduate of the Advance Officer's School, Mannings thought. Just after losing two cruisers, the rookie only cares about his own future and is trying to push all the blame onto me. Anyway, I got the chance I wanted. I definitely won't fail, 'cause if I do, I'd be letting the troops on the Geaong and Chanty die in vain.

"Yes, sir. I, Captain Stole Mannings, will deploy the S Gundam, Z-Pluses, and FAZZs from our mobile suit compliment for this battle."

Two hours later, the *Pegasus III*'s sun deck launched a strange mobile suit called the S Gundam. Its pilot was Ryu Roots. The next-generation machine could be equipped with several different loadouts. Attached to the lower half of the body was a gigantic rocket thruster, the kind of high-acceleration thruster used by cruisers to travel long distances. Next to the S Gundam were two machines called Z-Pluses. A variant of the Zeta Gundam intended for mass-production, they were

currently in waverider mode, hiding any humanoid characteristics.

“Understand? Roots, your only objective is the SOL7804 satellite. That’s all I care about.”

“Got it. I’ve been waiting for this for way too long. The cruiser battle was boring as hell. Shoulda sent me out earlier!” Roots told Mannings confidently while observing the 360-degree panoramic monitor panel.

A little confidence is a good thing. We’re depending on him, Mannings thought. It’s best to let him use that arrogance in battle.

“Controls are the same as in the simulator. Ready when you are!”

Before the end of the sentence, the two Z-Plus units took off from the deck simultaneously.

“The Z-Plus squadron will cover you. One minute after the FAZZ squadron opens fire, accelerate and break through.”

“I know. I remember, dammit. Hurry up and lemme launch!”

As if it heard Roots’ request, the Pegasus III’s catapult system slowly retreated to the launching position and began to vibrate.

Approximately one hundred kilometers away from the *Pegasus III*, Crypt’s FAZZ squadron, which had been deployed first, hid behind a group of asteroids and finished up their attack preparations. The monitor started the mission countdown timer.

Four... Three... Two... One... Zero.

“*Fire!*”

Crypt gave the order. The three mobile suits in the FAZZ squadron began the bombardment by firing their high-mega beam cannons.

”S Gundam, Ryu Roots, launching!”

As the FAZZ squadron began their bombardment, S Gundam followed the trail of two the Z-Pluses from behind and launched into space.

The S Gundam used the magnetic acceleration force produced by the launch, along with the acceleration of its cruiser-class thruster, to gradually catch up to the Z-Pluses that had launched first. They formed up in a *V* as they headed towards the area the FAZZ squadron had secured.

“Alright! Let’s go!”

The Z-Plus units broke left and right. Roots stomped on the S Gundam’s acceleration pedal and the thruster boomed. The strong *g*-force generated by the accelerator forced Roots firmly into the pilot seat. In the blink of an eye, the S Gundam overtook the two Z-Pluses in front of it, inverting the initial *V* formation.

“It’s powerful!”

“This is way too fast!”

“W-what kinda mobile suit *is* that?!”

Crypts couldn’t help but stammer as he saw the S Gundam pull a long trail of smoke, as if it was a charging comet.

“G-god d-dammit, w-what a h-horrib-ble a-accel-ler-ration r-rate!”

Inside the S Gundam’s cockpit, Roots found his situation highly unenjoyable, despite the fact that he was wearing a pilot suit and sitting in a floating chair control system that countered the effects of the *g*-force. The S Gundam’s design team, in order to achieve maximum performance, had deemed the pilot’s comfort unimportant.

* * *

Unable to give in to Cod's optimistic views, Cray boarded his Xeku Eins and flew towards SOL. He received a laser transmission on the way.

"Tosh! If what you say is true, they've begun long range bombardment! There are three lines of fire!"

It was Cod's voice.

"Where from?"

"It's still being calculated. Wait, this is impossible..."

"What is it?"

"There's something! It's approaching at an unbelievable speed! Is it a mobile armor...? Impossible, it's only the size of a mobile suit!"

Indeed, Cray thought. The enemy possesses a next-generation weapon design.

"Brave, hurry and deploy the mobile suit squadron to intercept!"

Cray then quickly accelerated his Xeku Eins and headed to SOL.

Heeding Cray's advice, Cod deployed Offshore's first assault squadron and Lt. Fast Side's fourth assault squadron. Eighteen Xeku Eins were sent towards SOL to intercept the strange mobile suit.

* * *

"Dammit! Gah! Argh!"

The S Gundam continued straight forward, despite the surrounding area full of satellite-guided missile clusters, cutting across space towards SOL. Ryu had begun to break out into a cold sweat inside the cockpit.

"We can't keep up with the S Gundam." West grinded his teeth tightly, still hoping that his Z-Plus could catch up with the suit quickly pulling away.

"Sure he even needs cover?" Second Lieutenant Sigman Shade complained from within his suit.

In the blink of an eye, the three mobile suits reached the area where the firing platforms were set up.

"S-SOL... Whe-ere is it...?!"

Roots tried his best to lift his head up from the pressure of the g-forces and checked out the numbers appearing on the 360-degree panoramic monitor panel.

Noting the estimated time until he reached his target, Roots activated the weapons control system and began to choose and load his weapons.

"A-Alright! I-I've... got-ta... s-score... a c-c-critical... h-hit...!"

Ringling noises started to form behind his ear membrane.

Whether or not we take out SOL comes down to this shot...

"We can't! We couldn't get a lock on it!"

Cod yelled. The floating platform's targeting system could not keep up with the S Gundam's speed. Every shot had gone astray.

"The enemy craft has breached the last line of defense!" There was a lack of calmness in the control crew member's voice.

"Please! We can only depend on you!"

Cod began to scream into the microphone on the commander's chair. After receiving his orders via a laser line, the mobile suit troops scattered and surrounded SOL, forming a defense line. They started shooting wildly with their rifles, despite not knowing when the enemy would appear.

"...Eight seconds... Nine seconds..." Offshore counted silently in his heart to ten. Finally, a spark of light appeared in the darkness of the void. "It's here!"

Sensing the appearance of his enemy, Offshore set his rifle to fully automatic mode and emptied the entire cartridge of bullets as he turned his mobile suit around, facing down, and let the Xeku Eins evade from below.

"C'mon! Urgh!"

The S Gundam's targeting system registered a light in the distance. It was SOL. The Gundam's firing system had already been preprogrammed with the necessary information to distinguish targets.

Kalabong!

The beam smart gun's crosshairs appeared instantly. Minovsky particles began to form into a massive source of energy. In a moment, it disappeared into the darkness of space, headed toward SOL. The two Z-Pluses then too opened fire.

Clang, clang, clang...

"Dam-m-mit-t-t!"

Enemy bullets struck the S Gundam's armor, but its speed nullified their effect.

BREE...

The beam pierced the darkness and headed towards SOL. Two additional beams of light followed behind it. The first beam pierced cleanly through SOL's gray covering and tore apart its internal structure. The next two beams headed straight towards the position Offshore had been defending earlier. One of the beams of light pierced through a Xeku Eins from the first assault squadron. The sound of the pilot's dying scream filling Offshore's cockpit.

"If I had been just a bit slower, I would have been..."

Offshore felt a chill rise up his spine, followed by anger from witnessing the death of one of his squadmates. His death did not sadden him; rather, Offshore felt that he had lost a valuable and useful pawn. Such an opinion had most likely been subconsciously inherited from Cray.

"Don't let him escape!"

After sorting out his feelings, Offshore aimed his rifle at the targets. The screen displayed three globes of light that gradually grew bigger as he neared them.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Loud noises and vibrations were heard and felt. Gunfire was concentrated on the strange mobile suit being followed by a trail of light.

"T-this is their elite interceptor squadron! Argh!"

Roots, having charged into battle, began to curse Mannings. He was starting to lose control of his bladder, but the machine was still accelerating and would not stop until it cleared this section of the galaxy. It would not stop at all.

“Left arm's plating has been hit!”

Even though Roots kept telling himself it was no big deal, his body thought otherwise. A warm sensation passed over his lap. Though the beam smart gun's recharge time was only a fraction of a second, Roots still felt anxious. Once it had recharged, the S Gundam immediately fired a second shot and blew a Xeku Eins to pieces.

In front of Offshore, a second Xeku Eins exploded. He then saw a Xeku quickly evade two beams. It was Cray's unit.

Balong...

Three mobile suits flew past the New Desides' mobile suit troops at an astonishing speed, leaving the wreckage of destroyed mobile suits and the pierced SOL behind.

“Are we... are we really this powerless?”

Offshore was stunned. “What kind of mobile suit was that? Don't tell me a new machine just whipped our hard-trained, elite pilots just like that!”

“All commanders, identify the destroyed mobile suit!”

Cray's order brought Offshore to his senses. All of the New Desides mobile suit pilots participating in the battle shared Offshore's doubts.

It was inevitable that their training, which had cultivated new techniques and confidences, would now be doubted.

After leaving the battlefield and activating their automated propulsion devices, the S Gundam and the Z-Plus squadron orbited the area around the battlefield's safe zone for an hour before finally returning to the *Pegasus III*.

“It's damaged pretty badly,” Roots mentioned after seeing the S Gundam's battle-ridden upper body. However, because of the Z-Pluses' lower-quality armor, the S Gundam's damage was much less severe. If the two suits were to take the same amount of hits at the same speed, the S Gundam would take more damage, due to its higher acceleration speed. If he had been in a GM III or Nero mass-production model, Roots would not have dreamed of surviving.

After returning to the mobile suit deck, Roots quickly headed to the crew cabin. He felt cold and wet between his legs.

“Hey, hero. You did well!” Crypt rushed back, cutting in front of Roots.

“The battle was a success. Their defensive capabilities are weakened tremendously, now that SOL is no longer a factor.”

Mannings too walked in to the restroom and patted Roots's shoulder.

“You make it sound so easy! You're tryin' to send me to my death, aren't you, you bastard?!” The overbearing attitude Roots had held before launch was nowhere to be seen.

Mannings headed towards him and spoke softly into his ear. “Go clean up, pants-pissing hero.”

“Y-you bastard! Don't screw with me!”

“It's nothing to be ashamed of. It happens to a lot of rookies when they first go into battle,” Mannings said, raising an eyebrow.

Over the next two days, both Task Force Alpha and the New Desides attempted to investigate and reconnoiter the other's activities. The tension was building. However, another battle did not break out. The two sunken Task Force Alpha ships, the *Geaong* and the *Chanty*, had been replaced by two cruisers from Side 5, the *Ulysess* and the *Cumberland*. The fleet once again assumed the formation it had taken when it had left Earth.

On the other side, Federation Headquarters had finally decided to use military force to settle the Pezun and New Desides conflict. A short period of peace would preside before the attack on Pezun would begin.

Chapter 4

THE CONQUEST OF PEZUN

WITH SOL DESTROYED, the firing platform's energy source was now cut off. Pezun's defense line had no choice but to reduce its scope. Not willing to see its defense be reduced to such a weakened state, the New Desides began to formulate and execute an anti-invasion defense plan.

On the opposing side, upon receiving Task Force Alpha's report that Pezun had been strengthened, the Earth Federation Forces decided to send a fleet from the Earth to suppress them. The X Dispatch Fleet, under the command of Commander Brian Aeno, was chosen to be the herald for the mission.

Within the Federation Forces, veteran Brian Aeno was more commonly referred to as the Bald Eagle Admiral. Now that he once again commanded an active unit, his military career was given a new turning point following his transfer to the Federation Forces' Advance Officer's School as a principal, and thus his taking leave of the active forces for a short time. Although the Federation government did not always approve of the way Aeno went about his business, the operation would benefit greatly from his popularity within the Forces.

Despite the Federation's decision to suppress the New Desides with military force, they had secretly hoped that they could convince the New Desides to surrender, and thus achieve victory without firing a single shot. Therefore, Aeno's true role in the operation was to use his popularity to come to terms with the enemy.

However, no one had expected that such an assignment would inspire a betrayal.

"During the Gryps campaign, the Federation's combat abilities had been weakened, and we lacked experienced commanding officers among the active forces," stated the Federation government when they heard the military had agreed to put Aeno at the head of the operation.

A young operations officer on board the small ship was shaken by the majestic view presented to him. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for him.

The cruisers stationed at Solomon had rushed to rendezvous with the fleet from Earth at the low-orbit Federation space station Penta. The small ship was towing a large crate towards the X Dispatch Fleet's connection dock that was set to launch in one hour.

Because his only orders from his superior were to deliver the crate to the cruiser *Bull Run*, the officer was unaware of what was stored inside it. Judging by its size, it seemed to hold a mobile suit or some other type of large weapon.

The operations officer began to daydream out of boredom. Before departing from port, would it be necessary to recalculate the propulsion and combustion rate of the fuel because of the object the cruiser towed? The header of the delivery note read, "New 'G' Equipment." The odds were that 'G' referred to a code name, or possibly to the word "gun". In the end, however, the operations officer's mission was only to deliver the crate. What was stored inside it was none of his business.

Along with the two *Magellan Kai* class cruisers *Bull Run* and *Nagato*, eight *Salamis Kai* class cruisers were moored on the other side of the port. They were the *Pasadena*, the *Volgograd*, the *Panama II*, the *Kashima*, the *Brasilia*, the *Danang*, the *Stockholm*, and the *Dortmun*. Additionally, two *Columbus Kai* class transport ships, the *Iwo Jima* and the *Ivan Rogov*, would transport the fleet's mobile suits. Rounding off the fleet were six *Columbus* class transport ships, more or less mission standards. Surrounding the fleet were countless busied small operations ships.

Admiral Aeno's flag of command was raised on the *Bull Run*, denoting the cruiser as the fleet's flagship. *Magellan* class cruisers were equipped with the ability to hold and launch mobile suits. They were equivalent to the Naval aircraft carriers of the past.

Aeno sat in his personal office and smelled a distinct odor that consisted of something mixed with rotten onions. It was a smell present only on old cruisers, and brought about many memories. The interior of newly constructed cruisers such as the

Pegasus III smelled only of fresh paint, rubber, and metal. Only battle worn cruisers carried their own unique smell.

Because of the differences between military and civilian craft, the comfort of the passengers in these ships was not considered a principal concern, and so traditional military cruisers had poor air conditioning systems. The stench of the crew could get so bad that even air fresheners could not mask the smell. The air inside the cockpit of a mobile suit wasn't any better. The only thing worse than this aroma was the smell of the insides of the crew's normal suit helmets. As a result, veteran soldiers often joked about how excellent officers smelled worse than beggars.

Aeno, reminiscing about the past, recalled a man who had traveled to Earth to visit him a month ago.

At first, the man had stated that he was an employee of Anaheim Electronics. Judging from his slim build, it was obvious that he had grown up in a low gravity environment. Because he was not used to bright sunlight, he wore sunglasses everywhere he went on Earth. He constantly stared at the ground when he walked, another habit of a colonist, as they were not used to the Earth's gravity.

His unkempt black shirt made it seem as though he was not conducting public business. However, Aeno sensed a military presence about the man. His face lacked any prominent features. The best way one could describe him would be to say that the corners of his face were slightly more profound than those of the average person.

Aeno told him to sit down, then said, "Let's get straight to the point. I've been pretty busy lately preparing to go back to space."

"Excuse me, sir, but do you consider yourself a Spacenoid?"

"I consider myself a true, blue Earthnoid. Is such a greeting common on the Moon?"

The man drew back the corners of his mouth and smiled. He then revealed his identity. He said his surname was Saotome, and that he was a member of the Instructor's Corp. that Aeno was fighting against.

"In that case, I'd like you to send a message to Cod and Cray asking them to voluntarily surrender themselves in order to avoid further conflict. I don't wish to see such outstanding soldiers such as you all sacrificed for nothing."

"We will not voluntarily surrender. I took the risk of being arrested by the Federation to come to Earth so that you, sir, could understand our intentions. We believe we will win because we know the Federation is finding it difficult to find many pilots who can match the skills of the Instructor's Corp. You should be aware of this as well, sir."

Saotome then explained in detail why the Instructor's Corp. was participating in the operation.

"We are aware that we are committing hara-kiri for the Earth and for Earthnoids. This, sir, you must realize..."

Hara-kiri. It was something only Japanese samurai did, but the person facing him was most likely of Western descent. And yet Saotome's explanation carried a unique charm that caused Aeno to approve of their point of view, most likely because he was also unable to find any incentive within the Federation. The current Earth Federation was no longer a military fighting against similar military forces. Deep inside the old Admiral's heart, the vigor to spill his blood on the battlefield still remained. However, the veteran frowned upon the uselessness of the Federation government, and thus, he became more and more interested in what Saotome had to say.

"Establishing a political power on the Moon? Captain Cray aspires to do too much."

Saotome of the Instructor's Corp. began to see sparks of interest form in Aeno's eyes.

* * *

While waiting for the reinforcement fleet, Task Force Alpha's mobile suit squadron took turns to hone their combat abilities. Even though the pilots of the Gundam series on board the *Pegasus III* had gained combat experience, their proficiency was still substandard in Captain Mannings's eyes, especially that of Ryu Roots. His coordination was extremely poor, and so more emphasis was placed on this area during training.

“Roots! Form up with the FAZZ and Z-Plus squadrons!”

Once they received Mannings’s order, the S Gundam moved ahead of the two Z-Pluses. At their rear, the three FAZZs formed up in a row. The six suits had formed a right triangle.

“Now, alternating the start and end sequence, form up in groups of three in an arrowhead formation.” The orders were transmitted one at a time, making Roots feel vexed and impatient. He had always hated receiving orders, and this held true now more than ever.

“Mannings, you bastard...” He cursed silently.

“Roots! Ryu Roots! Are you listening?!”

While Roots complained to himself, the other five mobile suits went into formation. He had no choice but to quickly move the S Gundam to the front-left of West’s Z-Plus.

“Quit fucking around! You’re not cut out to be a pilot! Just quit the Forces already! You woulda been shot at least two or three times by now! The enemies won’t wait for you! If you die, I’m not gonna write a letter to your parents saying ‘Sorry, your son has died in battle!’ Instead, I’m just gonna tell ‘em, ‘The entire fleet was destroyed because your son’s retarded!’”

Right as the words left his mouth, Mannings remembered that he had read up on Roots’ family background in his case file, and realized he had made a bad mistake.

His speech had certainly incited Roots’ anger.

“My parents have been dead for years, you old fuck!” Roots knew that only he was at fault for the situation at hand, but the Federal Forces were the ones who had snatched the lives of both his parents. He took to heart not only Mannings’ words, but also the laughter of his comrades. His pride had been deeply injured.

“Is all you can do just bark from the bridge?! If you’re so great--if you’ve got any balls--get your ass out here and fight me yourself!”

“So you want to duel? Interesting. Alright. Z-Plus and FAZZ squadrons, return to the cruiser immediately. Roots, try to not piss your pants this time.”

“You... Don’t fuck with me!”

The five other mobile suits left the S Gundam’s side and, following the greenish-white navigation guides, flew onto the return path back to the cruiser.

“Take care, buddy,” Crypt transmitted from his FAZZ before he left.

At this time, each of the ships belonging to the X Dispatch Fleet that Admiral Aeno was commanding were being fitted with afterburners that were to be used to take them to Pezun, where they would begin their operation after leaving orbit.

There was one other detail that was not mentioned in the mission schedule. Before the cruiser *Bull Run* departed, a mobile suit crate was loaded onto it. The crate’s label read “New ‘G’ Equipment” and referred to what rested inside--a Gundam. This suit had originally meant to be used during the battle for the Colony Laser, but had never been deployed in a real battle, and was instead kept inside Penta’s warehouse.

However, the traitors of Pezun had suddenly decided that each of the experimental Gundam models, including the S Gundam currently on board the *Pegasus III*, were to be deployed in actual battle. The soldiers’ decision to forego saving these pieces for economic development in favor of using every piece at their disposal could best be attributed to their curious and adventurous nature.

“What’s this? You can’t find me? Roots!”

Upon receiving Mannings’s transmission, Roots’ inability to find his commander, despite his constant searching, made him

feel uneasy.

Where is that old fool? Thought Roots. He then felt the S Gundam's left foot vibrate slightly. "Dammit! From over there--?!"

"Shut down the functions of your left foot! It's finished!"

The S Gundam's left foot was covered in red from the paint round.

Mannings shouted as his Nero Trainer mobile suit charged from the lower left of the S Gundam to its upper right. Before Roots knew what was happening, the Nero maneuvered around to the S Gundam's rear. Roots quickly spun around to fire, but Mannings dodged and easily shot another paintball at the S Gundam's cockpit.

"You have already lost this battle, Roots!"

Roots went silent. Based on performance data, the S Gundam was clearly a superior mobile suit. Could it be that piloting techniques could overcome such an advantage? Ironically, the situation was reversed in their battles against the New Desides' mobile suit pilots.

"I want a rematch! Gimme another shot, Manning!"

Roots did not realize that this was the first time since he joined the Federal Forces that he had opened his heart to a superior's order. Seeing such a change in his pupil made Mannings very happy.

"Okay, we'll do it one more time."

This little punk is serious. He's finally realized that battles aren't about being a hero. Mannings frowned his brow and laughed alone.

* * *

March 6, Universal Century 0088. The X Dispatch Fleet had left Penta two days ago. It had been five days since SOL had been breached.

Admiral Aeno sat in the high chair on the *Bull Run*'s bridge and glanced at the cruiser's commander. Nearly all of the *Bull Run*'s crew were Aeno's trusted aides, and thus he possessed the control rights to the vessel. The dispatch fleet was too far from Penta to be pursued.

"Admiral." The cruiser commander passed the microphone into Aeno's hand. The two of them then nodded at each other.

"Calling all members of the Earth Federation Forces' X Divisional Fleet. I am Brian Aeno. From this point on, my cruiser will not receive any further orders from the Federal Forces' Main Command Office and will be joining forces with the New Desides' Instructor's Corp.

I humbly feel that the New Desides' cause is a righteous one. They advocate that the Earth Sphere belongs to us Earthnoids, and that the only truth is that which is based on the interests of Earthnoids. The Spacenoids' continual gain of power throughout our past conflicts has caused the Earth Federation to degenerate to nothing more than a puppet controlled by those living in space. I am confident that any and every true Earthnoid will understand my sentiments.

My objective in doing this is not to revolt against the Federation Government or the Earth Federation Forces. The true Earth Federation Forces should fight courageously for Mother Earth! The One Year War should have opened your eyes as to whose cause is truly just: not the Spacenoids', but our own.

Those who do not agree with my humble decision may freely leave the fleet within the next twelve hours. For those who are proud to be an Earthnoid in their hearts, I beg you to continue this fight at my side. I expect all of you to make the right decision. Long live the Earth Federation! End transmission."

The transmission ended with an uproar of applause from the *Bull Run*'s bridge crew.

However, at the same time, the members of the fleet had begun to question their consciences. Had the Admiral gone crazy? Calls of inquiry were made continuously to the *Bull Run*. Once they had finally realized that Aeno was serious, the other

cruisers began to communicate amongst themselves, each making their own decision.

“The *Pasenena* and the *Danang* have decided to separate from the fleet,” the cruiser commander conveyed to Aeno after reading the reports gathered by the communications room.

The admiral nodded his head and said, “The individuals who wish to leave the fleet may board the transport ship.”

Aeno’s status as the principal of the Federation Forces’ Advance Officer’s School was most likely what had prevented more than only two cruisers from leaving the fleet. Nearly every senior officer within the fleet was a student of his.

Twelve hours later, the *Pasedena* and the *Danang* left the fleet leading two Columbus class transport ships. The incident would later be referred to as the Admiral’s planned betrayal.

Upon receiving news of Aeno’s betrayal, the Earth Federation Forces headquarters was thrown into disarray. The enemy had already retreated into a region that was difficult to pursue them through. Additionally, the sudden betrayal of such a large fleet subverted the plan to suppress Pezun.

Aeno’s fleet slowly headed towards the rear of Task Force Alpha. If they were to exchange fire, Task Force Alpha would be wiped out. News of the Admiral’s betrayal was immediately relayed to Task Force Alpha’s ears.

“What?! You’re saying our main reinforcements are now our enemies all of a sudden?!”
The news made Heathrow’s body feel weak. “What did the Commander in Chief say?”

“Task Force Alpha, leave your current airspace immediately. Pursue Aeno’s fleet before the Moon Orbital Fleet is launched.”

“The Moon Orbital Fleet...”

The Moon Orbital Fleet’s headquarters was set up in the lunar city of Von Braun. The fleet’s primary purpose was to patrol commercial transportation routes. Even though its combat abilities could not compare to those of an Earth fleet, it was the only fleet currently available to fight against Aeno.

While the Earth Federation headquarters hoped that the Moon Orbital Fleet would stop Aeno, it also hoped that it would act as Aeno’s replacement and continue on to Pezun. On the other side, the Y and Z dispatch fleets that were still stationed at Penta were busy undergoing preparations for launch, realizing that what had been a Federation domestic dispute had gradually turned into a real battle. The situation had quickly turned violent.

The Federation, which had lacked the ability to prevent the conflict between the Titans and AEUG during the Gryps War, had now lost its last bit of authority.

* * *

“Please, allow me to launch a guerilla attack. I only need an observation vessel and I’m ready,” implored Drake Pashuray.

“What do you say, Tosh?” Cod asked Cray, who was standing at his side.

“How do you withstand large cruisers with just an observation vessel? You can’t! Besides, we’re not strong enough. It’s impossible to split up our military forces with our lack of troops.” Cray turned and glared icily at Drake, one of the main participants in the coup that had founded the New Desides.

“Feeling a little timid, are we?” Cod asked Drake.

Because the Federation had simultaneously changed their transmission code and jammed all laser transmissions, the New Desides were unable to fully comprehend the current situation. Earlier, when they had dispatched Saotome to Earth to try to win Aeno’s heart, they had not expected Aeno to defect so quickly. The mission’s original objective had been to buy more time. Even now, everybody still believed that the fleet under Aeno’s command was preparing to invade Pezun. To the New Desides troops, the strength of Aeno’s fleet was unmatched. There was a chance, some of the troops thought, that some of the more feeble-minded soldiers could take this chance to surrender to the Federation Forces.

"I'm not feeling timid at all. It's just that the floating firing platforms have been wiped out. I was thinking of relying on charging fearlessly into the Pezun invasion path and taking on the responsibility of firing the cannon. I don't need the mobile suit squadron."

"Drake, that's even more reason to deny your request. We cannot let this kind of operation split up the remaining vessels we have."

Cray stared after Drake as he left the commander's office.

"Monitor him closely. He lacks courage."

"I agree, Tosh. The troops' morale is starting to waver. If this mutual confrontation continues, morale will collapse completely. Therefore--"

"Are you talking about gaining respect? Indeed, an organization requires discipline. What's more, we still have to push on to the next stage of our plan. You intend to make an example of Drake, no?"

"Indeed. We must show the troops what true loyalty is."

"I understand. Leave it to me and Josh. Regarding the upcoming plan, Cod, I was thinking of how to use Pezun and that toy."

"Oh? How?"

"After we escape, leave Pezun to the enemy. Once the enemy fleet approaches the empty city, we'll ignite the nuclear warhead. That'll hit 'em hard."

"I see. We'll need someone to cover our retreat first, though."

"We'll use Drake as a decoy. We'll give him a meaningful death so that nobody will suspect anything."

Cray's blue eyes shined deceptively.

"And you're sure no loopholes will be exposed?"

"This is to ensure that we make full use of every last bit of our combat abilities. Besides, his sacrifice is for our justice."

"But will we be able to establish contact with Ayers City once we retreat?"

"That's Saotome's job. If he's successful, we'll receive his communication capsule. Isn't it ironic that we're once again returning to communicating with carrier pigeons?"

Cray took out an optical disc and waved it around. "Hmm. I'm confident the enemy won't descend upon the Moon's surface. We can still win."

"Fleet Commander! We have received a transmission from the Moon Orbital Fleet!"

Under his orders, Heathrow led the fleet to another corner of Pezun, an empty region 180 degrees opposite it. All ships were in first stage combat status to defend against a raid from Aeno's fleet. They then received another laser transmission.

"Grr."

"We cannot find any traces of Aeno's fleet. It seems they have altered their flight path."

"Altered their flight path? He didn't head towards Pezun...? Impossible!"

"Once the Moon Orbital Fleet rendezvouses with ours, commence the Pezun invasion operation."

“That’s insane! What’ll we do if, during the attack, Aeno’s fleet ambushes us from behind?!”

According to traditional combat tactics, Heathrow’s concerns were well founded. However, the Federation was thinking only of settling this conflict as quickly as possible.

Nine hours later, eight vessels from the Moon Orbital Fleet arrived in Pezun’s airspace. Their operation had long been planned by the Federation Forces Commanding Office. Simply put, the two fleets would simultaneously attack Pezun: one from the front, and one from the rear.

Around the same time, they received an emergency transmission from Side 4 stating that they had discovered Aeno’s fleet and were engaging their forces. The patrol had already lost two cruisers. After the skirmish had ended, AEUG vessels were sent to Side 5 to undergo urgent repairs. Though its defensive abilities were stronger than in the past, the Federation had suffered tremendous damage, and thus did not have any intentions to pursue the fleet. After the battle, Aeno’s fleet once again vanished without a trace.

“I wonder where Aeno’s fleet is headed. The Moon, maybe? Or Side 3? Perhaps Solomon...?”

Each potential destination for Aeno’s fleet seemed to be a possibility. However, for now at least, he could rest for a moment. During the invasion of Pezun, there was no need to worry about a surprise attack from behind.

However, it would later be revealed that the engagement between Aeno’s fleet and Side 4’s defense forces had carried with it another purpose.

“We will launch the invasion tomorrow, the 7th, at Earth Standard Time 0600 hours. The attack will be divided into two stages: cruiser assault and mobile suit assault.

Heathrow relayed the Commanding Office’s order to the rest of the troops. He still wondered where Aeno’s fleet was headed.

The next day, March 7.

All of the mobile suit pilots involved in the operation had gathered in the *Pegasus III*’s pilot lounge. Along with the pilots of the S Gundam, the two Z-pluses and the three FAZZs, a squadron of three Nero pilots was present as well. The commander of the Nero squadron, Lieutenant Chung Yung, was also a veteran soldier. As Roots’s generation saw it, he was just another irritating old-timer like Mannings.

Mannings began to cover the battle plan in detail. “At 0600 hours, both my fleet and the Moon Orbital Fleet will approach Pezun from its two rings and close to the effective firing range of our cruisers’ cannons. Following the third wave of cruiser fire, the mobile suit squadron will launch in sequence to occupy Pezun’s port. My vessel’s launching sequence will be as follows: Ryu Roots, S Gundam--”

“Sorry, but I’m first!”

“Hey, wanna switch with me? Last time I didn’t even get out there--it should be my turn this time!” Crypt complained.

“Attention! This is an order! It’s not your job to decide such things. Following Roots will be the two Z-Pluses...”

West’s face turned frightened. During the assault on SOL, charging through the enemies’ web of fire had been the most horrifying experience of his life.

“Hey, you okay?”

Seeing West’s expression, Crypt gave him a fierce pat on the head.

“Heh. In the end, they’re still just hoping for us to charge in first and take the blunt of their attack,” Roots commented while patting Crypt’s shoulder. The two men were then promptly punched in the chin.

“That hurt, God dammit!”

The two of them lifted their heads to see Chung Yung, the Nero squadron commander.

“You rookies. Do you two really think you’re that amazing? You’ve only done as well as you have because of your mobile suits’ performance. Seeing brainless retards like you two forming this cruiser’s main mobile suit corps makes me wanna puke. I won’t take this shit from you! If either of you spew that shit out of your mouth one more time, I’ll toss you out into space!”

“All of you, sit down!” Mannings’ furious tone managed to curb down Chung Yung, who had clearly lost his temper. However, previously-formed conflicts between comrades usually proved difficult to patch in the future.

* * *

0600, Pezun.

The darkness of the universe was suddenly torn apart by a flash of lighting. The prologue to the attack on Pezun had begun. The various vessels of Task Force Alpha and the Moon Orbital Fleet opened fire with their main cannons.

The vessels’ cannons were coordinated to fire one after another with only a fraction of a second difference between shots. One beam after another wiped out the groups of satellite-guided missiles that surrounded Pezun, blowing them to space dust. After the *Pegasus III*’s main cannon fired its third volley of shots, its linear catapult system began to sequentially launch mobile suits into battle.

The satellite-guided missiles that had managed to evade the cruiser fire started their engines and moved towards the fleets. Crypt’s FAZZ squadron targeted the missiles with their hyper mega cannons. Last time, two cruisers had been sunk before the mobile suit squadron could even be deployed. However, this time would be different.

“Heh. It’s just a bunch of rocks. Dammit, they’ve already advanced!”

After assisting the fleet disposing of the satellite-guided missiles, the FAZZ squadron rushed towards Pezun.

Roots’ S Gundam and the Z-Plus squadron had entered the battle in mobile suit form.

“That’s funny...”

After entering the range of the first firing platform, which had already been disabled, the unexplainable silence made Roots feel uncomfortable. He instinctively looked up the search data.

“From the right?!”

Just as the thought crossed his mind, a beam pierced the darkness.

The S Gundam shifted its body to the right and managed to dodge the beam.

“Dammit!” Ryu shifted his suit to face the direction from where the beam was shot.

“Ryu, don’t break formation!” It was West’s voice.

“Shut up! The enemy’s here!”

“Our mission is to conquer Pezun!”

More and more scarlet red beams appeared. One hit one of the Neros that had formed up at the rear. The suit’s body immediately exploded and turned to space dust.

“A friendly’s been shot down! I’m gonna check it out!”

The S Gundam suddenly accelerated towards the region where the beam had been shot from.

“Where are you going, Roots?! Your objective is Pezun!”

On the *Pegasus III*’s bridge, Mannings saw from the tactics display that the dot representing Roots’s suit had suddenly left the squadron. He shouted angrily through the microphone in response.

“It’s the enemies’ beam! The longer it stays active, the more friendlies we lose! Be careful! Don’t aim the cruiser’s cannon at me!”

“Your mission does not require you to consider damage to friendly units!”

Roots ignored Mannings’s instructions and continued to head forward. Under the illumination of Pezun’s explosions and the beams from the cruisers’ cannons, he vaguely saw a blue-colored mobile suit. It was a suit used specifically by the New Desides’ Instructor’s Corp.

“You son of a--!”

The two beam cannons on the S Gundam’s hips fired.

“Is it a Gundam?”

Inside the blue Xeku Eins, Josh Offshore saw the mobile suit charging towards him and spoke excitedly. Because of the distance between them, he didn’t think all the suits in the last battle at SOL were Gundams. However, he had predicted that the enemy would launch an attack, and so he started to climb upwards. The two beams glided away harmlessly below.

“You’re too weak!”

Roots said that because he felt that his opponent, Offshore, was more proficient and possessed better combat skills than he did. To prevent the Xeku Eins from dodging, the S Gundam kept charging towards it in a straight line to get in front of it.

“Huh? The Gundam pilot’s a newbie?”

Offshore could not help but laugh seeing the S Gundam in action. He felt that a load had been taken off his shoulders.

“Heh. Who cares if you’re a Gundam?!”

Offshore took aim at his target. The S Gundam was closing the distance between them.

“Based on your performance...”

The Xeku Eins’s fire control system displayed an immense amount of data.

“You have no right to declare who is strong or weak!”

The suit’s rifle sprayed out a continuous string of bullets that hit the Gundam’s chest armor within a second. At the bullets’ striking points, blue and yellow paint and fragments of Gundarium alloy began to fly around.

“Ow! Shit.”

The cockpit shook roughly. Of course, Roots himself was not injured, and had only reacted naturally.

“You must leave the battlefield. You must leave the battlefield.”

“Shut up, dammit!” Roots whined at the alert sounding in his helmet’s earpiece.

Painful...?

Agony...

Suffering...
Unhappy...
Noise...
Annoying...
Unhappy...

Roots mistook the suddenly-appearing report as a circuit error, and continued to pilot the S Gundam despite it. The Xeku Eins that was before him had vanished without a trace. While the S Gundam was moving back into firing position, the Xeku Eins had used agile movements to escape.

“Is he a rookie, or just an idiot?”

Seeing the S Gundam clumsily yet determinedly chasing him, Offshore felt a bit anxious inside. The first and second assault squadrons under his command had been assigned the task of letting the enemies believe that the New Desides were fighting to the death to protect Pezun. After destroying two or three of the enemy’s mobile suits, they would immediately withdraw and meet up with the fleet that had already launched.

Cray had also given him another task: to eliminate the traitor. No losses could be sustained in either of these missions.

“If we don’t eliminate him now, he’ll cause us trouble in the future.”

Offshore fired again, but as he did, two beams shot towards him from afar. Two triangle-shaped machines were closing in on him.

“Mass-produced Zetas!”

Cray had warned him about such a mobile suit after the attack on SOL.

“Are you okay, Ryu?” West risked disobeying military orders and left the battlefield to support Roots.

“You all are pretty damn nosy! If you wanted to help, you shoulda come earlier!”

Roots continued to put up a front and complained. The Z-Pluses transformed into mobile armor mode and charged past him in the blink of an eye. Generally, when variable machines transform into mobile armor mode, the AMBAC system does not take effect. In addition, the turning radius of such a machine in mobile armor mode is larger than it is in mobile suit mode. To be precise, this form was called Waverider mode. Once the Z-Pluses arrived to provide assistance, the Xeku Eins widened their distances by quickly moving away, and vanished in the darkness of space.

“Argh...!” West, who had charged in front of the S Gundam, could not help but yell after witnessing the scene in front of him. Directly below, from where the fleet was attacking, the New Desides fleets were moving away from Pezun at the highest speed possible.

This was not an attack, but rather an escape.

“The enemy’s escaping!” West sent out a laser transmission to the *Pegasus III* to report his findings.

“The axis of attack is directly below. Okay, got it!”

After receiving the news, Mannings quickly informed Heathrow. His intuition told him that once the fleet and mobile suits escaped, they would leave a trap behind, because Tosh Cray, a man who should never be underestimated, was in the opposing camp.

“It’s a trap! Hurry, give orders to stop the attack plan! The enemies are no longer at the Pezun installation!” Heathrow quickly made a decision and informed the participating parties via the emergency communications channel and the wide-area laser communications system.

“What? A trap?! We need to return? How’s that possible?” Even though they had received resistance in the form of a few scattered beam weapons, Crypt’s FAZZ squadron had already reached Pezun’s outer wall when they received orders to

return to base.

“I didn’t even have the chance to take out an enemy!” His tone was filled with unbounded regrets.

Heathrow decided to explain the situation later. He requested the Moon Orbital Fleet and the Federation Forces Commanding Office to change the battle plan and retreat immediately.

In the Moon Orbital Fleet's side of the warzone, a New Desides cruiser transmitted a cease fire signal while closing in on the fleet. However, the two mobile suits escorting the cruiser suddenly began to open fire at the Moon Orbital Fleet, which caused the Moon Orbital Fleet to immediately launch a counterattack, annihilating the cruiser. With that, Drake and the other New Desides traitors were wiped out. Offshore and Cray had piloted the two mobile suits on escort duty. However, other than a select few, nobody needed to be aware of such confidential information.

“What, and get discovered?!”

Cod sat on board the *Kilimanjaro*’s bridge and paid close attention to the movements of the Federation Forces’ fleet and their mobile suit squadrons. He discovered that the enemy mobile suit troops had left Pezun and returned to their individual carriers.

“We have no choice, Brave. Since our plan’s been discovered, blowing up Pezun would not yield much in the way of results. Besides, our fleet is still too close to the explosion's radius. By igniting it now, we would only hurt ourselves.”

Cray placed his hand on the furious Cod’s shoulder.

“Destroying Pezun would no longer hold any meaning.”

“No. It’s not meaningless. Such an act will display our ideology to the world.”

The New Desides fleet set sail to the “Promised Land.” It similar in concept to Moses leading the Jews from Egypt with hope for the future.

“We will destroy Pezun. It will symbolize our will to take Earth back from the Spacenoids.”

Once the fleet had reached a safe distance, Cod bowed to the ship’s crew and pressed the detonation button on the remote control. Having nowhere else to run, they could only head towards a new frontier. The officers on board the fleet saw their second home on the monitor and knew that it was their last chance to wave goodbye.

The nuclear warhead installed in Pezun was ignited, turning the asteroid into space dust.

On Earth, under the dusky sky, the light from the explosion was visible to the naked eye.

These rays of light were the will of the New Desides, marking the start of a tragedy that would drag the lunar city in.

Chapter 5

A DREAM FOR THE MOON

THE AUTONOMOUS LUNAR city Ayers was originally an observation base set on the rear side of the Moon. In time, it gradually developed a prosperous economy. The city's residents were mostly descendants of those who had worked at the observation base, yet they still strongly desired to return to Earth. However, due to the city's position, they were unable to ever glimpse the Earth. Eventually, the residents of this peculiar city began to adore the Earth and believe in the ideology of Earth's superiority. Among the many autonomous Lunar cities that promoted the independence of the colonies, Ayers City was indeed an unusual case.

During the Gryps War, and specifically, the battle to defend the Colony Laser, the residents of Ayers City, in order to increase their defensive capabilities, mobilized reserve troops and formed a police force called the Ayers City Militia. They believed that fighting for Earth was the responsibility of the residents, and so they naturally allied themselves with the Titans and provided them with a supply base positioned far from the battlefield.

As was now common knowledge, after a long, tough battle, the AEUG had emerged victorious. The defeated Ayers City Militia fleet and the Titans troops could only retreat back to Ayers City, humiliated.

Ayers City mayor Kaiser Pinefield had provided citizenship to all the troops who had come to seek shelter in Ayers City afterwards. He had rejected the Earth Federation government's request to extradite them by claiming that, through such an act, the Federation would be interfering with the politics of the autonomous city.

In Pinefield's eyes, the current Earth Federation government had become nothing more than a glorified puppet of the AEUG, and Ayers City was the last hope to restore the pride and glory of the Earth.

There was a man working silently behind this entire political backdrop. His name was Mike Saotome. However, his identity had always been shrouded in mystery, because neither his real name nor experiences fit the data recorded within the Federation Forces' database.

Shortly before Pezun's revolt, Saotome had received an order from Cray requesting him to establish negotiations with the Earth and Moon in order to stir up feelings within those in the Earth Federation Forces, like Admiral Aeno, as well as those who were unable to identify with the Federation Forces and Federation Government, such as the autonomous Lunar cities.

He was not an Instructor's Corp. mobile suit pilot, but rather an intelligence officer. Before being dispatched to the Instructor's Corp., he had served in the Federation Forces' Department of Intelligence. What Cray saw in him were his abilities.

He currently sat at a place overlooking the starry night sky, the high chair on top of an observation station.

Only the endless, eternally unchanging sky was visible in the gigantic, egg-shaped observation station made from reinforced glass. Inside, other than Saotome, not a single person was in sight. This was because the residents of Ayers City refused to gaze at the universe. Normally, they would only lift their heads if they wished to see the blue sky projected on the dome screen.

Saotome's line of sight gathered at a tiny dot of light: his homeland of Side 3. It was a space colony situated at Lagrange Point L2, which lay beyond the far side of the Moon. Originally called the Principality of Zeon, it had been renamed the Republic of Zeon after the war and subjected to strict control by the Federation Government.

"One day..." He mumbled softly to himself.

One day, the Motherland shall regain its former glory.

After the One Year War, he had changed his identity and got a record within the Federation Forces army by assuming the identity of a Federation Forces East Pacific Squadron soldier whose unit had been completely wiped out. Following the War,

the Federation Forces had increased their efforts to eliminate the remaining aggressive forces within the Zeon military. However, the irony of the situation was that those forces were currently hiding within the Federation.

After concealing themselves for eight years, the old Zeon military forces had changed their name to Neo Zeon and continuously dispatched suppression forces to various colonies. Although Haman Karn was the one who possessed true authority within Neo Zeon, she had kept Mineva Zabi, the last surviving member of the Zabi family that had dominated the Principality of Zeon, as a puppet leader to appeal to others. Nevertheless, the foundation of Neo Zeon signified the continuation of the old Principality, and everyone had hoped that, one day, the nation of old could be revived. The time would come when the Federation's strength was exhausted and weakened, and so was Saotome's true aim.

He stood up and walked toward the elevator heading to the underground residential facilities. This area was filled with twists and turns, because everyone had something to hide. The individual with the most potential would be the one to benefit from it.

* * *

Although they had not been caught directly in Pezun's explosion, the chunks of debris resulting from the explosion had caused damage to several cruisers of Task Force Alpha and the Moon Orbital Fleet.

The Moon Orbital Fleet left to dock at the nearest space colony, Side 2, to make emergency repairs.

Furthermore, the fleet had cruised continuously without rest at a high speed to participate in the battle for Pezun. Therefore, their propulsion fuel had already been depleted and required replenishing.

For that reason, Task Force Alpha received a new order from the Federation Commanding Office to pursue the New Desides fleet that had escaped. If they were to wait for all of Task Force Alpha's cruisers to regroup, they would fall behind the New Desides fleet by half to a full day of travel. As for the two Earth fleets that were dispatched to be stationed at Penta, they were to wait for the time being and launch into battle once the New Desides' destination had been determined.

It was now March 10, Universal Century 0088.

"So that's called 'castling,' huh?"

In the *Pegasus III's* Fleet Commander's cabin, the monitor displayed a white and brown, Western-style chessboard. Heathrow controlled the white side against the computer-controlled black side.

He knocked against the chessboard and swapped the positions of the King and Rook pieces. Because this kind of chess move made use of special rules, it had been given the term 'castling.'

When Heathrow swapped the positions of the King and Rook, the King retreated into a safety barrier formed by the other pieces.

"They would rather sacrifice Pezun in exchange for a chance to escape, is that it? The question is, where are they escaping to?"

Heathrow was using the movements of the pieces on the chessboard to analyze the New Desides' strategy. The Rook represented Pezun, and the King represented the New Desides troops.

"Then Aeno's fleet would be the sneaky Knight..."

Aeno's fleet, the whereabouts of which were still currently unknown, was indeed similar to the Knight in chess, as the Knight was highly mobile, and could make several different moves. The doorbell chimed softly.

"Fleet Commander, it's Captain Mannings. May I come in?" The intercom transmitted a deep voice.

"Of course. Please do." Heathrow unlocked the Fleet Commander's cabin.

"There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

“Right. Please take a seat. We've been busy ever since we left Penta. I've been wanting to find an opportunity to talk with you.”

Once Heathrow got Mannings to sit down, he asked, “What is this about?”

“Actually, it's a personal issue. I'm not sure if it could affect the strategies employed from now on, but I know someone from the opposing faction.”

“You do? Well, this is interesting. Even if it's not related to our strategy, if we can figure out the enemy's personality, that too is something important. Would you like a little something to lift your spirits? It's something from the year 12. It was requested from the clinic, probably a special privilege of the Fleet Commander.”

Heathrow turned and faced the bookshelf, on which Mannings saw a bottle of Navy rum.

Alcohol had been prohibited on board naval vessels since the Old Century. However, there were usually a few bottles of good wine commonly referred to as “seasickness medication” or “spirit lifters” locked up in cabinets at the clinic, with the key kept by the ship's captain. Even though humanity had entered the Universal Century, certain naval traditions were still unchanged.

“No, thanks. I don't drink.”

Mannings's reply caused Heathrow to feel a bit despaired. What Heathrow truly desired was not the wine itself. However, all the old veteran soldiers he knew loved alcohol, and so drinking was generally an effective means of opening up conversation. However, this tactic proved to be useless against Mannings.

“Then, let's get to the point. Who is it you know in the opposing faction?” Heathrow this time around gave Mannings a packet of vacuum-sealed red tea.

“During the last war, he and I belonged to the same unit. You could call us old war buddies. He had a sharp mind. Everyone was confused over why he, with his capabilities, would apply for a position as a mobile suit pilot. He was always talking about building an independent country that corresponded with his beliefs.”

“An independent country? That's a big statement to make. Does he want to occupy an entire colony?”

“No. When he was a student, he frequently published articles in third-rated debate magazines. I remember one of the articles having the heading “The True Spirit of the Colonies.” He advocated that humans must live on the ground, and that only by modifying and developing planets other than Earth could real space colonies be made. Only then would the colonies have the authority to declare autonomy. The current space colonies are just man-made islands in space that can only be considered Earth's islands, and so Earth should govern their economy and politics. These man-made metropolises floating in space do not have a strong enough economic foundation to speak with the Earth as their equal.”

“From a certain angle, his arguments were accurate. Indeed, some of the colonies are currently using solar powered electricity generating satellites to provide electricity for Earth, or are extracting minerals and other resources from small satellites to trade with Earth. However, these are hard to use as bargaining chips in negotiations, because even without these resources, Earth's general economy would not be disrupted. However, we cannot deny that the current autonomous state of the space colonies proves they only care to satisfy themselves.”

“Let's get to the point, Fleet Commander. I agree that, because he is among our enemies, the New Desides' final destination will most likely be the Moon.”

“I was considering that earlier, but I couldn't come to a conclusion. I used to think that the New Desides was simply an anti Federation organization, and so could possibly join forces with Side 3 or the remaining aggressive Zeons. But now, considering that man's character, such a move is highly unlikely. They are definitely different from Zeon. Specifically, they're a different type of anti-Federation organization: they're against space immigration. Furthermore, they have another chess piece at their disposal: the Knight.”

“What are you referring to?”

“Aeno’s fleet. Setting aside for the time being the reason behind the Admiral’s betrayal, his defection forced the Moon Orbital Fleet to leave their area of defense and come forth to attack Pezun, leaving the areas surrounding the Moon defenseless. Additionally, the troops stationed at Side 4 must have suffered losses, making it easier for the New Desides to begin ferrying troops to the Moon. As for the troops stationed at Side 3, they have been busy preparing their defense against Neo Zeon’s invasion, so they can’t move.” Heathrow turned his head and looked back at the chessboard on the monitor.

“So, it is the Moon. It looks like we won’t be able to avoid further bloodshed.”

“Captain Mannings, that man... Err... What’s his name?”

“He is Tosh Cray.”

“Could you tell me a bit more about him?”

* * *

After escaping from Pezun, the New Desides fleet headed towards the South side—the lower half—of the Moon.

On the other side, after doing battle with the troops stationed at Side 4, Aeno’s fleet did not head straight to the Moon, but instead hid itself in the dark L1 region to perform repairs and await a chance to rendezvous with the New Desides.

Wreckage left behind from the One Year War floated alongside space dust created during the construction of the colonies in this dark region of space. Even though the density of the region had thinned out quite a bit over the past eight years, it was unavoidable that radar equipment would still be hampered. The density of Minovsky particles was high as well, resulting in radar being rendered completely ineffective and forcing ships to navigate the region relying only on visuals. All of these factors made this the best hiding spot.

From the start, Aeno, who had sided with the New Desides faction, knew that the of the fleet’s final destination was the Moon. Thus, he hid in this region, awaiting a chance to rendezvous with the New Desides fleet.

He had expected to battle the troops at Side 4. However, losing the two cruisers *Panama* and *Dortmun* was quite a serious loss. The *Panama*, after losing its firepower, had sacrificed itself to absorb enemy fire intended for the *Bull Run*. Luckily, although Aeno did not realize it at the time, the battle had reduced the resistance the New Desides would face on their way to the Moon.

“Admiral. Pezun has exploded.”

Aeno, sitting in the commanding officer’s room, received the report transmitted by the Captain in charge of directing emergency repairs.

“Did the invading fleet cause it?”

“No, it seems that the New Desides self-destructed. After withdrawing, they escaped the New Government’s pursuit.”

The “New Government” referred to the current Earth Federation Government. This was, of course, a disdained way of addressing them, because no one on board the defecting fleet recognized the position of the current Federation Government.

“Is that so? Have we been able to establish communications with them?”

“The comm room is still trying, but they’ve been unable to acquire the same laser transmission frequency.”

“Grr. Either way, they will arrive at the Moon sooner or later. Increase the speed of repairs to the facilities.” Aeno switched the transmitter off and sighed deeply. Perhaps the New Desides did not know that Aeno’s fleet had already defected. Aeno did not wish to see a situation that would force comrades to fight against each other.

* * *

March 12, 0088

The closer they came to the Moon, the higher the New Desides fleet increased their alert level. They were not aware that the Moon Orbital Fleet had been sent to attack Pezun, and thus assumed that the Moon Orbital Fleet would come forth and “welcome” them.

“Hey, have all the assault squadrons finished their launch preparations?” Cod placed the helmet of his normal suit near Cray’s and asked.

“They finished their assignment fifteen minutes ago without a problem.”

“How about that Xeku? Has it been adjusted?”

“And why do you ask? Ho ho...” Cray carefully observed Cod’s expression, hidden by his helmet.

“You haven’t sortied in quite a while. You’re just itching to go out, aren’t you?”

“How did you know?” Cod drew back his mouth and laughed, his expression matching that of a child with a new toy.

“It’s written all over your face. However, Brave, you are now the leader of the New Desides. We cannot bare the responsibility of any losses.”

“Do you really think the weaklings from the New Government can take me down?” Cod assumed a playful personality.

“What worries me is your tendency in battle to concern yourself with taking down your enemies and forget about your leadership role.”

“Nonsense. I am, after all, a man who dislikes being a leader. I hate having to think too much. I feel that you, Tosh are more suitable for such a position.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re better than me at putting your words into action, and that’s exactly what our organization needs. It’s easy to find good thinkers, but those who are able to put such thoughts into motion are the ones with true talent. That’s why you are the best choice for a leader. There’s no need to waste such energy on eliminating insignificant targets.”

Cray’s tone was similar to that of a company CEO. The Earth Federation Forces was comparable to a gigantic corporate enterprise. It was as if a small business was competing with a monopoly. The only way to win was to unite the nucleus of conviction within the company. Cray strongly believed in applying this philosophy to the New Desides.

“We have reached the Moon’s orbit!” The navigation officer contacted Cod via a personal line.

“That’s funny. Why didn’t we see any signs of the Moon Orbital Fleet...?”

Maintaining level one combat status, the New Desides fleet proceeded slowly into the Moon’s orbit at a gradual angle. The signaler then reported, “Captain Cod, for a while now, laser transmissions have been searching for nearby ships. However...”

“It is a warning to surrender?”

“I don’t know what it’s trying to say either, but the transmissions are concentrated at a certain region. And the frequency’s been changed several times.”

“Should we use the same frequency? Try to synch up with them and see,” Cray interrupted the conversation.

The signaler returned to the controls at the deck and aimed the *Kilimanjaro*’s communications antenna at the transmission’s point of origin.

“Like I thought, the transmission originated from the direction of Side 4. It’s a text message. It says, “We no longer recognize the Earth Federation government and strongly believe justice resides with the New Desides faction. Please form

up with my troops and permit us to enter into battle together.” The signaler paused, then resumed to read the sender’s name. “Earth Federation Forces Admiral Brian Aeno.”

“Aeno Sir, he...!” Cod’s expression was suddenly brightened.

“Saotome’s operation was successful. We finally have comrades!” Cray, who rarely showed his feelings, was also smiling. Although he always appeared calm, his heart had been filled with unrest about fighting alone.

Thirty minutes later, the New Desides fleet finally reached the docking station surrounding Ayers City.

“This is the *Kilimanjaro*, flagship of the New Desides fleet, requesting permission to enter port.”

At the Ayers City Central Government port control department, a middle-aged port control officer gazed at the exhausted face of the young signaler on the screen and remembered that the Mayor had mentioned something about this. Coincidentally, a communications shuttle, which always arrived at fixed intervals, also wished to enter port. Thus, he decided just to follow standard procedures.

“Can you wait twenty minutes? Sorry, but the port is kinda busy. We've got a shuttle goin' thru the necessary paperwork.”

Someone patted the port control officer on the shoulder.

“Let them in first. The shuttle can wait.”

He turned his head to the source of the voice and was shocked at the sight.

“Mayor...”

Ayers City mayor Kaiser Pinefield nodded at the port control officer and turned to the communications monitor. The young signaler on the monitor was equally shocked to see the Mayor.

“Sir, are you the Mayor? I'll patch the transmission through to the Captain immediately!”

The monitor then changed to show a helmeted military officer wearing a normal suit. It was Brave Cod, leader of the New Desides.

“It's been a tough journey for all of you,” The Mayor said.

“You, Mr. Mayor, are the one in a rough spot. Thank you for your support.”

“There's no need for formalities. We're all comrades. No, rather, we are all part of a large family. Saotome has already explained the plan in detail. I thought that I, who did not participate in the battle, must do my part as well.”

Pinefield referred to the battle to defend the Colony Laser. He had led the Ayers City Militia to participate in the battle, but had been dragged out of the battle and back to Ayers city by a group of subordinates worried about his safety.

No matter the reason, the Ayers City residents had deemed such a last-minute retreat unacceptable. So when he had heard that the New Desides troops were coming to seek shelter, he saw a chance to redeem himself. He told himself that this time around, he would live up to the residents’ expectations.

“Four cruisers? What an impressive show of force. If we include my six vessels and Admiral Aeno’s fleet, we can form a fleet with formidable military strength. Suppressing the Moon should pose no problem at all.” Cod looked out from the bridge at the Ayers City Militia fleet anchored at the harbor, causing him to feel exceptionally happy inside.

“Brave, we don't intend to use force to gain control of the Moon. Besides, these are all old ships. I’m afraid that each of these vessels' fighting abilities could not even reach forty percent of that of the New Government's. Further evaluation could prove to be dangerous.” Cray did his best to eliminate Cod’s optimistic hopes.

“What determines victory on the battlefield is not weapons, but strategy. Ah, strategy. Besides, isn’t Aeno, sir, brining some

new kind of weapon along? There's no need to worry. Once the battle starts, the troops' doubts will scatter and disappear! Then wouldn't your dream of a Lunar City Coalition be realized?"

The plan to conceive a Lunar City Coalition was a fairly bold one. The people of the Moon, although considered space immigrants, lived their lives on a ground where natural gravity was present, unlike the colonists. If all the autonomous Lunar cities were to unite and form a country, they would have the strength to oppose the Earth Federation Government. But from a different perspective, such an act would be like constructing another Zeon.

"I understand. You still want to fight in a good battle, don't you? If you really want to go into battle that badly, I have no right to stop you, provided that you do not forget your role as a commanding officer."

Upon hearing him say that, Cod's face showed a smile filled with a childish aura.

"Don't worry, I won't. But I'd like to mess around with the new weapon Aeno is bringing us."

"You mean the Mk. V?"

"Aye, indeed. When an excellent mobile suit and pilot are paired together, that one man becomes capable of changing the entire situation on the battlefield, like Amuro Ray did during the One Year War. If you were to give me an equally good suit, I could achieve the same results." Cod laughed heartily.

* * *

Also on March 12, Task Force Alpha, which had been in constant pursuit, received news that New Desides had appeared in Lunar orbit. On the other side, the two fleets stationed at Penta raised their anchors and launched. However, judging by their normal cruising speed, it would take at least two days to arrive at the Moon.

The Moon was located between Lagrange points L4 and L5, which gazed at each other from afar. At L5, the military stronghold Konpei Island floated near Side 1. The latter used to be the Principality of Zeon's Solomon space fortress during the One Year War. Naturally, a Federation Forces fleet was stationed there. However, the objective of the fleet was to oversee Axis' actions, and so it could not move about freely.

"Looks like Lady Luck has not abandoned us yet," Heathrow said from the Fleet Commander's seat on the bridge.

Perhaps this could be credited to the *Pegasus's* cruising speed. Unfortunately, being overly optimistic could cause a man to drop his guard all too easily. Most of the Gundam pilots on board shared such an opinion.

"Fleet Commander, we will arrive in Lunar orbit in another twenty-four," The navigation officer reported.

"Order all ships in the fleet to stop where they are. Call Captain Mannings. We need to plot our invasion strategy. Also, gather all ships' mobile suit squadron commanders here." Heathrow then left the Fleet Commander's seat and headed to the mission briefing room.

"The Fleet Commander is heading to the mission briefing room!" The duty officer on the bridge echoed loudly.

"First, we need to get rid of the New Desides fleet before they can organize themselves into a proper formation."

Once all the mobile suit squadron commanders had gathered in the *Pegasus's* mission briefing room, Mannings began his explanation.

"Our fleet trails theirs by about twenty-four hours. The only way to overcome this disparity is to launch a surprise raid. I believe it's impossible for the enemy to finish establishing a defense system around their fleet and Ayers City within these twenty-four hours. There is simply not enough time to set up firing platforms or satellite-guided missiles, thus I would believe they have only their own ships, mobile suits, and Ayers City Militia vessels for defense. Based on your combat experience, it should be easy to break through the cruisers' web of fire, descend on Ayers City, and secure a flat landing point."

No one could hold back any longer. Everyone began to laugh.

“Commander, what about the defecting fleet?” Chung Yung raised his hand and asked.

“Their current situation is difficult to grasp. However, they need time to perform repairs and maintenance following their battle with the troops stationed at Side 4, so they should be somewhere around twenty-four hours behind us. Their travel route is likely similar to our own. If, optimistically speaking, the fleet's defection and the Instructor's Corp. incident on Pezun were not related, and they waited until Pezun's explosion to depart for their final destination, then I would say they are even further from us. There's no need for concern.”

“But if the defecting troops have established communications with the Instructor's Corp, then...”

“That's doubtful, because the New Desides had originally planned to remain stationed at Pezun. Of course, that all changed when the S Gundam destroyed SOL.”

The pilots felt a load lifted off their shoulders upon hearing this.

“The Earth fleet will arrive in two days' time. We should make preparations to suppress the defecting fleet catching up to us. However, the general capabilities of both side are about the same, so we should first reduce the capabilities of the New Desides fleet as soon as possible.”

“In the end, they're still gonna to send us off to die first!” It was Roots' voice. Even though he was not a mobile suit squadron commander, he had still attended the mission briefing.

defecting If the commander says you're dead, then you're dead! What's there to think about?!”

Chung Yung began to argue with Roots again as the other squadron commanders stared at the two hotheads.

“Why are you all always so damn unreasonable?! You all think you're so great...!” Roots stood up, pointed his chin at Mannings, and continued. “What's all this, “if the commander says you're dead, you're dead” bullshit?! God, I can't stand that shit! Even our own deaths are based on other peoples' orders?! That's ridiculous!”

“This is the military! You joined it. You're part of the organization!”

“That's such an old way of thinking! If you wanna go die, then go die. Do it yourself. I'm too lazy to baby you all.”

After throwing an icy glare from the side, Mannings decided that if this were to continue, Roots would not only be unable to get along with his own commander, but with the mobile suit squadron commanders from the other ships as well. In a situation as important as this, conflicts between comrades would do no good.

So he interrupted the argument. “Easy, now. I wouldn't send any of you off to die.”

“The squadron in charge of the primary assault will consist of the S Gundam, Z-Plus squadron, and FAZZ squadron. Your objective is to take out the enemy ships. The other mobile suit squadrons will be stationed around the fleet in a standard formation to intercept enemy mobile suits. The operation will commence at 1000 hours Earth Standard Time on the 13th. I wish all of you success!”

The battle would take place in the same atmosphere in which Roots had antagonized various mobile suit squadrons.

The number thirteen, in western numerology, was an unlucky one. To Task Force Alpha, it was an unavoidable ill omen.

* * *

Later in the day, at Earth Standard Time 0400 hours, Aeno's fleet established communication with the New Desides, who had assumed a circular formation and departed the dark L1 region. With them, they dragged a long, thin trail of light to the Moon's orbit. This time, Task Force Alpha had made a grave mistake. They were about to face a powerful combined fleet.

Once they neared the Ayers City spaceport, the two battleships attached to Aeno's fleet shifted their thrusters to face the ground. The thrusters released high-temperate flames and gradually descended from a steep angle. The ship's hangar was

full of GMs.

“We have received the *Bull Run's* signal light!”

The observations officer on the bridge captured a small dot of light moving closer to the *Kilimanjaro*, and reported his findings to Cod.

“It’s Aeno, sir!”

The vague outline of a battleship could be seen in the darkness from the bridge's window. The *Bull Run* headed towards the *Kilimanjaro's* stern as all the troops rushed excitedly to the windows on that side of the ship.

“Captain Cod, it's been quite some time since we last met after the last battle of the War.”

The voice from the laser-transmitted message was heard on board the *Kilimanjaro's* bridge. Aeno also raised his hand in salute. Cod was reminded of the proud moment back during the One Year War when he received command of a fleet from Aeno.

“I have brought everyone in the Ayers City Militia and New Desides a little gift. It's the much-rumored new weapon type...”

From that moment on, Task Force Alpha had lost the chance to independently control the flow of the battle.

* * *

The 13th, Earth Standard Time 0100 hours.

From the bridge of *Pegasus III*, space looked like an uncountable number of fireflies dancing through the night sky. The S Gundam and the fleet's other mobile suits had begun their attack. Among them, more than half were Neros.

Fifteen suits were retained to defend the fleet, accounting for one third of the total number of mobile suits deployed. The other mobile suits headed toward the New Desides fleet. Only fifteen, or half, of the mobile suits in this group were equipped to land on the Moon's surface. In addition to wiping out the enemy ships, Ayers City needed to be suppressed before the arrival of Aeno's fleet.

However, they did not understand what kind of fate awaited them...

The tragedy first befell the nine Nero suits from the 112th Company, part of the assault force. One of the leading Neros suddenly expanded and exploded into a ball of fire.

“What the fuck?!”

Green and white beams surrounded and crisscrossed through the Nero squadron. The opera of death had begun.

“It's an ambush!”

“We've got three squadrons!”

“Where'd it come from?!”

The Nero squadron was immediately thrown into a swirl of confusion. Furious messages were transmitted from within the troop. Before they could get a grasp of the situation, another two Nero suits exploded one after another. The pilots had, in an instant, sunk into an appalling hell.

Fireballs signifying extinguished life appeared continuously. Within seconds, the entire 112th Company was wiped out. From afar, it looked like ornaments shining on a Christmas tree.

A blue mobile suit with white painted stripes appeared through the wreckage. A Gundam.

Two small circular discs flew back onto the Gundam's shoulders. The discs docked into their storage racks and its eyes flashed a demonic glare.

This was the item that had bared the “New 'G' Equipment” code. It was a new model mobile suit commonly known as the G-V. The official name the Federation Forces had given the suit was Gundam Mk. V.

Licking his lips, Cod spoke a brief afterthought.

“So, this is the Incom System. It’s really something.”

* * *

“The 112th company has been wiped out!”

“W-what?!”

On the *Pegasus III*'s bridge screen, the IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) signal representing that particular unit suddenly vanished.

“Were they ambushed?! Don’t tell me they've already finished getting their ships into position... Or...”

Upon hearing the report, the worst-case scenario appeared in Heathrow’s mind. Since the enemies had set up an ambush, they were bound to be sending considerable amounts of mobile suits to counterattack. But considering the abilities of the Ayers City Militia's mobile suits, that was impossible. Thus, there could only be one possible explanation: Aeno’s fleet.

“Shit! Order all troops to change their invasion routes!” Heathrow stood up and yelled.

Due to the lack of gravity, and the way he abruptly stood up, the Fleet Bommander began to float around the bridge.

“We can't! To maximize the raid's chance of success, orders have already been given to maintain radio silence!” The communications officer replied, causing everyone to turn pale.

Chapter 6

THE LOGISTIC BOMB

A NEW DISPLAY window opened up on the 360-degree panoramic monitor's front panel. A magnified telescopic image was projected onto the middle of the screen. The assault squadron's Nero pilots were so frightened by the image of their destination that they momentarily stopped breathing.

Countless mobile suits painted in New Desides dark blue floated at the far end of the sector. All of the cruisers' cannons were aimed at the assault squadron.

"We were tricked!" The pilot pressed a red button located on the heads-up display. Signal flares shot out from either end of the suit's shoulder, slowly rising and then igniting, producing bursts of pale, purple rays.

"Purple signal flare spotted at twelve o'clock! Break radio silence! Our surprise attack has failed!" S Gundam, currently transformed in G-Cruiser mode, was formed up with the second wave of the follow up squadron. Roots, in its cockpit, understood the meaning of the signal, but it was already too late.

The others saw the flare as well.

"We'll show you what a space battle is really like! Commence cannon attacks at 1500 meters! Adjust your aim! Now fire!"

New Desides newcomer Admiral Aeno ordered his flagship, the *Bull Run*, to begin the cannon barrage. The beams from his fleet's other ships, accompanied by countless unguided missiles, formed an attacking web of fire. It was as though a gigantic demon's palm was heading forward to deliver a devastating strike at the mobile suit squadron forming the front line troops to shatter them to pieces.

"Task Force Alpha should have been the one to deliver that attack. It's a shame their scatterbrained, ages-old Lieutenant completely lacks the ability to command a fleet. I, the Bald Eagle Admiral, shall be the one to test them."

Aeno recalled that "genius," the man who had never before appeared in the Federation Forces' Advance Officer's School, with mixed emotions. If Heathrow could defeat him, it would prove that Heathrow was indeed worthy of his reputation, a feeling akin to a father hoping that his son would grow up to shine in society. However, Aeno intended to show no mercy. Besides, Aeno understood his prodigy's weakness: he followed regulations too closely and never made exceptions.

Upon receiving a report stating that the front line mobile suit squadron had been wiped out, Heathrow became so tense that he stood up on the Fleet Commander's high chair. He suddenly relaxed his tightly-knitted eyebrows and momentarily sat back down.

"M warheads. Order all cruisers to fire M warheads. Immediately recall back all mobile suits from the attack squadron!"

Mannings, in charge of all mobile suit troops, doubted what he had heard with his own ears upon receiving Heathrow's order.

"M warheads? Didn't the Grenada Treaty prohibit the use of Minovsky particle-based weapons? You need to get authorization from the Commanding Office before you use those!"

M warheads. They were commonly-used weapons during the One Year War that scattered a high concentration of Minovsky particles into space and could decrease and dissipate the potency of long-range beam weapons.

However, following the One Year War, the treaty signed at the Lunar city Granada not only prohibited the use of nuclear weapons. An additional clause was added to prohibit military usage of Minovsky particles except for in nuclear fusion protection shields, mega particle cannons, and I-fields.

During the One Year War, both sides had employed unrestricted usage of Minovsky particles. Unfortunately, the

interference caused by their remains did not disappear even after the war ended, creating many obstructions. Thus, directly scattering Minovsky particles had been deemed capable of polluting the Earth. It was comparable in severity to the chlorofluorocarbons' destruction of the ozone layer during the Old Century.

As the AEUG's influence had gradually grown, the Earth Federation Government had begun to launch its own new ideology of purifying the Earth Sphere. Their first task had been to enforce tight control on the usage of Minovsky particles for military purposes.

Hence, Mannings could not understand why Heathrow had broken this prohibition.

"It's not something the Major would normally do. But it's too late to use M warheads now!"

He smacked his palm against the reading board in front of the communications officer. His misjudgment had wasted several lives without reason.

The fleet originally suspected not to exist had appeared, and one round of their fire had destroyed the nine front line mobile suits. This made Mannings once again feel the same sort of remorse that had emerged during the One Year War. Currently, the thirty mobile suits that formed the attacking squadron had been reduced to twelve. and It was up to them to break into Ayers City if they still planned to continue the assault.

"Fleet Commander, we've received a transmission from the S Gundam! 'The enemy mobile suits haven't moved. They might be dummies.'" The communications officer had made sure to first censor Roots's vulgarities before conveying the report.

"What? Dummies? That means the enemy's main mobile suit force is already at Ayers City...!"

Indeed, one bad thing follows another. Roots steered the S Gundam, adjusted the beam cannons to a low-damage frequency, and eliminated the plastic capsules specially made to resemble Xeku suits that had been dispersed about the airspace.

"What are you still doing here?" Crypt, from the FAZZ squadron closing in from the rear, reminded him.

"Can't you see for yourself? How are the other suits?"

"The fleet' assault squadron was completely wiped out from the earlier round of fire, and the other squadrons assigned to land on the Moon are getting ready to invade Ayers City. Let's go help them out."

"Who decided that?! What about our own assignment? There aren't any enemy suits here, so now's the best time to attack the enemy ships!"

The Nero squadron then sent a transmission. "Hey, newbies from the main force! Since you're not contributing anything useful, come over here and help us draw away the enemies' attention!"

Turning around to face the area near the Moon's surface, the Nero squadron prepared to carry out the invasion.

"Tch!" Roots spat disdainfully. "You're useless!"

The fleet's assault squadron had already been destroyed. Whether or not they liked it, they would need to adjust the mission plan to fit the circumstances. They were forced to turn around and assist the squadron about to land on the Lunar surface.

Chung Yung, from the descent squadron, activated the Nero's IMPC mode and finished preparations to descend onto the Moon's surface. He then keyed in the coordinates of the landing site, and the system began to run without problems.

However, like a devil sent to corrupt the mortal realm, the computer's mind was filled with evil intentions. The descent timer continued to count down until it reached 666.

"What the hell?!"

The monitor was filled with senseless characters. The sentence, "Shame on you!" continued to flash in its center. The Nero's

IMPC instantly lost its ability to control the suit. The error program hidden within the tactical combat data had, in an instant, completely wiped out the Nero's database, turning the suit into a floating metal coffin.

That was the "logistic bomb" the Instructor's Corp. had planted in the tactical combat data.

The New Desides knew that all the mobile suits in the Federation's various departments relied on them to provide tactical combat data, and so they had decided to make use of this. Having decided to use the Moon from the beginning, they had added a routine to the IMPC system to paralyze Federation Forces mobile suits when the system switched to descent mode during Moon descent operations.

When the Instructor's Corp. revolted, a select few members unwilling to participate had brought the most recent tactical combat data back to Earth. Federation Forces HQ did not question the reliability of the data at the time because they had thought from the start that the Instructor's Corp.'s rebellion was just a spur-of-the-moment operation. However, the New Desides' trap was not completely successful, because their initial goal for the logistic bomb had been to create confusion when the Federation's main force when it would inevitably invade the Moon. Now, because Task Force Alpha was landing in an independent operation, their trap had been exposed, likely making the tactic ineffective in the future.

"Manual control! Switch to manual control!"

The change in their descent angle from a gradual one to an upright one left them some altitude, but the two leading Nero suits in front were not so lucky. They sank straight into the surface like a chicken with its feathers plucked. Chung Yung heard the pilots' agonizing cries, but did not have the mindset to provide help to anyone other than himself. For now, he could only think of staying alive.

"I won't... die... here! Argh!"

He cut off the autopilot system and instead started to rely completely on his experience and piloting skills to control his suit. The restarted monitor showed only the field of vision in front, and lacked the distance calculations made by the computer. The only proof that the Nero's landing position had already changed was given by the rapid approach of the Moon's horizon line.

Roots stared blankly at the ongoing confusion.

"What the hell is goin' on...?"

A group of mobile suits, obviously enemies, suddenly appeared at the other end of the Moon's orbit and were quickly heading towards Yung's end.

"Shit! They're a bunch of sitting ducks! I gotta think of a way to help them! Argh!"

"Shit"...? Not good... Situation worsening...

...A crisis is approaching...

...They are... companions...?

...Human organization...

...The best choice... To assist... To fight...?

...Fighting to prolong the lives of his companions..

...Even though he himself hasn't suffered...?

...The pain of human beings... I couldn't possibly understand...

...This is... a human...?

Roots aimed his beam cannons at the approaching mobile suits.

"You bastards!"

The Nero's enemy detection system had not shut down.

"Dammit, we can't even fire back!"

Chung Yung cursed seeing the approaching mobile suits. He was exerting all his concentration to maneuver the suit and did not have any effort to spare for combat.

“Now I'm fucked...”

Just as his disheartening peaked, a beam of light was suddenly fired towards the group of mobile suits.

“Who is it?”

Chung Yung saw it. A Gundam. The S Gundam was protecting the troops. Wasn't that newbie as cowardly as a mouse? *Why would he risk his life to do something so stupid...?*

When the S Gundam fired, the Z-Plus and FAZZ squadrons joined in, packing enormous combined firepower. Their tsunami-like web of fire did not give the enemy suits any chance to evade. In a matter of seconds, the Gundam team had destroyed the entire group of enemy suits.

“These rookies...” The remaining members of the Nero squadron, after escaping the crisis, floated towards the Moon's orbit and begin to revolve around it, becoming miniature Lunar satellites.

“Thanks a lot, newbies from the main force!”

“Hey, hey! You owe us one, y'know!” Roots and the others entered high orbit and escorted the group of Nero suits that could no longer fight.

“Fleet Commander, the descent team has also failed. They have retreated from the battlefield and are now in Lunar orbit, but they're running low on propulsion fuel. Should we send the mobile suit squadron defending the fleet to retrieve them?” inquired the communicator.

“Urgh.”

He nodded, but a different idea began to form in his mind.

“No, hold on a second! So that's how it is. I understand. I won't be tricked, father...” Heathrow unintentionally added in the term of endearment.

“Why not retrieve them? They're stuck there like target drones,” Mannings continued the conversation.

“I'm afraid we can't do that. Once the squadron protecting the fleet departs, the Bald Eagle will definitely seize the opportunity.”

Mannings noticed that Heathrow's tone contained an air of confidence.

On the other side, Brave Cod, leader of the New Desides, upon testing the Mk. V's performance, returned satisfied to the *Kilimanjaro* for resupply.

“Hey, this guy's pretty powerful. Took out nine bad guys. How are the others?” Cod quickly asked Cray, who stood in the hangar's airtight cabin, before removing his helmet.

“Well, there's good news and bad news. Most of our Xekus have landed on the Moon's surface and are under Offshore's command. Once the fleet has finished resupplying, they'll be responsible for defending Ayers City airspace. Aeno's side has repelled the enemies' surprise raid. But then there's the bad news.”

“What would that be?”

“The enemies that attacked us are not from the main fleet. Also, the commanding officer on the other side—I don't know whether he's overconfident, or just an idiot—has actually ordered mobile suits to descended on the Moon's surface. We dispatched the third wave of mobile suits to intercept, but those freakish enemy suits wiped them out.”

“Then the logistic bomb... has been cracked?”

“Yes, it should have been. However, this could be a good thing. They now know that they have no way to land on Ayers City, so their only option left is to destroy it, which would result in its citizens becoming casualties. If that were to happen, the other Lunar cities would be thrown into panic and revolt, which would aid us in pushing forward our proposal for a Lunar City Coalition.”

“Sacrifice something small for the good of the whole?”

The ship's alarm sounded.

“Captain Cod, please come to the bridge!” A panicked young officer came forth to inform him.

“Why so distressed? What is it?” He inquired.

“A huge, huge fleet... it's the main fleet!”

Cod and Cray looked at each other, nodded their heads, grabbed the handle of the handgrip heading towards the ship's interior, and quickly rushed to the bridge.

* * *

“Why can't we retrieve the troops?”

The S Gundam was defending the four Neros orbiting around the Moon. The three FAZZs made for long range combat were performing 360-degree surveillance in a triangle formation. As for the two Z-plus units, they were concentrating on defending the front portion of the orbit.

“Out of the thirty suits that formed the attack force, only ten remain. Who knows? Maybe the fleet is under heavy assault. You all should still have some propulsion fuel left, right?” Chung Yung asked Roots.

“If the fleet's finished too, then we've got nowhere else to run. It'd probably be better just to stay here.”

“You're a weird kid.”

“It's not like you're too normal yourself, y'know.”

*A “weird kid”...? Abnormal characteristics... Both of them...
...All humans are abnormal... All humans are soldiers...
...”Soldier” is equal to “abnormal”... “Battle” is equal to “abnormal”...
...All humans are lunatics...?*

Countless small dots of light appeared on the other side of space, closing in on the forsaken mobile suit squadron.

“They're comin' again! Looks like we're about to go out with a fuckin' bang!”

“Wait a second.” Chung Yung noticed that the specs of light were flashing systematically.

Currently, what could Task Force Alpha do with only five remaining ships? The more Heathrow thought, the more unsatisfied he felt. The Bald Eagle Admiral was sharpening his claws and preparing to swoop down on Task Force Alpha. However, there was no way he was going to achieve his objective so easily, because the class's top student had now learned to use his own will to think.

The navigation officer seated in front of the monitor saw the flashing dots of light and identification signals, clenched his teeth, and reported to Heathrow, “F-fleet Commander! It's... a fleet! A big one...!”

So, you have finally come, Bald Eagle.

“ID signals confirmed! *Nagato*, *Exeter*, *Strasbourg*... it's the main fleet!”

“What?! They already caught up to us...?!”

Heathrow could finally rest easy. The troops on the bridge were half dazed. Once they came to understand the situation, scattered cheers could be heard from the bridge.

There was no mistaking it. The Earth Federation Forces' main fleet, after setting off from Penta, had been traveling at a high cruising speed while devouring propulsion fuel at an enormous rate.

With this, the balance of power had once again shifted. For Task Force Alpha, this long, unbearable March 13th was finally coming to an end.

* * *

March 14, Earth Standard Time 08:00 hours.

Heathrow received the instructions for, and explanation of, the plan to invade Ayers City from the main fleet's flagship, the *Nagato*. The operation would be named Eagle Falls.

Based on Heathrow's suggestion, the mobile suits' numerical IMPC data was changed. However, because they did not have the latest data on their hands, and also due to a lack of time to repair the error sequence in the original IMPC, the old data was used for landing. It was undeniable that the combat data was bound to cause a decrease in the mobile suits' combat abilities, but it was better than using corrupted data.

Task Force Alpha re-formed its ships' mobile suit squadrons to welcome a new wave of combat. However, although their number of mobile suits had been replenished, they had been given no new pilots. Thus, the main fleet transferred another four cruisers to form Task Force Beta, which would be given the responsibility of providing support to Task Force Alpha. As for operation Eagle Falls, it was set to commence in three days, the 17th of March.

Chapter 7

EAGLE FALLS

THE *PEGASUS III*'s bridge was dyed red by the flashing lights that signified combat, creating a tense atmosphere aboard the ship. All troops had donned normal suits to prepare for the upcoming battle between the fleets.

For this battle, Task Forces Alpha and Beta had been assigned to invade and secure the entrance point to descent on Ayers City and, at the same time, do battle with the defending New Desides fleet. As for the main fleet, their responsibility was to destroy Aeno's fleet. The hope was that their engagement would force the New Desides to send support forces to assist Aeno, thus weakening the entrance point's defense.

"Three... Two... One..."

The navigation officer started the countdown. The situation was likely the same on board all of the ships participating in the battle.

"Commence operation!"

The ships' propulsion thrusters were ignited and increased simultaneously as they headed towards their individually-designated areas to prepare for the cannon barrage. Countless statistics concerning the enemy's distance and movement alongside environmental data were flowing into the cannons' control systems.

After carrying out three rounds of beam cannon bombardment, the fleet moved at the highest possible combat speed to the next firing position, repeatedly suppressing the enemy with their attacks.

The veil on the operation to suppress Ayers City, code-named Eagle Falls, had officially been lifted.

On the battlefield, colorful rays of light intertwined with each other while missiles of various sizes blindly charged forward. Within the warzone, countless balls of fire bloomed, each containing lament, rage and loathing, sending lives into an endless void.

Neros and Nouvel GM IIIs (GM IIIs modified for space use) carrying heavy landing equipment moved quickly towards the Moon's surface.

Task Forces Alpha and Beta each formed a single-file formation and moved towards the New Desides fleet. Because all of the mobile suits participating in the battle had been designed for landing operations, it had been decided that the battle's victor would be determined in the battle between the fleets.

"The enemy fleet has been discovered! One battleship and five cruisers!" The spotter reported to Heathrow.

"Concentrate all fire on that battleship! Ignore the cruisers!"

The *Pegasus III* and the other nine cruisers, after entering the firing range of their main cannons, turned left, opened their starboard cannon gates, and fired their main cannons in sequence.

The beams fired by the long row of ships were concentrated on the New Desides Flagship, the *Kilimanjaro*, in order to surround the target and eliminate any chance of its escape.

The accuracy of cannon attacks had improved greatly since the One Year War. However, since they depended on the naked eye, laser locks, heat detection, and other ancient methods for visual accuracy, in addition to having to compute for the three dimensions of space, their critical hit rate was still extremely low. This was another reason why it was better to concentrate all of the ships' firepower on a single enemy target.

The continuous loud noises caused the gigantic body of the battleship *Kilimanjaro* to shake. On the bridge, Cod was thrown

into the air by the resulting shock.

“Brave! The enemies have begun their main assault,” Cray said, holding onto the readings display tightly to stabilize his floating body.

“It seems so. I thought they would deal with Aeno’s fleet first. I didn’t expect to do battle at two fronts.”

Cod floated to the navigation officer's and asked, “How are the mobile suits on defense?”

“They're engaging the enemy's landing team. Our side has only been attacked by their ships' cannons.”

“Then hurry up and return fire!”

“Understood!”

After that, the damage report came in. “The earlier attack hit our stern! Rear decks eleven to 37 have been sealed!”

The area around the ship’s stern had been pierced several times. Lives were being risked to rescue the wounded, but several troops had already been sucked into the vacuum of outer space. The holes' diameters were so large that emergency repairs were unable to fill them.

“Has everyone withdrawn from this area?!” A Third Class Petty Officer called out through the ship’s intercom. If he didn't receive a reply, he planned to press the switch to seal off the deck.

“Hey, asshole! I'm still out here!”

Because the communicators in their helmets had broken down, the remaining officers were unable to request help, and began to feel the drop in air pressure. They saw with their own eyes the explosion-guard hatch slide down. The *Kilimanjaro* suffered a second wave of attacks, and a beam appeared, quickly vaporizing the remaining officers, who had barely been able to breathe.

“Stern- and portside weapons are no longer functional! The steering controls only have enough power to veer half the ship! The enemy seems to only be attacking our ship!”

“Argh!” Cod, who had finally managed to take footing on stable ground, was getting furious.

“The MS deck in front should be fine, right? Order all crew to evacuate the ship! All mobile suit pilots awaiting orders, follow me! We'll eliminate the enemy fleet! Let's go, Tosh!” He grabbed the moving handgrip on the wall, which was, luckily, fairly stable.

“Brave, calm down! You're our commander! We should land on Ayers City and organize a defense force, not duel with the enemies here. Don’t you understand? If the other side fires at the residents of Ayers City, we would grasp justice!” Cray gave chase to convince him, to no effect.

“Tosh, I think you’ve known me long enough to realize that I'm not as smart as you. I wish to do battle here, and no one should even think of holding me back! The one most suitable to command everyone is yourself. Go to Ayers City to assist Josh. The New Desides will be left in your hands.”

Cod landed a light punch on Cray’s shoulder and kicked off towards the mobile suit deck.

“Brave Cod, launching!”

The Mk. V charged into the space battle with a loud rumble. A handful of Xeku Eins followed close behind.

Cray stood next to an extremely large mobile suit in the storage area. The mobile suit, codenamed Xeku Zwei, was classified as part of the X series. It was developed at Pezun, and was used by the Instructor’s Corp. as a representation of the current generation of heavy mobile suits used by the enemy. Such suits were produced in limited quantities. When the New Desides withdrew from Pezun, they had brought along all of the experimental suits and spare parts.

“Can we launch the Xeku Zwei?”

Because the Xeku Zwei was a new model, it took more effort to fine tune.

“We still need to make some minor adjustments but, generally speaking, it should be able to land on the Moon,” The equipment officer replied.

“What do you mean, 'should'? Anyway, you all should get on board the shuttle and get off this ship too. The other ships will support Mr. Aeno's fleet. I'll meet all of you at Ayers City.”

Cray stepped into the cockpit and shut the hatch.

“Tosh Cray, launching!”

Xeku-Zwei departed from the battleship *Kilimanjaro's* rear and proceeded into orbit to land on the Moon.

The battle proceeded according to plan. Upon being heavily assaulted by the main fleet, Aeno's endangered fleet requested reinforcements from the New Desides fleet, which left the descent point vulnerable for a short time. The Lunar descent squadron was able to suppress Ayers City as originally planned.

On the Ayers City side, Josh Offshore of the New Desides had already begun defense preparations in advance. He commanded a section of the Ayers City defense force, along with two assault cruisers carrying ex-Titans mobile suit squadrons.

However, the troops that came directly under his command were cadets from the Earth Federation Youth Academy in Ayers City. The soldiers were categorized by age and past unit affiliations, and each division was given a color code to distinguish them. The division serving under him was White Squadron.

“Listen carefully. Do not waste ammunition. Wait until you close to about half your effective range before you start shooting. The enemies that are descending are defenseless and unable to retaliate. This mission should not be difficult to you all. However, be careful, as their descent speed will be faster than you think.”

Although Offshore was still quite young, he was a member of the Instructor's Corp., and most of its members had the ability to be mobile suit instructors. He taught battle tactics well. However not many members of his squadron would survive the upcoming battle.

After listening to Offshore's instructions, the young members of White Squadron gave a loud and energetic reply. Indeed, they were all young and without any prior combat experience, but that was one of war's truths. Whether an adult or child, it was impossible to prevent being entwined in the spiral of war.

Offshore recalled that the Gundam pilots he had encountered at Pezun were also newcomers who lacked combat experience. Was the enemy using a squadron of so-called Newtypes?

But if they are Newtypes, no matter how tactically proficient they are, can they really single-handedly change the outcome of war?

The cruel reality of childrens' involvement in war triggered great remorse in Offshore's heart. He had joined the Forces to accumulate bargaining chips for his future political career, but with the rise of Newtypes, his past values had been shattered. Since he was not a Newtype, would there be no returns for the efforts he put in?

That was difficult for him to accept.

It was this air of anxiety that Offshore and the others shared as they waited for the enemy to appear. He hoped that the battle, once it began, would divert his attention and stop him from thinking about those Newtypes.

The main assault force of the landing team was formed by Neros and Nouvel GM IIIs. The Gundam squadron was not responsible for the main assault.

Because the S Gundam and Z-Plus were capable of direct landings, they had landed on the Moon before the main forces and wiped out the enemies lying in wait to ambush the landing team. The S Gundam was currently in G-Cruiser mode, its appearance that of an aircraft's, and was carrying out a surface raid.

“Tex! Watch out for the cliff's shadow at 10:30!”

“I know!”

Roots found three GM IIIs hiding in the dark and immediately fired his beam cannons, turning one of the moving enemies into a ball of fire. The beam cannons mounted on the front of the Z-Pluses took down the other two suits. Before they could even cry out, the three GM IIIs and the young soldiers inside them had disappeared in the light of the explosions. As Offshore had predicted, they couldn't escape from the fate of such a tragedy.

“This is just target practice!”

It was true. The troops responsible for the first line of defense were even worse off than Roots and his bunch of newcomers, as they were all children who had not previously experienced the taste of battle.

“It's a Gundam! Ahh!” The hearts of the young White Squadron soldiers began to waver at the sight.

“Don't be afraid! Just do what I say, and you'll be fine! Even though they have a Gundam, they're not Newtypes. They're just a bunch of newbies. That I can assure you.” But in reality, Offshore could not do such a thing.

Indeed, the Gundam pilots were not Newtypes. However, the enemies' Gundams, regardless of their capabilities and firepower, were both superior to their own, having gained experience during the battle at Pezun. Furthermore, he thoroughly understood that even if these young soldiers did exactly what he had taught them to do, results would still be difficult to achieve.

Therefore, Offshore was forced to convince himself that, although he was a commanding officer, in the current situation, he would have to lie to them.

Now he could only hope that these reapers would quickly move on to the other combat zones. If he had had capable mobile suits under his command, he definitely would not have let the enemy go on such a rampage.

On the other side, Cod, in the Mk. V, was putting on an amazing display of combat prowess while rushing into the battle zone held by Aeno's fleet.

Installed on board this mobile suit was an Incom system, which was similar to the Psycommu system in that it utilized brainwaves to control remote weapons. This type of weapon had been in use since the One Year War, but it had required a Newtype at its controls, and only recently had been technologically improved enough that it could be used by normal humans. In an era where precision-guided weapons could easily be rendered ineffective by Minovsky particles, the Incom system was perhaps the only effective type of remote-controlled weapon.

The two disks the Mk. V shot out moved about freely, unhindered and controlled by Cod's will. They continuously fired off beams, instantly burying nine of Task Force Alpha's mobile suits within them.

“Ha ha ha...! Cowards! Don't tell me that no one dares to step up and challenge the Mk. V!”

Another GM III defending the fleet exploded, causing minor damage to the cruiser adjacent to the suit. Cod's confidence was at an all-time high. He believed there was no one capable of matching him. Indeed, the Mk. V had caused the main fleet's mobile suits to drop into a state of incomparable fear, and the original plan to attack Aeno's fleet was unable to proceed any further.

“FAZZ squadron! Do you read me? There's a blue Gundam here equipped with an Incom system. Can you take him out from long range?” Crypt received the transmitted cry for help from one of the main fleet's mobile suit pilots.

“A blue Gundam? Even if I wanted to help, I've got no data on the guy!”

“So ask the flagship for it, dammit!”

“Is that the kinda attitude you use when asking for help? Why do you need Gundams to do everything?”

The main fleet transmitted Crypt the requested data.

“Ha! He's got a Gundam too, huh? What *is* this Incom system anyway? ...Mk. V? I don't know what its model number means either!”

Even though the abilities of the enemy suit worried him slightly, Crypt nevertheless accelerated and rushed his FAZZ towards the region in which the battle was taking place. The mobile suit squadron assigned to defend the fleet was unable to withstand any further attacks. Crypt saw the ships gathering their cannon fire to prevent the Mk. V from continuously closing in on the fleet.

“Grissom! Aldrin! Form a web of fire with your missiles to pin down the enemy suit before attacking! We're be dead for sure if we get in range of the Incoms! Be careful!”

They agreed amongst themselves on when to fire the missiles. The chest plates of the three FAZZ suits suddenly opened and countless micro-missiles burst out, dragging trails of blue smoke with them. All of them were heading for the Mk. V.

“Heh! Don't look down on me!”

Inside the Mk. V's cockpit, Cod smiled upon seeing the group of missiles. Immediately, he raised his acceleration rate and shifted the suit downward to evade. Although the Mk. V's body had been outfitted to protect against *g*-forces, the *g*-force generated by the sudden maneuver was still quite considerable. Cod was a well-trained, elite soldier, and his body had excellent endurance. However, he was not a Newtype.

The *g*-force violently jerked Cod as though a giant had extended its foot to stomp him flat. The cockpit rattled and wailed. The vibration caused by the explosions of the micro missiles hitting the cockpit in the vacuum emitted additional buzzing sounds inside the cockpit.

All of this happened in the blink of an eye, but to Cod it felt longer than a lifetime. He tried his best to regain vision in his eyes that had become bloodshot from the excessive *g*-forces. In his field of vision filled with red lights, he discovered that the warning lights inside the cockpit were flashing red and green like a Christmas tree.

He had yet to realize that he was still alive, and instinctively gathered his concentration for battle. His male combat instincts had breached their human limits.

He suddenly felt a foreign object floating around his mouth and unconsciously spat it out into his helmet. While enduring the *g*-forces, he had bit down on his teeth too hard and, as a result, his tooth had collapsed.

“You bastard...!”

He cursed and gave the controls a push, accelerating him towards the three FAZZs that had caused him to lose his tooth.

Crypt believed that the dark blue-colored mobile suit was surely finished after seeing with his own eyes the countless micro-missiles that had exploded around it, causing the suit to shake so violently that its own missiles had come loose.

“I can't believe it was that easy...”

However, the thrusters on the blue mobile suit's back once again began to emit flames, and the verniers in its four limbs readjusted to stabilize it. It then came straight at the FAZZ squadron.

“This guy's...!”

“Come get me, you monster!”

Even though it managed to survive the concentrated micromissile attack, the Mk. V's body had received a considerable amount of damage. The Incom system, its most powerful weapon, had been critically damaged and was unusable.

Cod predicted the direction from which the FAZZs were firing and ingeniously evaded every single shot. He then changed the beam sabers, used for melee combat, into beam cannons. He attached the hilts to the top of the suit's backpack and adjust them 90 degrees forward, setting them up to shoot.

The beam saber was the prime example of mobile suit melee weaponry. It worked by using an I-field to restrict and condense the beam emitted from a beam cannon, and used the extreme heat energy produced as a result to cut through things. If this principal is reversed by removing the I-field, a beam saber will become a normal beam cannon. As something of an invalid example, if beam cannons were the equivalent of shooting a water hose, then a beam saber was the equivalent of a plastic bag filled with water. The Mk. V's beam saber was equipped with such an interchangeable characteristic.

"Hoo...!"

Indescribable rage turned into a loud bellow. The Mk. V fired its beam cannons while charging towards the FAZZ squadron. Cod saw that the enemy formation was in a state of confusion, and so stopped making risky sweeping shots and concentrated instead on attacking the front-most FAZZ suit.

"Evade! Scatter!" Crypt hastily ordered, but it was too late.

"I can't, it's too late! Ugh...!" Before Grissom's tragic cry could fade away, his suit, to the left of Crypt's, had exploded into pieces.

"Grissom!"

Crypt accelerated fiercely out of the combat zone and could only help but see with own eyes as his squadmate turned into a ball of fire. The sound from the explosion also became nothing more than meaningless electrical interference.

"That bastard! He actually killed Grissom!" Aldrin, not able to control his anger, headed back for the kill.

"Stop it, Aldrin! Don't go near it, or you'll end up like Grissom! Get out of there!"

The Mk. V extended both legs forwards and brought the suit to a screeching halt while simultaneously searching for its next victim. It could only see the two FAZZ suits desperately trying to retreat at full speed, hoping to increase their distance on him.

The FAZZ was originally an experimental prototype of the multipurpose ZZ Gundam mobile suit developed by Anaheim Electronics, a test suit equipped with a fixed, heavy firepower support system. However, this suit was vastly different from the ZZ Gundam piloted by young Judau Ashta. The most glaring differences were that the FAZZ could neither transform or separate, was made of a material inferior to the ZZ Gundam's, and possessed poorer maneuverability. In addition, installed in the ZZ Gundam's head was the ultimate mobile suit weapon: the high mega cannon, which could be used to conduct powerful, wide area bombardments. However, the FAZZ suits lacked this weapon. Captain Mannings called the FAZZ "big but unwieldy," which was not completely unreasonable.

The three FAZZ used by Task Force Alpha had been entrusted to them by Anaheim Electronics to be combat tested. The FAZZ's structure and capabilities were vastly different than those of the Full Armor ZZ optional weapons system that would be installed on the ZZ Gundam in the future. Thus, the FAZZ could only be viewed as a fire support Gundam, and was not suitable for close range combat, as it could only fire long-range weapons. That was the reason Crypt wanted to increase their distance on the enemy suit.

They're dead if I get any closer to them! Cod understood the other party's reasoning. If he had such great firepower in his hands, he would not be careless enough to bombard a fly at the tip of his nose with a cannon.

"You can't escape!" Cod yelled, transforming the beam cannons back into beam sabers. He drew the saber hilt from his right shoulder and accelerated forwards. With a yell, he lengthened the boiling hot body of the beam saber and charged towards the two FAZZs.

“Argh...!”

Cod gave a hefty cleave and hit Aldrin’s suit directly.

“Ah! Mom! Mom! Ahh...!”

Aldrin's tragic death cry hit Crypt’s ear membrane. By the time he turned his head, the FAZZ had already been sliced into two pieces. Its opened internals emitted electric sparks. The suit was then surrounded by a white ball of light.

“A-Aldrin too?! My subordinates! My companions!”

Crypt's FAZZ quickly used its AMBAC system to spin around. Even though he knew that he had no chance of hitting, he formed a web of fire with his beam cannon to prevent the Mk. V from closing in.

Even Cod was frightened by the fireworks in front of him. His experience had taught him that opponents in such a state of madness were difficult to predict, so he focused a little more closely on this last mobile suit he planned to slaughter. Finally, he noticed an opening.

“This is it!”

The Mk. V’s beam saber flashed by and the FAZZ's right shoulder fell off. Victory would surely be his.

Just as he thought so, Cod was embraced by a furious attack. Just before the FAZZ’s right shoulder was severed, the beam cannon's tube had already been in the process of firing at the Mk. V. Cod's screen showed that the propulsion system was damaged.

“Hoho!” Cod quickly activated the backup propulsion system. “Guess it's time to retreat.”

Apparently, Aeno’s fleet had already reached a safe zone, so Cod muttered as he brought the Mk. V back to the Moon.

His suit could explode at any time, so Crypt used all of his strength to pull the red and white striped ejection handle located next to the heads-up display. With a dull sound, the spherical cockpit pod popped out from the FAZZ's abdomen. His eyes were moist and red with tears that lamented his uselessness.

“How did it end up like this...?! ”

The spherical cockpit capsule floated silently in space, continuously sending out a distress signal. Crypt shut his eyes as the shockwaves from the FAZZ's explosion reached him from a distance.

On the other end, the 42 mobile suits that formed the first wave of the landing team fired their automatic thrusters and slowly landed on the surface of the Moon. No enemies remained to hinder their descent, so Roots, who had been patrolling the airspace, received an order to intercept the Mk. V.

“W-what?! The FAZZ squadron got wiped out?! Are you shitting me?! How are Shin and the others?”

Roots calmed himself down to listen to Mannings’s report. “Crypt managed to escape safely, but Grissom and Aldrin were killed in battle. The enemy is a Gundam.”

“Killed... in battle? They're already dead...?”

“The enemy suit appears to have taken damage during its engagement with the FAZZ team. But the FAZZ team was wiped out, weakening our fleet's mobile suit combat capabilities. You're the only one we can depend on to stop him. The blue Gundam has descended onto the Moon's surface. These are your new orders.”

The tone Mannings used to describe the destruction of the FAZZ squadron was fairly monotonous, which enraged Roots.

“Every time...! Every fuckin' time, you pretend to be so damn amazing! Grissom and Aldrin are dead! At least show a little emotion! Are you some kinda bloodless, tearless freak?!”

“I’ve discarded my emotions ever since I was a mobile suit pilot. Roots, even more people died during the last war. I lost even more friends and companions. But in war, there’s no time to get upset. Save your rage for the enemy mobile suits. You’re the only one who can do this. Do it for Grissom and Aldrin.”

Roots suppressed the urge to scream. Mannings was right. This was war. The difference between killing or being killed was...

Roots discarded the support equipment located on either shoulder of the S Gundam’s and transformed to mobile suit mode.

This was the S Gundam’s most powerful form, the Ex-S Gundam.

The Ex-S Gundam carried Roots, full of rage, to the Lunar surface to prepare to intercept the blue Gundam Mk. V.

...Unable... to comprehend... emotions...

However, Roots did not yet realize that his will was not the only one inside the S Gundam.

Chapter 8

THE BATTLE OF AYERS CITY

FACING THE NODE, Roots quickly spotted the Mk. V's blue body.

"You bastard! You killed my companions, so now I'll kill you!"

*...Friends are the most important thing...
...Must take revenge for hurt friends...
...Who are my friends...?
...He is one. The one hiding within my body...
...He is my friend, and so I must protect him...
...If he is hurt, I need to take revenge for him...
...It's called the pact of friendship...
...But is it right to do that if it involves hurting others...?*

The Ex-S Gundam carefully took aim, and a killer ray of white light shot towards the Mk. V. Roots checked out the 360-degree panoramic monitor. The targeting box was still placed over that dark blue suit. Images of the mobile suit exploding into pieces were floating around in his mind.

Inside the Mk. V's targeted cockpit, Cod had regained a normal state of mind after the battle with the FAZZ suits, and had activated descent mode.

"Primary rear thruster has been ignited. Discarding shield thrusters." He echoed the standard procedures and pressed a button on the side of his seat.

The Mk. V's combat shield, in addition to protecting the suit's body, served an additional purpose. Vernier thrusters installed in the shield could be used to propel the suit forward when the shield was locked into the suit's shoulder notch. However, Cod was nearly out of propellant, so it was pointless to carry the shield any longer, as the suit was entering the second stage of landing. Cod pressed the separation button and a small bomb ignited, forcefully disengaging the heavy shield. He took a look back and could only see the shield spinning around on its axis, flying further and further away. Coincidentally, Roots began to fire just as he ejected the shield.

Kaboom!

The shield Cod was looking at was suddenly surrounded and torn apart by a greenish-white beam.

"What the--?!"

He took a deep breath. The shield's remains struck the Mk. V's armor plating and caused waves of crashing noises.

Roots couldn't believe his own eyes. That blue-colored suit had been able to fly out of the explosion cloud without a scratch, and was still trying to finish its descent sequence. Roots was momentarily stunned, and could only stare blindly. The word "incredible" unconsciously escaped his mouth.

*...Praising the target of his revenge, even though his mind is full of hatred...?
...I don't understand...
...There are many things about war that I don't understand...
...There are many things about humans that I don't understand...
...I could assume there is an inconsistency in the theory, and label it a fault...
...Or... an abnormality...
...But no human is consistent in battle...
...Combat... Humans... Inconsistent theories... Abnormal...
...I was created to fight in battle...*

...I was created to be human...

...So have I become a part of that abnormal humanity...?

“This is Roots! The enemy's evaded the ambush! That guy's the fuckin' Grim Reaper! Hurry up and give me the projected landing point. He's in trouble once he lands. I'll take him down even if I have to nuke him!”

“Your projected landing point is Area 11-A, 2580 on the Moon's surface, directly behind the battle line of our first mobile suit wave that's already landed. It's too close to our own troops to use nukes. Besides, the Antarctic Treaty prohibits their usage,” Mannings transmitted.

“Dammit! You're tryin' to tell me to get to work, right?! Bring it on! I'm not afraid!”

Following the Mk. V's lead, the Ex-S Gundam turned around and rushed towards the Lunar surface while maintaining its engagement.

* * *

Most of Ayers City's facilities were located underground, with only small portions of the industrial zones exposed on the Lunar surface. As the area had been developed from an observation base, it lacked the design of a city, and so its facilities' locations were quite random.

The City Government was located in a gigantic, dome-shaped structure exposed on the surface, covering a 30-kilometer radius. Two kilometers north of the gigantic dome sat the Ayers City spaceport, and a mobile suit had infiltrated it.

“Is that the enemy's descent team?!”

The GM III squadron in charge of guarding the spaceport aimed their rifles at the invader. They gradually began to see that the suit's structure was different from the GM-series suits used by the enemy invaders.

“Don't shoot! I'm a friendly! I am Tosh Cray of the New Desides!”

It was the Xeku Zwei. The guard team lowered their rifles. The Xeku Zwei's heel spurted sparks of fire as its gigantic, clumsy body landed easily on the ground.

“I want to see the Mayor. Where is Mayor Kaiser Pinefield?” Cray quickly asked the guard team once his machine had finished cooling down.

“Right! The Mayor's in the main hall. You can take your mobile suit through the underground transportation tunnels to get to the dome.”

The commander's mobile suit pointed a finger at the far end of the spaceport, the entrance to the mass driver. It was similar to the subways of old.

The mass driver had originally been built when the colonies had first been constructed to transport minerals found on the Moon into space.

Ayers City, in addition to being an observation station, was originally also an advance base for the construction of the colonies. Because the observation station had been built in the gigantic dome in which the central office hall was currently located, the mass driver was not far from the base. The mass driver's tracks were buried beneath the Lunar surface and ran eight kilometers to the east of Ayers City, where it then resurfaced and connected to a four kilometer high launching rail.

Resources to be sent into space are first loaded onto magnetic carts and accelerated to a speed of 2380 meters per second, the speed necessary to escape into orbit. After traveling halfway up the launch rail, the items themselves will launch straight into space. The magnetic carts will then continue to follow the tracks to return to the surface and travel back underground in preparation for their next launch. The items catapulted out will float in orbit until the mass catcher at their designated Lagrange point opens up its large, reinforced nylon collection net to take in the goods. Cray was currently at the entrance originally used to send freshly-minded ores onto the mass driver.

Cray flew the fully-cooled Xeku Zwei into the underground tunnel and boarded the electromagnetic motor-driven container cart, which traveled silently and quickly through the dark tunnel. In just thirty seconds, the cart had reached the giant Ayers City Government dome. Ahead was an area that had previously been used for stockpiling, but had been temporarily refitted into a hangar used by the defending forces. Cray grabbed a preparation worker and entrusted the Xeku Zwei to him, then followed the worker's directions to reach the Mayor's office.

The door to the Mayor's office was made from aged red cypress, which allowed Cray to once again experience the smell of the Earth. The old worker who had led him there knocked on the door, and a somewhat high-pitched reply came from within.

Upon entering, a large screen displaying the Moon's current situation could be seen. A man with a muscular frame wearing a military uniform sat behind an office desk made of oak. He was the Mayor, Kaiser Pinefield.

"Mr. Mayor, I am Tosh Cray from the New Desides. It is an honor to meet you."

Pinefield stood up as well. "So you've finally come. Right. About the coalition that you were promoting... Let's do away with formalities and quickly clarify the current situation."

Cray realized the Mayor's determination upon seeing him in military garb. He wore an old-style military uniform worn by Federation officers during the One Year War, but it did not display any medals or rank insignias.

The mayor pointed at the dots of lights and began his explanation. "These dots represent our defense squadron, the Ayers City Militia. Each division is formed based on age and experience, and are further differentiated from one another by their color. For example, the white color right here represent the cadets from the Youth Academy that one of your own is commanding. The red color over here represents those sixty-five and above with military experience. Blue represents ex-Titans forces, and green represents the younger division with military service records."

"Even the young and elderly are being used. It's unbearable." Cray's words did not carry any signs of ridicule or sarcasm.

The mayor looked him straight in the eye and continued. "This is the will of the residents of Ayers City. Ever since our forefathers' generation, Ayers City's residents have embraced loyalty to the Earth. If we lose today, the Earth will no longer belong to Earthnoids, and we are all aware of that. It's a shame, because I doubt that such a small military force will be able to achieve any significant results. However, I believe that even if we are sacrificed, the remaining Lunar cities will continue to carry on our will. Thus, every single resident of our city is determined to sacrifice himself. This is the spirit of Ayers City. Besides, there is still a chance that the other cities will send reinforcements before we are wiped out."

"Now that I see that even you, Sir, share such determination, we will gladly accompany all of you into battle to the very end." Cray smiled and looked at Pinefield.

"While we understand your good intentions, we cannot accept your offer."

"Why is that?"

"The residents of Ayers City are religiously devoted to the Earth. Our philosophy is different from your own philosophy to fight for the Earth. We will never forget that humanity originated on Earth. If Ayers City is the last remaining tombstone for the Earth's past policies, then we are willing to guard that tombstone to the end. However, you people are different. Your existence serves as a reminder to everyone of the mistakes of the Federation Government, so you all cannot be so easily sacrificed. You must let the Earth Federation know how courageously we are fighting here. Even if we die here, all of you can only die on Earth soil."

The Mayor returned his attention to the monitor. "Yes. Perhaps the destruction of Ayers City is an inevitable fate. This is the purest of Earth's territories in space, and the source of the disparity between Spacenoids and Earthnoids. To tell the truth, even if your dream of a Lunar City Coalition is realized, no matter how many years go by, there will still be Spacenoids who will suffer the same tragedy as us because of humanity's inability to tolerate ideological differences. Just as my residents and I believe that we hold righteousness in our hands, those Spacenoids also believe that righteousness has been with them from the start. Only history can have the final verdict as to who is right or wrong."

"I understand, but we need this place to demonstrate the justice of Earthnoids. Mayor, the Lunar City Coalition will

definitely succeed.”

“I, too, hope so. But the situation does not permit me to let you do that.”

The Mayor looked at the diagram on the monitor that represented the city streets. A long line extended to the outskirts. Cray understood the Mayor's plan, but still felt some hesitation.

“But it's so old. Won't it be dangerous?”

The Mayor's facial expression implied that it would not be a problem. He nodded. The two then started to analyze and revise the entire defense plan.

Although the first wave of descent troops encountered fierce resistance, they managed to construct a beachhead once the second wave caught up to them. The two waves, consisting of nearly fifty suits combined, formed a horizontal line surrounding the Southwest end of Ayers City. The third wave of mobile suits, escorted by the two Z-Plus suits, also began their landing operation.

“Lieutenant Offshore, the enemies have us surrounded! Please, let us open fire now!”

With the assistance of the other defense teams, the Offshore-led White Squadron had managed to deal considerable damage to the first wave of troops that had landed. However, because the enemy possessed superior numbers and had already constructed a beachhead, Offshore had ordered his troops to fall back. However, his decision had not satisfied the young cadets.

“No, there are too many enemies! If we attack them head on, we'd be throwing away our lives for nothing!”

“We are not afraid to die! Please, send us into battle!”

“That's not what this is about. I don't want any of you to die meaninglessly. If you're looking to die, you must make sure to do it at the right place and time!”

For the first time in his life, Offshore understood the heavy responsibility of being entrusted with the lives of others.

He was a New Desides commander, and all New Desides members were professional soldiers well versed in battle tactics. White Squadron, on the other hand, was a bunch of young cadets who would lose their lives the moment he lost concentration. The difference between the two was too drastic.

As Offshore was searching for a suitable spot to stage a counterattack, the Federation's extermination troops did not waste a moment's time, and the boundary they encircled was shrinking. White Squadron finally arrived at the edge of a large rock formation approximately six kilometers in diameter that was situated along a mountain range. The extermination troops at the Northwest end of Ayers City had finished organizing themselves and began to press on.

“They're coming. Don't panic, even if your optical sensors are destroyed. Your suit's cockpit is below the top of the rock, so it's not life-threatening if only the head is destroyed.”

As Offshore gave out his orders, the elimination troops used short, swift movements to leap towards the rock formation White Squadron was defending. For a moment, they resembled rabbits.

“Prepare to fire!”

The enemy mobile suits had come nearer and now appeared closer in size to sheepdogs.

“Fire!”

The mobile suits of White Squadron began to spit lines of fire. Several enemy suits caught in the middle of their jumps were directly pierced by the beams. The other extermination troops panicked and lay flat on the Moon's surface.

“Aerial attack! There's an ambush set up in the pits of the rock formation!” A Nouvel GM III pilot blurted out.

“Where are our damn reinforcements?! What happened to the Gundams?!”

Both sides started firing at each other under cries of rage. The suits lying flat on the ground were shot the moment they stood up. At the rock formation, upon being shot, White Squadron's mobile suits fell backwards into the valley behind them. Both sides were thrown into an extreme state of confusion.

On the other end, Cod and the Mk. V had entered the final stage of the landing process. He saw the exchange of beam attacks near the entrance to the pit of the rock formation.

“Shit! The enemy's moving too quickly!”

He clenched his teeth, unable to do anything during descent. The broken teeth in his mouth were still spilling out fresh blood.

The Ayers City Central Government detected the Mk. V soaring in.

“There's a mobile suit sending out a friendly signal! It's getting ready to land! Estimated landing point is behind the lines of the enemy currently battling White Squadron!” The operations staff member reported to Cray.

“That should be Brave's Mk. V. His original landing point must have been changed because of how quickly the enemy managed to close in. Hurry and deploy mobile suit troops to bring him back!”

Cray's order was immediately conveyed to Offshore, who was engaged in battle.

“What is it, Captain Cray? ... Understood.”

And so, Offshore relayed the order to White Squadron. “Our army's Gundam is going to land behind enemy lines. Its pilot is the leader of our faction, who will eliminate the enemies in one fell swoop! We must do everything in our power to protect him and make sure he lands safely!”

Upon hearing “our army's Gundam,” the young cadets became full of excitement. Not only had the word “Gundam” always stood for justice, but its pilot was the leader of the New Desides. This motivated the squadron to complete their assigned task.

Finally, under dense suppressive fire, the Mk. V landed safely.

“An enemy suit has landed behind our battle line!”

“Hmm? Only one suit? Tear it to pieces, and hurry!”

The 143rd mobile suit squadron at the rear of the extermination troops discovered the enemy suit and immediately spun their rifle barrels around to target it. However, upon closer examination, they realized it was the infamous blue Gundam.

“Ahh! It's... it's that mobile suit..!”

The Mk. V's eyes flashed yellow and immediately caused the 143rd mobile suit squadron to panic. Cod drew beam sabers from the suit's shoulders and charged toward the confused enemy mobile suits. One mobile suit after another was sliced apart by the beam sabers as White Squadron shot down any remaining mobile suits attempting to escape.

The Mk. V fired its backpack rockets and flew over the elimination troops, who were caught between a pincer attack. The elimination troops discovered something was wrong, and were about to raise their rifles to shoot down the leaping mobile suit, but the Mk. V had already flown past the rock formation and arrived at White Squadron's defense line.

“Josh!”

“Captain Cod! You made it back in one piece!”

“Yeah, but I still took a few hits. You all have done great. Thanks a lot.” He paused. “What? These are all cadets?”

Offshore could tell based on the Mk. V's condition that it had taken more than “a few” hits. However, he greatly admired Cod's display of raw, fiery passion.

“They are young, Captain, but they're very strong-willed.”

“I can see that. That ambush at the rock formation was really something.”

Being praised by Cod, New Desides leader and Gundam pilot, caused the young cadets to feel extremely proud and honored.

“All of you, don't push yourselves too hard. Oh, right. Where's Tosh?”

“Sir, Captain Cray is at the central government hall discussing strategy with Mr. Pinefield. You can see our current situation. We should be able to hold out until the other cities send reinforcements.”

However, Cod knew in his heart that, based on what he had observed regarding the power of the extermination troops, such an estimation was overly optimistic.

“Hm. I'll go to the central government hall and take a look. You all, try to hold out a bit longer!”

After saying so, Cod in the Mk. V made another few high jumps and headed in the direction of the central government hall.

* * *

After a while, another white beam came in towards the rock formation's pit, and three of White Squadron's GM IIIs exploded.

“Tex! Sigman! Don't let that blue guy get away!”

The beam had originated from Roots' Ex-S Gundam, pressing on nonstop. He received a report that the Mk. V had been discovered, and formed up with the two Z-Pluses to give chase.

“White Squadron, listen up! Do everything you can to protect the Mk. V!”

Offshore saw the Ex-S Gundam and Z-Pluses soar by in the air and immediately knew what they were going to do. Immediately, the troops' web of fire shifted to surround the Ex-S Gundam and Z-Pluses. Offshore, piloting a Xeku Eins, leaped into the air to ambush them from behind.

“They're much more maneuverable than I am...”

He placed his crosshair over the left Z-Plus and pulled the trigger, all within a half breath of taking off. Before he could see the results of his shot, his Xeku Eins had already landed on the ground. Offshore performed a quick search and found that fragments were coming from the Z-Plus as it fell towards the surface of the Moon.

“Sigman's done for!” West cried out in despair.

“He only took one shot! He's not gonna die! Don't get distracted, or he'll get all of us!” Roots replied. The only enemy in sight now was the Mk. V.

The defense team surrounding the gigantic, dome-shaped central government hall was heavily bombarding the two new mobile suits charging in.

“Hey! At this rate, we'll all die!”

“Shut up! This bastard...!”

*...Will he die?...
...Does he intend to charge straight in...?
...I must protect him...
...I must get him out of danger...!*

The Ex-S Gundam ingenuously opened up a flight path to evade the web of fire coming from the Lunar surface, then managed to turn around and escape from the battle zone.

“W... what the fuck?!”

It had not been Roots' actions that caused this. The Ex-S Gundam had automatically taken over the controls. Roots was stupefied. None of the controls were responding. The accompanying Z-Pluses thought that Roots had given up pursuit and escaped the web of fire with the Ex-S Gundam. The Mk. V used the opportunity to slide past the entrance meant for the giant dome's heavy machinery and disappeared without a trace.

“Shit! He got away! You fucking whore!”

*...Whore.. Whore... Whore... Whore... Whore...?
...Was it wrong to save his life...?
...No, no, no...!
...It's useless to exchange your life for the enemy's...
...Were you wrong? Or was I...?
...Is it a sin to make logical decisions...? Negating dangerous instincts cannot be considered a sin, can it...?
...If that is true, then... to humans, is being meaningless a form of meaning?
...Debating whether to confirm or negate...
...Is this emotion? Is this what it means to be human...?*

Roots hammered violently on the cockpit's display and spat in disgust. Of course, he did not realize that another will presided in the S Gundam. “Her” ability to make decisions had experienced a great change.

March 17. The first day of the battle for Ayers City came to an end just like that.

* * *

The battle for Ayers City grew more and more intense as the days passed. Cray broadcasted the bravery of the Ayers City defense team to the other Lunar cities, which in response expressed their determination to defy those in power. Of course, he did not forget to pass on reports of the New Desides troops' fighting spirit as well. Nevertheless, the battle dragged on for a week. All that Ayers City still controlled was a less than one kilometer radius around the central government hall.

“Zone 360's outer city defense line has been breached!”

“What's Red Squadron doing in Zone 2?”

“Move Green Squadron to Zone 18!”

“Green Squadron was wiped out a long time ago!”

The central government hall's combat headquarters was filled with bellows. New information continued to show up on the screen fixed to the wall. Mayor Pinefield watched silently as the red lights representing the extermination troops continued to wipe out the green lights representing the defense teams. The weary look on his face was like that of a patient's, and could not be concealed.

“Sir, the squadrons that have suffered 30% losses need to be called back to be reorganized,” said Cray, who was the acting chief of staff, and thus had not slept for the last few days. His body and mind had slipped into a state of extreme fatigue.

“Have the other cities showed any intention to help us?”

The mayor grunted. “They look at our dream of forming a Lunar City Coalition like it was thought up by an idiot.”

Suddenly, a control staff member screamed excitedly, “We have received news that Von Braun City had expressed protests against the Earth Federation Government!”

“What? Have the protesters taken any action?” For a moment, Pinefield once again appeared full of energy.

“No. It's the same as it is in the other cities. Just a threat of economic sanctions. That's all they've done.”

The signaler's voice was filled with sorrow. All of the other Lunar cities had given their replies, but the only assistance provided had been in the form of protests. The Mayor's face began to turn sullen once more.

“It was, in the end, ineffective. Captain Cray, you've worked so hard. But it appears that the people of the Moon—no, Spacenoids—do not truly support your ideology. No matter the case, everybody is either politically or economically dependent on the Earth, and so it is Earth that dictates how we must handle affairs. Without the Earth, humans are unable to survive. Now, for better or for worse, whoever controls Earth is the representative of justice. I have finally figured out the situation, but the price to do so was too high.”

“I did not expect the Spacenoids' ideals to be more noble than the Earthnoids'. They are, after all, human beings as well. On the contrary, though, I feel that those able to survive on solid ground have more pride. Those so-called Newtypes are, after all, Earthnoids who yearn to live in space. The roots of all of these ideologies originated from pure Earthnoids. Someone once said that Newtypes represent the will of human revolution, but I feel that the ones who truly need to change their way of thinking are those living under gravity. Spacenoids always say that the humans bound in place by gravity will never be able to evolve into Newtypes. Isn't that a form of discrimination? Currently, I deeply feel that Spacenoids are not putting enough effort into enhancing the ideologies of humankind. However, we are the only group of people who promote human revolution and actually put in effort to enact our ideals. No matter what happens to us, I will willingly become the stepping stone for human evolution.”

“Is that so? Indeed, Spacenoids only use their ideologies to judge the humans on Earth, an indiscriminating activity. The people of Ayers City and I have inherited the longing our forefathers had for Earth. All along, we have had such strong feelings for the Earth. However, the other Spacenoids are different. Their longing has long turned to envy. Even though they have the ability to make a change, they have not achieved any concrete results. Earth against space, gravity against a lack thereof; they make constant childish comparisons without open discussion. Out of such narrow-minded thinking, I fear another new tragedy will be born. If we entrust the world to these kind of narrow-minded people, what kind of environment will they create? I truly look down on those bloodsuckers living in space!”

“I won't let them have their way, right?”

Pinefield and Cray looked at each other and smiled.

“We're still not dead yet. We will fight to the bitter end. Sir, let's create more painful memories for them.”

“But first, we have to escape from their web that surrounds us. If we execute our earlier plan, we won't be able to hope for any further assistance.”

The end of Ayers City was approaching. The New Desides had once again made preparations to escape.

The decision was made on March 24.

Chapter 9

THE MASS DRIVER

FOR THE NEXT three days, from March 24 onward, the battle did not go as planned. Ayers City controlled a roughly four kilometer radius around the central government hall.

Aeno's fleet, fighting above, had lost half of its battle force and retreated to Side 5 airspace. The ground defense team had been almost completely wiped out. The only forces still able to make organized attacks were the ones left at the spaceport and government hall. Some of the extermination troops had already advanced into the underground residential area. Thus, the remaining New Desides troops that had been dispatched to defend certain zones were recalled to gather at the central government hall to prepare to escape Ayers City.

"I am grateful to all of you. You have fought a wonderful battle. Today, Ayers City and I shall stroll into history. That is our destiny. However, all of you must bravely live on and continue to fight to raise doubts within the Earth Federation Government, even if it requires the use of military power. This is not a political battle. This is a battle for those who love the Earth. The current Earth Federation Government is unable to represent the thoughts and feelings of the majority. It is not the government, but the *people* who should possess the right to make decisions. I am truly grateful to all of you, and it is my honor to have fought courageously at your sides."

Pinefield, who had changed into a normal suit, expressed his gratitude to the remaining New Desides troops, who had formed in a straight line. War veterans Cod, Cray, Offshore, Side, and Saotome were, of course, seen among the survivors. The mayor and his troops were plagued by fatigue. The remaining number of troops was less than half of what they had when they first escaped from Pezun.

Afterwards, these New Desides troops traveled to the mass driver located in east Ayers City and launched the remaining usable mobile suits. The pilots headed West, to the spaceport, and left the Moon in shuttles. When the battle to defend Ayers City had first begun, Pinefield had already hinted at making use of an old mass driver network. Because the facility had not been used for a long time, they predicted that the Earth Federation Forces' extermination troops would neglect the seemingly abandoned network.

Indeed, the extermination troops had treated the mass driver as an abandoned transportation network, and thus did not dispatch troops to occupy or destroy it. Large portions of the tracks were buried below the granite bed of the Moon. The portions exposed above ground had been reinforced and armored during the One Year War, and thus could withstand light attacks.

Even though a select few suspected that Ayers City might use this mass driver to bombard Earth or the nearby colonies, after taking into consideration factors such as the politics involved, many decided against Ayers City doing such a thing. So far, the Earth Federation had treated the Ayers City rebellion as the sole decision of its Mayor, an isolated incident instigated by the New Desides. If Ayers City were to attack Earth or the colonies, the incident would escalate into an all-out war.

Among these layers of dispute, the New Desides put into action their plan to escape the Moon by breaking past their surroundings.

In the mobile suit storage facilities located below the gigantic, dome-shaped central government hall, final preparations and replenishments were being made to the remaining New Desides mobile suits.

"I'm very sorry, Captain Cod, but this thing is way too complicated. We can't complete the emergency repairs, especially to the Incom system. It's not fully repaired, so don't use it continuously. It can only be used another five or six times, so use it only if you absolutely must. However, we've installed micro-missile pods and adjusted the targeting system so it can be controlled by the IMPC system's firing mode."

Although he was left unsatisfied, Cod nevertheless thanked the preparation staff, entered the cockpit, and locked the hatch.

"Good luck, Sir!"

Everyone on the facility's bridge waved as the Mk. V slowly strode out.

“Thanks for all your help!”

A door in the central government hall usually used for heavy machinery opened. The Mk. V appeared in front of the escaping troops' mobile suits, spewing fierce flames.

“Tosh's team will take the spaceport. My team will secure the mass driver. Even if our comrades fall in battle, we must continue on! Remember, one man's sacrifice could save the lives of ten of his comrades!”

Cod's order caused everyone to feel uplifted. This would be his final order as the leader of the New Desides.

Cod and Offshore brought the troops to the East and secured the mass driver's launch rail. On the other side, Cray led his troops to secure the spaceport to the North. The other troops went underground and made preparations to launch the mobile suits. The Mk. V silently led a team consisting of a mix of Xeku Eins and Zweis, Zakus enhanced by the Ayers City Militia, and GM IIIs into battle. To protect these forces, the Ayers City Militia stationed around the gigantic dome began to fire more fiercely than ever before to divert the extermination troops' attention, thus indirectly providing fire support for the drops to occupy the mass driver.

For several days in a row, the Ex-S Gundam, assigned to escort duty, had been forced to fly to and from various combat zones nonstop. Finally, a chance to rest presented itself, and the Ex-S Gundam stayed behind at the supply station along with the two Z-Pluses to await orders.

On the first day of the battle, Sigman Shade was attacked by Josh Offshore of the New Desides, and a HLV (Heavy Lifting Vehicle) had to transport his Z-Plus back to the main cruiser for repairs. The *Pegasus*'s repair crew worked continuously through the nights and managed to send the suit back into battle four days after it was shot down.

“Roots! West! Shade! There's been a new development at the central dome! Move out immediately and engage in combat! You're the only ones available now!”

Roots, awaiting orders inside the Ex-S Gundam's cockpit, received Mannings's order to sortie. He dumped the coffee-flavored beverage he had been sipping out to the side and started up his suit. He looked exhausted; he seemed to have aged ten years over the last few days.

“You old bastard, do you get a kick outta makin' fun of me? Gundams can't do everything... Ex-S, Ryu Roots, ready to launch!”

“Z unit 1, Tex West, ready to launch.”

“Z unit 2, Sigman Shade, ready to launch.”

Before the Z-Pluses could finish replying, Roots had started the fuel pump.

“Let's go!”

The three Gundams' backs emitted balls of light as they charged into the starry Lunar sky.

The troops that Cod was leading to occupy the firing platform were currently battling the frontline extermination troops.

“Josh! Move some troops to the right side to draw the enemy away. Don't push yourself too hard,” Cod yelled after slaughtering a second GM III with his beam saber.

The entire area was dancing with colorful beams.

“Understood! Draw the enemy away. First assault squadron, follow me! All squadrons, keep your distance. Fire once you're in range!”

The two sides exchanged fire with their beam weapons. The concentrated beams pierced the extermination troops' GM IIIIs, turning them to fragments in a matter of seconds.

"I got one, Lieutenant!"

Offshore was shocked to hear the tender voice's report. New Desides troops would never report such minor details.

"Who gave that report?" Offshore, piloting a Xeku Eins, said, destroying the three suits surrounding him. Such success was all the result of Offshore's training. He was not a so-called "Newtype." His smooth, chained movements were the result of tough training, and resembled those of a highly skilled samurai.

"Lieutenant Offshore, we've come to help you!"

He finally recognized the voices of the young cadets from White Squadron. He was annoyed at the possibility that they were only looking to die. However, Offshore himself was unable to determine at whom he should vent his annoyance.

"Idiots! Why did you come? Return to the central government hall and disarm yourselves at once!"

"We want to fight to the very end! We won't get in your way!"

The moment for another tragic cry to be transmitted came too quickly. Beams from above destroyed the young cadet's mobile suit.

"From above?"

Looking up, he saw the Ex-S and two Z-Pluses flying in formation.

"Captain Cod, it's three Gundams," Offshore warned his commander while attacking in midair. The extermination troops on the ground had all been taken care of, so all that was left to concentrate on was the aerial assault.

The young cadets from White Squadron imitated Offshore's actions and fired upwards, but without much effect.

"Why haven't you all left yet?! Don't die in this kind of place!"

Another suit from White Squadron was destroyed.

"Come after *me*, you cowards! You have no right to kill them!" Offshore snarled furiously. He had finally found a target at which to vent his frustration and anger.

"Josh, take care of the gray suits in the back. Leave the white suit in front to me!" Cod said.

Let's give 'em a little something to worry about, he thought. He launched his Incoms and fired at the middle of the formation.

"Ho ho...!"

The discs that suddenly appeared in the middle of the enemies' formation, while they did not do much damage, managed to scatter the enemy. The two Z-Pluses performed an evasive turn to avoid the beam shots, while the Ex-S Gundam dodged in the other direction.

Offshore followed Cod's order and leaped after the two Z-Pluses.

"It's that guy again...!"

Roots looked down and lowered his altitude immediately upon seeing the Mk. V. He thought the blue Gundam would try to escape, but surprisingly, the enemy was actually leaping straight at him.

"Let's declare a winner right here!"

Facing the blue enemy charging fiercely towards him, Roots felt a strong urge to fight.

"You came at the right time! Who cares about your Incom thing?! I've already seen you in combat!"

Roots changed his selected weapon. The two lids on the Ex-S Gundam's knees opened with a sharp noise and shot out two cylinder-shaped, wire-guided weapons: reflector Incoms. This weapon was similar to the Mk. V's Incom in that both were pseudo-Psycommu weapons. However, the reflector Incom did not possess any offensive abilities. Instead, it formed a large energy field to refract beams fired by either the enemy or the controller himself, changing the angle of the beam attack and allowing the beams to attack the enemy from unexpected angles. It functioned similarly to a mirror.

The two reflector Incoms, set to auto mode, were flying around with a whizzing sound. After predicting the Mk. V's exact destination, the weapon control computer on board the Ex-S directed the cylinders to the best spots to reflect his attack.

Roots saw the word "fire" displayed on the screen and immediately pulled the trigger of the beam smart gun hanging off of the Ex-S's waist.

Bzzz! Bzzz! Bzzz!

Three flashes of light quickly appeared and flew at the Mk. V at complex angles.

"Huh?!"

Seeing the flash of light, Cod quickly shifted the machine to the right. The beam gently swept past the suit's body, but melted its left leg.

"Ha! That kind of bluff only works against amateurs!"

Cod once again launched the two discs on the Mk. V's shoulders at the Ex-S like a pair of poisonous snakes pursuing their prey. The discs emitted crashing sounds while shooting out tiny beams of light and bolted towards the Ex-S's torso.

Roots dodged the first shot to the left, but as for the second shot that followed it...

"Shit!" All of his thoughts stopped cold for that moment.

However, the Ex-S automatically performed an unexpected maneuver. She turned the beam smart gun that was fixed to the center of the suit around and managed to block the beam. The gun's movable frame completely melted, rendering it unusable.

"Huh? You're... Are you trying to protect me...?"

Roots, having been sure that would be the end of him, was in a state of awe when he discovered that he was still alive. He quickly examined the weapon's condition on the weapons panel.

Currently, the suit's main weapon, the beam smart gun, was unusable, so the reflector Incoms did not have much use either. He ejected the damaged beam smart gun away from the suit and raised the priority of retrieving the reflector Incoms to first. At the same time, he fired out the single Incom installed in the head.

The Mk. V's Incom system was still making continuous attacks. Roots managed to narrowly evade them, but finally realized that the enemy's piloting skill was not to be underestimated.

"Why haven't you given up? That thing is useless against me!"

Although Cod knew that was so, he also knew that his own Incom system could not be overused, so he switched to attacking with his beam rifle. He knew that while the discs had damaged the enemy suit, just using the discs' beam attacks would not take that Gundam down.

Bzzz! Bzzz! Bzzz!

The Ex-S's Incom fired three beams. One of them hit the Mk. V's back but, similarly, as its firepower was weak, only the armor plating was damaged, and the attack did not cause enough damage to influence the outcome of the battle.

The two Gundams continued to fly upwards to gain an advantage in altitude. No one could intervene with their intense battle, simply because no other suit was as maneuverable as theirs were.

“One more time!”

The Incom system, needing to be recharged, had to be retrieved from time to time. Cod saw that the Ex-S had re-launched its Incom system and immediately opened the recently installed micro-missile pod in response. The missile pod's cover opened loudly and consecutively fired countless missiles at the Ex-S. When the missiles exploded, numerous small steel balls were scattered. A rain of these small steel balls formed between the two suits and the Ex-S's Incom was trapped within it, immediately losing its functionality.

“Dammit! New toys!”

Roots scanned through the weapon selection display and selected a new set. This time around, he chose the beam cannons located on the Ex-S's hips and began to fire them continuously.

“Dammit! This guy just won't give up...!”

Cod's tone was filled with unbearable resentment upon seeing his opponent switch to a new weapon. His opponent was obviously using his superiority in weaponry to make up for his poor piloting skills.

Roots flew to the far end of the rain of steel balls and continued to fire, but found that the Mk. V's outline had suddenly, almost magically, disappeared.

Kaboom!

Allowing him no time to catch his breath, the steel balls impacted violently on the Ex-S. Roots then saw the Gundam, resembling a giant standing in front of him.

While the face of a Gundam was usually viewed as a savior, the Mk. V's current facial expression was hardly a merciful one. Both eyes shone a golden light and were glaring straight at Roots.

The Mk. V had actually used the rain of steel balls as cover, and suddenly landed back on the Moon. It then fired its rocket thrusters once more and leaped up, delivering a swift kick to the Ex-S as its hands simultaneously grabbed hold of the enemy's hip-mounted beam cannons.

“With just these?! Do you really think you can win with just these things?!” The Mk. V pilot's bellow penetrated through the vibrating armor plate and into Roots' cockpit.

“Don't go overboard, you old bastard!” Roots unconsciously yelled in panic.

“All you Newtypes are still green! Keep crying, you little punk! Watch as I squash you like a bug!”

“I'm not a Newtype! I'm a human!”

“You thought this Gundam was something special, but in the end, you still can't top my technique!”

The string of continuous conversation had once again caused a change in the other will within the Ex-S.

Mother taught me to be human... To become a warring human.

Warring humans are all mad creatures, but I have yet to experience madness.

In order for me to go crazy, I must malfunction, and if that happens, my functions will be stopped.

Then does that mean I am inferior to humans?

I do not understand what they say... They are sure to be divided into good and evil, which cannot coexist.

*However which side is right?
No, both of them are crazy. Both lack logical reasoning.
There is still another way...
Ah! I am forming two different wills myself...
I can't!
I can't investigate further...
I should not change arguments...
They need to separate! I need to let them separate...
Right. I have my own will... I must... depend on myself in battle!
But does that mean... that I have to walk the path of self-degradation?*

Cling...

The Ex-S automatically disengaged its hip-mounted beam cannons, causing the Mk. V to momentarily grab empty space. At the same time, she raised her right knee and fiercely rammed the Mk. V's chest. The Mk. V swayed and landed on the surface of the Moon. The Ex-S had also lost its balance and had too fallen down, leaving it sitting on the Moon's surface.

“Gah! Argh...!”

Cod endured the pain. He readjusted his suit and managed to stand. The tooth that was broken during the battle with the FAZZs a few days ago had again begun to bleed. His mouth was filled with a salty taste.

After stabilizing itself, the Mk. V used its right arm to draw its beam saber. With a hissing sound, the blade extended.

On the other side, Roots nearly wet his pants again because of the Ex-S's actions.

He saw the Mk. V charging forward and prepared to enter melee combat, but before he could react, the Ex-S automatically opened its knee, drew the beam saber stored there, and grasped it in its right hand.

“What?! I... I didn't do that! What kinda shitty suit is this?! Even the pilot is optional!”

By the time Roots cleared his mind, the Mk. V was already dangerously near.

“Die, Newtype!”

Roots dropped into an extreme state of panic. He had never experienced a close range mobile suit duel. He had only recently familiarized himself with the Ex-S he was controlling.

“No, no! I don't wanna die! I want to live a few more days!”

It was a fear capable of driving one insane. Muscles all over his body stiffened, refusing to be controlled. His testicles had shrunk back into his body, and his mind was a completely blank slate. Only his violent vomiting allowed him to experience the taste of his final moments.

“I don't wanna die! Raaaahh!!”

*Natural instincts. The desire of a species to survive...
It is something that only living things possess, a wonderful mentality that humans have.
I understand.*

Pzzz...

The beam saber's hot blade extended. Roots immediately sobered up.

“I'm piloting the S Gundam... I won't die here...”

The beam saber pierced the giant's abdomen. In barely a few seconds, different scenes depicting human life flashed by in his mind. It was an unbearably long few seconds to him.

Dong, dong, dokang...

The one that felt it first was the Mk. V. The Ex-S had lowered its body and beautifully pierced the Mk. V's abdominal area. The two maintained their respective postures. Their stillness caused the suits to resemble statues.

Before Cod's consciousness slipped into the dark abyss, he dreamed of the beautiful, blue planet. His will had momentarily brought him across space. He smiled.

“Finally... I can return... to Earth...”

The Mk. V's body emitted a greenish-white spark. A chimney of strange smoke spouted from it, and it finally exploded.

“Did I win?”

The Ex-S Gundam had leaped away to evade the explosion. Roots gasped as the Mk. V disappeared in the expanding ball of fire. He could not help but express his gratitude to the preciousness of being alive.

In his heart, he continued to think about what kind of man the enemy who had called him a Newtype was.

By that time, the New Desides had successfully occupied the mass driver network and spaceport. However, unbeknownst to everyone, a new shadow had been cast on the surface of the Moon.

Chapter 10

THE SHADOW OF NEO ZEON

OFFSHORE, PURSUING THE gray colored Gundam, looked up to see an expanding ball of fire on the 360-degree panoramic monitor panel.

“Ah!”

When he saw the white mobile suit intact, flying away from the explosion, he could not help but repeat the words, “How can this be? Why did it turn out like this? It’s a lie! Dammit! Dammit!”

It was difficult to accept the truth of the situation. He did not charge forward, but instead simply stared longingly as the white mobile suit flew further and further away. The gray suit that he had been chasing earlier had taken the chance to escape.

“Captain Cod... Captain Cod has... died in battle.”

The news reached Cray, who was in the process of occupying the spaceport. He could not believe his ears.

“What..? Even Brave...?”

He started to think about Cod, but was also worried about the mental state of Offshore, who had reported the news to him.

“Josh, are you alright?”

“Yeah... I can still fight.” Offshore thought Cray had inquired about his current situation on the battlefield.

But it was better that way. Cray felt that Offshore was strong enough to accept anything that came his way.

And so, despite how sinful it made him feel, Cray decided to make full use of Offshore's mental strength. Back during the One Year War, when he was in a Zeon POW camp, although he didn't like it, Cray had made use of others for his own personal gains. Witnessing the current situation, he knew he had to make full use of these youths with such potential.

“Okay. From now on, you will be in charge of commanding the troops.”

“That's too heavy a load for me...”

“You have to do it, Josh! I've stabilized the situation here and I'm handing command over to you. Don't worry, you can do it!”

“Understood. I, Josh Offshore, will now hold the right to command the troops.”

“It's all up to you now.”

Cray saw the first wave of escape shuttles being launched. They were to fly straight to L1 and rendezvous with the remaining ships in Aeno's fleet who were waiting for them there.

After cutting off communication with Offshore, Cray started to mumble to himself.

“Oh Brave, in the end, you faced even your last moments as a soldier. What can I do now that I am alone?”

Cray had always been a dreamer. Although it was hard on the ears, he thoroughly enjoyed the glee of battle. However, from now on, he would have to turn himself into an activist.

Gazing at the rocket thrusters of the space shuttles that traveled further and further away, he finally understood the weight of White Brow Pinefield's responsibility.

* * *

The autonomous Lunar city, Ayers.

The extermination troops had disarmed half of the residents' military equipment, and only the central government hall had yet to surrender. Inside his office, Mayor Pinefield received a note from the signaler and, while reading it, grumbled, "Too late. It's all too late..."

The signaler who had passed the note to the Mayor was also utterly fatigued. The blood stain on his forehead had dried.

"Ha! The Spacenoids we never really got long with were, in the end, the only ones who offered to provide aid. How ironic."

The Mayor removed his normal suit's helmet and placed it on his office table.

"How should we reply?"

"The last thing I can accept is their assistance. If the transmission had been sent during the first few days of the battle, I probably would have rejected it outright."

Pinefield went silent for a while, then continued, "Okay, this will be our reply. 'While we are grateful to Neo Zeon for offering to assist us, Ayers City will unfortunately end its resistance today and will reenter the control of the Federation Government. I shall die to take responsibility. We again thank Neo Zeon for their kind intentions, and hope that they will continue to support the warriors of the New Desides.' There's no need to encrypt the report. Just send it directly."

"Mayor, we've been completely and utterly defeated."

The signaler's voice sounded a bit dry and hoarse. His body quivered slightly upon seeing the determination on the Mayor's face.

"Please, let me me to accompany you..."

"No. Only the elderly possess the right to die. I owe you youngsters far too much. In order to save the reputation of Ayers City, I must be the one to do this. As for all of you, your mission is to educate the soldiers of tomorrow on the meaning of this battle and its results. If you all are to die, who will I have left to depend on?"

The Mayor placed his hand on the signaler's shoulder.

The signaler bowed silently, turned around, and walked out the door.

"Grr." He heard the noise of an opening drawer.

The Mayor opened the drawer of the wooden desk and looked at fate. It felt heavy and ice cold in his hand.

The young signaler closed the door and left. He heard the sound of something metallic being struck, followed by the sound of something breaking. At that moment, he stopped cold.

He knew that the sound had ended Pinefield's life, along with his ties to Ayers City.

The signaler walked straight to the administration department and saw residents and casualties occupying the corridor.

"Mom, is the Gundam our enemy? Will the Gundam come and kill us?" A young boy watching the news's report on the battle in the administration hall asked his mother. The child was holding onto a metallic RX-78 Gundam toy. The paint on the hero of the One Year War was chipping off.

The young mother did not reply, and could only hug her crying child. The child used all his strength to throw the toy, which

once represented his hero, against the wall. However, the toy did not shatter to pieces.

The signaler picked up the toy, returned it to the boy, and said, "It's already over. The Gundam represents justice. He would not come to kill us."

He forced a weak smile, patted the child on the head, and continued to the administration department. The responsibility of the soldiers of tomorrow. The earlier generation had irresponsibly opened the door to war, and the survivors had the obligation to bear the burden and carry on living. It didn't matter whether they liked it or not, for they needed to take up this responsibility and construct a new history.

* * *

The shadow on the other end of the universe had finally approached the Moon. It was a space fleet dispatched by the Neo Zeon army.

"Deck 2, hurry up with the launch of the C-types! It's too congested back here!"

On board the bright red, flower calyx-shaped battleship, the workers on the mobile suit deck were in a great rush. Bellows were exchanged within the ship's interior. Unit after unit of pink-painted Gaza-C-type suits were being launched into space by the linear catapult system.

"Are we gonna launch the E-type too?"

"We're preparing for war! Of course we'll launch it!"

After the pink, humanoid war machines had finished launching, countless new suits that resembled the already-launched C-type were pulled out onto the deck. They were hooked one after another onto the linear catapult and shot out. In no time at all, countless humanoid war machines surrounded the bright red battleship that acted as the heart of the space fleet.

"I couldn't have imagined it would end up like that..."

"Admiral Twanning, are you sure this is a good idea? Once Ayers City falls, the current operation will be meaningless. Should we recall our forces?" The captain of the battleship *Gwarey* turned around to face the fleet commander behind him.

"No, just wait. Recalling the ground troops will hurt their morale. Besides, this is the best place to demonstrate our combat capabilities. According to the contents of the transmission, the people of the New Desides might still be of some use. Additionally, there are rumors that people within their organization have been secretly assisting us."

Admiral Twanning, who kept a well-groomed beard, continued to dictate the battle plan.

During the One Year War, he had served under the banner of Rear Admiral Kycilia Zabi and overseen the command of A Baoa Qu to the very end, where he had ended up as a captive of the Federation Forces. Eventually, with the help of the Zeon army's remaining associates, he managed to escape from the Federation Forces' POW camp in Iceland to the asteroid Axis occupied by the Zeon army. He had then become involved in the foundation of Neo Zeon.

"It seems to be a man named Saotome..." The captain took out an operation case file and found out the name of the informant.

* *

Above the surface of the Moon, the New Desides troops that had occupied Ayers City's mass driver were engaging in battle with the extermination troops while launching their remaining mobile suits. By now, the extermination troops finally realized the importance of the mass driver, and continuously dispatched mobile suit troops to the area to suppress it.

"Alright! Next in line, board the container!"

"No, the Zwei's too big. Save it for last!"

The mass driver's control station, located a short distance away from the central government hall, was in a state of chaos.

When a mass driver launched a mobile suit, its pilot could not be in its cockpit because the g-force generated was too dangerous to withstand. Therefore, upon the launch of their suits, the pilots rushed to the spaceport to board a shuttle. In the meantime, anyone with their hands free was required to assist in launching the other suits.

“Good work! All of you, hurry to the spaceport!”

“Right! We'll get one more out first!”

All of them shared the same wish: to send as many suits out as possible before the extermination troops arrived so that more of their comrades could go back to space. The ones who had made this mission to escape a possibility were the mobile suit troops guarding the spaceport and launch rail. They had gradually tightened their front line and begun a slow retreat inwards. Only the most elite mobile suit pilots had managed to survive to this point. They had made flexible use of the terrain and guerrilla warfare tactics to achieve impressive results. Offshore, who had recovered from the shock of Cod's death, was currently commanding them.

Offshore had rendered nine suits from the extermination troops immobile over in a span of only thirty minutes.

Because the difference in combat strength between the two forces was so great, he had given up his desire to completely destroy the enemy suits, choosing instead to disable three with the same amount of firepower required to destroy one.

His personal suit, the Xeku Eins, appeared from the shadow of the cliff and scored its tenth suit of the day. He had only destroyed the Nero's legs, causing it to fall to the ground, unable to move. However, Offshore knew that he did not have time to confirm the suit was disabled, and quickly hid under the left side of the rock formation's shadow. In order to achieve success in battle, he knew that one must start moving immediately after firing a shot.

One by one, the extermination troops' mobile suits were ambushed and disabled, creating a great deal of panic. Everyone began to shoot blindly.

“I didn't want this kind of battle. I wanted to have a fair, proper confrontation.”

Offshore understood in his heart that his tactics were superior to the enemy's, but even so, he could only hide among the shadows, continuously performing sneak attacks. It was a disgrace to him.

However, there was not enough time to accept the disgrace. Now that he was a commander, he had only one concern: to use the least amount of force to achieve the greatest results.

Just as he spoke, he finished off his eleventh mobile suit.

Three hours ago, Ayers City had surrendered and disarmed itself. As for those persistent young cadets, Offshore had forcefully destroyed their mobile suits' legs so that they had no choice but to give up fighting. Without the support of White Squadron, Offshore was now fighting as a lone wolf.

Indeed, he had personally removed the will to fight from these soldiers of the future, for if the direction they were heading in was wrong, then he would rather bear the responsibility himself. However, Offshore did not realize that he himself was also a victim of the mistakes the previous generation had made.

Now, after losing both Cod as a leader and the assistance of Ayers City, he could only depend on himself. The New Desides organization was the same; they had lost all external sources of aid and were heading into a dangerous and unstable future.

* * *

“Tex! Sigman! Hurry up and take down the mass driver! The other troops are being held off by guerrilla attacks and can't get near it!”

The Ex-S Gundam, having been heavily damaged during its battle with Mk. V, had been sent to the supply base for light emergency repairs, and thus had lost most of its weapons. Currently, it could only borrow the beam rifle used by the Nouvel

GM III. The two Z-Plus suits were also damaged. However, because of the repair crew's intensive efforts, the Ex-S had finally been restored to its normal combat state. Upon receiving Mannings's new orders, Roots felt they were being unfairly treated.

“Why do you keep sending us off to die?! We're already exhausted beyond belief! Why can't you let us rest a bit more, you scumbag?!”

“Unfortunately, we can't! Are you giving up now? Ryu Roots, your tone used to be so arrogant. But now, you've become as cowardly as a mouse. The problem is that *you* aren't the one who decides whether or not you sortie. You were personally chosen and brought here to pilot the S Gundam. You cannot pass your position over to anyone else.”

“Chosen and brought here”? Which asshole was responsible for selecting me?”

“In any case, you can't get out of this, no matter how much you'd like to. Do you realize that while you were whining, even more pilots lost their lives?! So, whether you like it or not, you need to go, Ryu Roots.”

“Argh! Fine! I'll go, dammit!”

The Ex-S was once again launched, and the two Z-Plus suits continued to act as its escorts.

“What kind of fucked up order is this? Trying to work us to death, is that it?” Even West was complaining, a rare occurrence.

Upon reaching the airspace above the mass driver's launch rail, the three Gundam pilots looked down took in a deep, controlled breath. Countless damaged mobile suits lay across the area.

“This guy is strong...” Just as Roots sighed, another suit was ambushed.

“Luckily, our mobile suits can fly. I pity our comrades below,” West commented.

“If this goes on, the number of casualties will only increase. We need to destroy that mass driver, quickly!”

Roots stepped harder on the Ex-S's accelerator.

Just as Offshore aimed at his thirteenth prey, the top of his monitor showed three rays of light.

“Puh. It's those Gundams again!”

Immediately after he pulled the trigger, Offshore spun his suit around and gave chase to the Ex-S. The thirteenth prey exploded behind him as his Xeku Eins fiercely leaped up.

“Ryu, there's a blue mobile suit closing in!” West warned Roots upon discovering Offshore.

“Got it! But our objective isn't the mobile suits!”

With a buzzing sound, Offshore's suit started firing at the formation. Roots managed to narrowly evade the attacks.

“Isn't that bastard the one that shot me down?!” Sigman shouted. He could tell by the way the suit moved.

“Shit! At this rate, the mass driver...”

After its first attack missed, the Xeku Eins again landed on the ground. Offshore quickly used all his might to continue leaping towards the launch rail.

“It's three Gundams! They're going for the mass driver!” He managed to warn the accompanying suits while flying his own.

“Incoming!”

The New Desides mobile suits, upon receiving the warning, gathered up and began to fire intensely at the three Gundams flying towards the mass driver network.

“Protect the mass driver!” “Shoot it down!” The pilots loudly blurted out, but the three Gundams managed to delicately fly past their web of fire and fired several critical shots at the launch rail's support pillars.

“Is it too late?”

Upon seeing what had happened, Offshore clenched his teeth and blamed his suit's weak thrusters.

The mass driver's launch rail soon began to falter.

Following their first pass, the three Gundams made a 180 degree turn and prepared to deliver another round of concentrated fire. However, because their speed was so slow, it took them a full five seconds to change direction.

“Grr! Why is it so slow?!” Roots complained while bringing his Ex-S into its attack pattern.

A Xeku Eins suddenly appeared in front of the Ex-S and pointed its rifle at Roots. It was Offshore's suit.

“I've finally caught up to you...!”

Offshore quickly pulled the trigger, but at the same time was hit by ray after ray of surprise beam attacks.

“What?!”

The Ex-S had suddenly changed its target and decided not to attack the network. Instead, it started firing at Offshore's suit.

“Why do you do this?! I said our target *isn't* the mobile suits!”

A wave of vibrations caused Offshore to slip into unconsciousness.

* * *

“Josh... Josh...”

In the confusion, he heard someone calling his name. A long time seemed to have passed.

“Gah... Gah...”

Upon hearing Offshore groan, Cray set his mind at ease. “Josh, can't you tell? It's me, Cray.”

“Captain Cray... Where are we...?”

“We're inside the clinic of the Neo Zeon flagship, the battleship *Gwarey*.”

“Neo Zeon?! How did we end up here...?”

“They have come to help us. When you were attacked, they were near the launch rail's orbit. They were the ones who started the wave of bombardment to support us.”

“To support us?! How do you call that support?! They were just firing at everyone indeterminately!”

“Either way, that's what happened. I don't know who asked them for help either, but they at least saved our lives. Our companions who left first on the shuttles are all on board this ship. In total, forty members managed to escape alive, and we have them to thank for that.”

“How was I unconscious?”

“You were asleep for a whole day. We barely managed to rescue you, but you were unconscious. Josh, you did well. By the way, it would be best if you didn't open your eyes yet. Most of your optical nerves were damaged by the impact.”

Upon hearing Cray say that, Offshore's handsome face became startled. He couldn't see, and would not be able to participate in future battles. Cray noticed his reaction and quickly said, “Don't worry, you're not blind. According to the doctors here, you will recover within a month.”

“A month...? That long...?”

“You can fight again once you recover, so you need to rest up.”

In a month, the New Desides would probably no longer exist. Offshore thought that in his heart, but did not dare say it aloud. He was afraid that if he were to say that, he would forfeit the right of his life.

“I still need to see the fleet commander. Don't think too much. Just rest.” Cray left the clinic, leaving Offshore alone to face the dark world.

On that same day, March 28, the situation underwent another drastic change. The Neo Zeon army had entered the battle, and the Federation Forces had ceased their attack due to political reasons. Neo Zeon made use of this opportunity to receive the New Desides troops stranded on the surface of the Moon. However, also on that day, an entire Lunar city had vanished forever.

The Ex-S Gundam and the two Z-Plus units stationed on the surface of the Moon were recalled to the *Pegasus III* and prepared to accept a new mission.

Chapter 11

TARGET: PENTA

"WHAT YOU ARE trying to say is that this matter is not up to you alone to decide, right?"

"I'm sorry, but I need to consult our other members. If our leader, Brave Cod, were still alive, he would do the same thing."

"Looks like you are all still biased against us Zeon citizens. However, I feel I need to emphasize that we are not the Zeon of old. We are a new organization formed by people unsatisfied with the Federation Government."

Inside the captain's cabin on board the Neo Zeon battleship *Gwarye*, the second discussion between Fleet Commander Admiral Twanning and New Desides Captain Tosh Cray ended.

Neo Zeon had expressed its willingness to absorb the members of the New Desides into their organization. However Cray was not willing to accept that so easily. After the loss of their leader, Brave Cod, Cray was now the highest ranking official within the New Desides. However, due to several clear-cut strategies, he could only respond to the present affairs with silence.

On one hand, because Neo Zeon was also an organization opposing the Earth Federation Government, they shared a common interest. However, on the other hand, the Titans, whom the New Desides had originally admired, were originally an armed force formed to eliminate the remaining Zeon forces. Even if Cray was willing to join forces with Neo Zeon, which had been formed by the remaining members of Zeon, the other New Desides members may not be able to agree so easily.

Indeed, if they were to align themselves with Neo Zeon, they would gain the substantial firepower required to make a direct strike against the Earth Federation Government. However, to perform such an act would be to officially declare Earth as an enemy. If they did that, the New Desides would lose their values and reason to exist. It was indeed a difficult decision to make, whether to abide by their original faith or to compromise and receive military power.

Yesterday's enemy had become today's ally.

"I guess I need to look at this from a more realistic perspective."

Cray grabbed onto the moving handgrip that ran down the hallway and floated back to the cabins assigned to the New Desides troops. While gazing out the cabin's window, he mumbled to himself as he saw a formation of three pink Gaza-C mobile suits fly by. Behind them, a *Musai* class cruiser towed a gigantic cone behind it. Cray thought the HLV looked somewhat strange.

The Neo Zeon fleet had readjusted its flight path and was currently heading to L1. Their objective was to rendezvous with Aeno's fleet and collect the mobile suits launched from the Moon.

If I were him, what would I do? Cray thought of the man who, like Cod, was also an activist. However, this man went about his business in a drastically different manner than Cod.

"He's probably still on Earth doing some sort of clerical job. Is he already retired? Or has he begun a new lifestyle? Does he know what I'm doing now?"

Cray understood that he still owed the man a favor. He would not die meaninglessly before he returned it.

However, Cray did not know that this man, Stole Mannings, was a part of the very same forces pursuing him.

* * *

The mobile suits that had survived the battle on the Lunar surface had been brought back to their respective mother ships on HLVs. However, the Ex-S and Z-Pluses, as they had enough thrust to pull away from the Moon's gravity, had left first and

were now on the *Pegasus III*'s deck.

"Oh, you guys are still alive!"

The one who had come to welcome Roots's fatigued group was Shin Crypt. After losing two of his squadmates and having his FAZZ suit destroyed in the battle against the Mk. V, he had been absent from the following battle. However, the FAZZ was incapable of descending on the Moon, and so he had no part to play in the invasion anyway.

"Eh, we're lucky just to be alive. I'm pretty damn tired. Leave me alone for now."

"I understand." Crypt looked on as his view of Roots' back got smaller and smaller. He then opened his mouth to shout, "Thanks for taking revenge for me!"

Roots, without turning around, threw him a thumbs up.

* * *

Later, March 31, Earth Standard Time 0600 hours.

The *Pegasus III* fired its thrusters, turned around, and broke away from the spherical formation that Task Force Apha had maintained. Their new mission was to pursue the Neo Zeon fleet that had rescued the New Desides troops. Among all the vessels in the fleet, only the *Pegasus III* was fast enough to give chase.

"Because our objective is to determine if the New Desides have joined forces with Neo Zeon, this will be mainly a recon mission. Don't engage in any unnecessary combat. All mobile suit pilots need to get sufficient rest. Additionally, unless the enemies attack first, take special care *not* to attack the Neo Zeon ships or mobile suits. That concludes the briefing."

"That asshole! Another death mission!"

Roots, after taking a short nap, was getting a beverage from the pilots' ready room when he heard the internal announcement made by Captain Heathrow.

"You were finished off so easily because your tactics were shit."

The shocked Roots turned his head. Beside the door was Mannings, commander of the mobile suit troops.

"Honestly, you're only good for scaring people." Roots stared at the officer while drinking a slightly sweet energy drink.

"Well, you still managed to survive the battle on the Moon's surface."

"I thought you would praise me. What do you mean by 'still managed'?"

"You shouldn't think that you're experienced just because you've gone into battle a few times. Until you can beat me, you'll always be rookie."

"Whatever. I was just about to ask you something anyway. Back on the Moon, you said I was 'chosen'. What's that supposed to mean? Of all people, why'd you choose *me* to pilot the S Gundam? Isn't that a little odd? And why does the S Gundam move on its own?!"

"What? The S Gundam moved on its own?"

"Yeah, she started to move by herself. But thanks to her, I was able to finish off that Gundam called the Mk.V, so..."

"I see..." Mannings was deep in thought.

"What are the origins of this Gundam, anyway?"

"All I can say is that it's a truly fantastic machine. As for your other questions, that's not something you should ask. Let's get this out of the way first: How about being my sparring partner? I want to see how much your piloting skills have improved."

"That'll be fun. How about if I win, you tell me the S Gundam's secret? C'mon, I'll show you what I've got."

The two of them stepped out of the pilots' ready room and went to the mobile suit deck. Roots boarded the S Gundam, and Mannings entered the cockpit of the Nero Trainer located beside it.

The two mobile suits removed the training-use paintball guns from the hangar wall and stepped out onto the mobile suit elevators.

"Training again? You guys are hardcore."

The screen inside the Nero Trainer's cockpit showed the face of Heathrow, the ship's captain. Mannings faced the camera inside the cockpit and signaled with his eyes. Heathrow switched over to a private channel in response. This way, the others would not hear the contents of their conversation.

"Commander, those scientists lied to us. A.L.I.C.E. was not sealed."

"What?! That bastard Karl..."

"She's still alive inside the S Gundam, and she's learned a few things from Roots, the Cheshire Cat. What I'm trying to do now is to see if it's made any difference."

"I see. Don't push it. Come see me later in the captain's quarters. We will discuss the details. I'll be expecting you."

As the conversation ended, Mannings's Nero Trainer stepped onto the linear catapult, and Mannings felt slight vibrations. He switched the IMPC to flight mode, and the two mobile suits were launched from the linear catapults on either side of the *Pegasus III* into the darkness of space.

* * *

In the dining hall on board the Neo Zeon flagship *Gwarey*, the surviving members of the New Desides were huddled around Cray in deep discussion.

"Actually, the only difference is in the choice you make. Those who want to go with the Neo Zeon, go. Those who wish to stay with the New Desides and continue to fight, stay. Wouldn't that do?" Fast Side, from the fourth assault squadron, said. The meeting had been held based on Cray's suggestion. No matter their rank, each of them had the right to voice their opinion, and so everyone was discussing the matter enthusiastically.

"What about you, Fast?" Cray asked.

"Of course I'll stay, but I'm not going to stop those who want to leave. If we divide our forces into two, no matter which group is destroyed, the other group will continue to fight on. Wouldn't that be a good thing?"

"Dividing your military power is never a good idea." "Besides, there are only forty of us. What else can we do?" Some members chimed in.

"Then are we just gonna lay down and surrender to the New Government?"

"No. I feel instead that borrowing Neo Zeon's power is not a bad idea. It's simply a matter of either keeping our reputation or exchanging it for military power. I would rather be sacrificed for our ideals. How else are we going to demonstrate our will?" Offshore, his eyes hidden by bandages, faced Cray and stated.

"Even now, you're still discriminating against the Neo Zeon name. This is ridiculous. We all share the same goal. What's wrong with cooperating with those who possesses actual strength?" Saotome replied.

"Captain Cray, it's pointless to discuss this any further. If you agree to make the final decision..." Side urged him as all the

members' eyes gathered on Cray.

Cray silently shut his eyes, waited quite a while, then said, "I understand everyone's intentions. I hereby announce that, from today on, the New Desides has been formally disbanded. I will not stop those who wish to join Neo Zeon. Those who wish to fight on at my side, stay. Let's say goodbye to each other without complaints."

"That's just irresponsible!" The dining hall immediately started to get rowdy, but after a while slipped into silence as Cray had.

A few members stood up, raised their hands in salute to Cray, and left the dining hall.

"Thanks for all your care and concern." Saotome threw a gaze at Cray while walking past.

"It was you who called the Neo Zeon fleet over, right? I'm eternally grateful to you for convincing Mr. Aeno and Ayers City to join us. It's just that I never would have thought there was someone among us born on Side 3."

"I did not try to conceal that from the start. I am happy to be able to work with everyone. While I wish to continue to fighting with all of you, I have my own mission. I must fight to restore my homeland."

"Indeed. In the past, you and I were divided in opposing camps. But do not be mistaken; we now share equal status as comrades. I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart. You must do your very best."

Cray and Saotome shared a close handshake.

Only twenty-eight members had been willing to stay, which amounted to roughly two-thirds of the survivors. Cray did not feel disheartened, however his expectations for the future had been lowered.

"Everyone, listen up. From this point on, our path will only become more difficult to travel. The New Desides no longer exists. From now on, the battles we choose to fight are our own personal ones. Let's take a gamble and see what we can accomplish with only twenty-eight men!" Cray vowed in front of the remaining members.

* * *

Upon entering a region of space not far away from the *Pegasus*, Mannings's Nero Trainer and Roots's S Gundam began another intense dance of battle.

"Mannings, your ass is showing!"

Roots's S Gundam sneaked behind the Nero and raised its paintball gun.

Pzzz! Highly compressed air propelled the paintballs towards the Nero, but Mannings miraculously evaded the shots by shifting left and right. The paintballs hit empty space and exploded, spraying florescent yellow dye.

"Dammit!" Roots clenched his teeth and swore.

"All of your attacks are pulled straight from standard battle procedures! In an actual battle, you need to make unexpected attacks in order to win! Looks like you're still a rookie. I honestly have no idea how you managed to survive back there and actually make it back from the Moon's surface in one piece!"

Mannings turned the Nero's body 180 degrees around to directly face the S Gundam. He hoped to reenact the course of events from the battle with the Mk. V. The battle's record had already been digitized and input into his Nero's IMPC.

"Gah...!"

On the monitor, Roots saw the Nero charging towards him, and panicked and screamed in response. He was again reminded of the duel to the death he had fought with the Mk. V on the surface of the Moon. The Nero disappeared without a trace in the blink of an eye.

Why? Why must he intentionally make me recall that event?

I won't be afraid, even if I have to experience it again!

The Nero ducked below, then raised up and quickly fired paintballs at the S Gundam in a straight line. The S Gundam evaded down and to the right while continuously firing at the Nero flying by overhead.

The gray and orange-painted Nero was dyed with three yellow blotches.

"Oh? Not bad. Looks like you really have improved. So, that makes it two wins and one loss, right? Don't forget how a real battle feels."

"Great. You haven't forgotten about the agreement we made earlier, right, old man?"

Mannings' words hinted that Roots's attack, from start to finish, had not proceeded according to his own will. That was what Mannings had observed.

"This fight was far too different from the last one. Has A.L.I.C.E. really awoken...? But it didn't seem complete. Maybe that was only a self-defense instinct," Mannings thought.

In order to fully awaken A.L.I.C.E., they could not let the Cheshire Cat know of her existence. If the one-sided love affair developed into a willing relationship, there would be an early divorce. When humans are secretly in love with someone, whether male or female, they will try their best to improve themselves to impress their love, basically cultivating their charm. Thus, using a one-sided love affair to train A.L.I.C.E. to be independent was an important part of constructing A.L.I.C.E.'s consciousness.

The process of using this type of false love to let A.L.I.C.E. become fully independent could not be easily stopped once it had started. It was too dangerous to reseal her now. If A.L.I.C.E. was rejected, there was a possibility that she could self destruct. If that were to happen, the entire plan would be ruined.

"Roots, it seems like you're still unsure about actual combat, like you're relying on your sixth sense to do battle. Your flaws are bound to appear if you battle with your feelings, so you still haven't truly defeated me. I will only recognize your ability when you can beat me every time."

Despite their previous agreement, Mannings still decided against telling Roots the S Gundam's secret. However, because was an adult, not staying true to his word was not something outside the norm.

"You're damn tricky, you know that?! A win is a win! Don't tell me part of being an officer is not living up to your end of a bargain!"

"Although you're technically one-and-two, in an actual battle, you'd already be KIA'd. How can the dead brag about victory?"

"This is ridiculous! You old fucks are always lying, always full of excuses! Watch out, or next time I'll ambush you from behind!"

"We're in the same boat. You can't be too honest if you want to make a living in today's society. Roots, if you think you can ambush me from behind, then come give it a shot."

"Oh, I will, but not now. I'm all outta ammo. We'll declare a real winner next time!"

* * *

Neo Zeon had arrived at L1 as planned. The twenty-eight New Desides members, including Cray, moved on board the *Bull Run*, the flagship of Aeno's fleet.

Judging by its outside appearance, the flagship had suffered considerable damage in the last battle. Only the cruiser *Seikyou* remained to escort it. This was the only bit of military strength Aeno's fleet still possessed after battling the superior

Federation fleet.

The Neo Zeon battleship *Gwarey* approached the *Bull Run*. The twenty-eight remaining New Desides members boarded a connection craft and departed. On board the *Gwarey*'s control deck, the group of New Desides troops who had stayed behind looked on respectfully as Cray and the others departed. Among the group was the Side 3-born Neo Zeon supporter, the man named Saotome.

The small connection craft docked next to the Bull Run's locked hatch. Cray went up the bridge and discussed the current situation directly with Aeno.

"Don't tell me they're all unusable! Only five suits ready to sortie?!"

Most of the mobile suits that had taken such great effort to launch from the Moon were damaged beyond use due to the shock that had occurred when they had been stopped by the collection net after being shot from the mass driver. They were far more damaged than originally expected.

"Gah. I'm really sorry. If our fleet had been able to properly distract the enemy fleet, you all would have had more time to adjust the firing speed during the launch..."

In reality, Cray had long known that Aeno's fleet had lost a large portion of their vessels after the heated battle. A few ships had even surrendered to the enemy. Aeno, recalling the tough battle, said, "I didn't expect they would send my son to deal the final blow. That was indeed something."

"Sorry, Admiral, but wasn't your son killed in action during the final battle?"

"Oh, I always talk like this. I'm just used to calling my past students 'sons'. I was referring to the captain of the *Pegasus III*. When I was the principal of the Advance Officer's School, he graduated at the top of his class, and now he's already commanding a fleet in a real battle. I guess it's time for an old vet like me to retire." Admiral Aeno's expression radiated with satisfaction as he spoke of the experience.

"Captain Cray, we've received a transmission from Neo Zeon. They're requesting to speak specifically to you," said a signaler from the corner of the *Bull Run*'s bridge.

"Patch it through."

The communications monitor showed Admiral Twanning of the Neo Zeon fleet.

"Everyone, it is time for us to go our separate ways. Because we still have yet to complete our preparations for a direct military confrontation with the Federation Forces, all we can do is provide you with a cruiser and mobile armor as a parting gift."

A *Musai* class cruiser moved itself adjacent to the *Bull Run*. It was towing the strange conical object Cray had seen while on the *Gwarey*.

It was not a HLV, but a mobile armor. The surprising part, though, was that the cylindrical object had the dimensions of a cruiser. It was hard to believe that such a large mobile armor existed.

Mobile armors were also referred to as "high mobility space fighters" or "all-range general purpose support weapons". Compared to mobile suits, which are commonly used in melee or close range space combat, mobile armors placed greater emphasis on firepower and concentrated attack power. They were classified as heavily armored, heavily equipped mechanical weapons, and so their appearance was not limited to just a humanoid shape. Even though the development of mobile armor technology was quite common, never before had a mobile armor of this size, measuring over two hundred meters in length, with the ability to match a cruiser in battle ever appeared.

"This mobile armor is only a prototype, but it's equipped for real combat. We call her the Zodiac, you're free to name her whatever you like. The operations manual is inside the cruiser. I hope to be reunited with all of you in the future."

"Thank you for your assistance."

Cray and Twanning each faced the communications monitor and saluted, bidding each other farewell.

The Neo Zeon fleet left behind the cruiser and gigantic mobile armor, then turned and departed in the direction of L1.

“'Zodiac', huh? Is it a defective model?” The *Gwary*'s captain asked.

Twanning smiled and replied, “Since it’s free, they can tolerate a few defects. After all, our army does not have the capabilities to provide them with anything more. They are, after all, only a renegade faction of the Federation Forces, and so are not worth looking out for too much. We, Neo Zeon, still have to prepare to descend to Earth and fight there. Come to think of it, it was a waste to give them an additional towing vessel.”

Neo Zeon's lack of military strength had been shown when they had dispatched troops to several colonies to declare their intentions.

With only twenty-eight troops, five mobile suits, a damaged battleship, a cruiser that can barely move, a bizarre mobile armor and a towing vessel... What can Cray, the bald guy and the others do? They asked in their hearts.

After leaving the bridge, Cray walked into the officer's room assigned to him and sat in front of the computer, which he used to retrieve information from the main computer.

The *Bull Run* was modified from an old battleship, thus some of the items used in daily life had not been changed at all. For example, the computer lacked voice recognition input and vision tracking, and actually required a keyboard for input.

Cray unconcernedly pecked away at the keys on keyboard and brought up computer-generated 3D maps of the space surrounding the Earth, the Moon, and the orbits of the satellites. These pieces of information could not be considered classified, for they were available on any computer on board a Federation Forces vessel.

Cray stared expressionlessly at the maps of the space regions, then suddenly started to rattle on the keyboard again, as though he had discovered something. He enlarged the image of Earth's lower orbit and saw a low-orbiting communications space station from which five transmission cylinders extended.

“Penta, huh...?”

He continued to rattle on the keyboard and searched through the data retrieved by the computer when it was last online. He was trying to gather information on the strength of the fleet stationed at Penta and the strength of the troops involved in the Moon invasion, all while keying in additional factors such as the flight details of the fleet and the route they were taking, along with civilian-use navigational information. Several minutes later, the computer calculated the probable combat status of Penta. The Earth orbital fleet was seemingly still stationed in Lunar orbit and had not returned to Penta. At the moment, Penta was just an empty shell.

Next, he brought up the schedule of events for the Federation Government.

“The date of the Federation Legislative Assembly meeting...”

A new strategy floated around Cray’s mind. He frantically rattled on the keyboard once again.

“This is it...!”

Twenty-four hours later, he had already planned out the strategy, and began to explain it to Admiral Aeno and the other New Desides members.

“The details of this operation plan are roughly as follows. Because the spaceport assigned to the Federation Forces' Earth orbital fleet, Penta, currently has weak defenses, a surprise attack can easily suppress it. Once we gain control of a space shuttle capable of descending to Earth, the mobile suits and their pilots will immediately descend on Dakar City in Africa and gain control of the Federation Legislative Assembly currently in session. On the other end, the mobile armor will remain in orbit on combat alert to defend against any Federation fleet that may rush over to provide reinforcements. Finally, we will use this mobile armor to carry out a precise bombardment of the Federation Forces' new headquarters at Dakar.

"However, 'bombardment' does not mean that we will drop bombs. According to the mobile armor's operations manual, this mobile armor has the ability to enter the atmosphere. Thus, it's similar to a small-scale colony drop in that we will use the mobile armor to directly ram the target. However, because the mobile armor is controllable, the accuracy of the drop will be much higher. This is a surprise raid that can be executed in our current situation, with our current combat strength, and can be considered a form of armed revolt."

Although Cray knew the operation would end in tragedy, he hoped to still show the world their majestic goals. The proposal, upon being unanimously accepted, was immediately put into action.

Cray and Side were chosen to pilot the mobile armor. With several technicians, they boarded the connection vessel and headed to the *Musai* class cruiser.

As it had been specifically modified to tow the mobile armor, the cruiser was unarmed. To make the cruiser easier to identify, they named it the *Brave*, a name that none of them could forget.

"Target: Penta!"

The *Bull Run*'s captain gave the order. The damaged battleship led the cruisers *Seikyou* and *Brave*, the latter towing the mobile armor, as they proceeded en route to Penta. Even though each of them knew that this would be their final battle, their will was still as determined as ever.

Chapter 12

PURSUIT

ORIGINALLY, THE *PEGASUS III* had planned to rush to L1 to pursue the New Desides and Aeno's fleet, which might be hiding there. However, on the way, it encountered the Neo Zeon fleet that had just parted ways with the New Desides. The fleet began to fire warning shots at the *Pegasus III*.

Several of Neo Zeon's Gaza-type mobile suits flew quickly towards the *Pegasus III*'s bridge. Although Neo Zeon claimed to not want to start a fight, such an action was clearly an attempt to provoke the *Pegasus III*. Earlier, the Federation Forces Commanding Office had given strict orders not to engage in any actions that could potentially lead to battle, and so the *Pegasus III* could only attempt to avoid them.

The attempts to provoke the ship went on for two hours. Heathrow, the ship's captain, ordered the *Pegasus III* only to maintain its cruising speed and continue to head towards its destination. In the pilots' waiting room on board the ship, the mobile suit pilots were staring at the monitor, observing the Neo Zeon mobile suits' provocation attempts.

"Could they stop being so irritating?" Roots was lying back in his chair, using both hands to support his neck.

"You don't want a battle to break out here, do you?" Crypt said, putting his vacuum-packed lunch in the microwave. West, who was beside him, had just taken a hot meal out of the microwave and was looking for somewhere to sit down. The smell of barbecue sauce rushed into Roots's nose.

"I was talkin' about our lunch, not those mobile suits, you idiot. They haven't changed the menu for a week! I can't stand them..."

"Heh. When did you become a gourmet chef?" Crypt rubbed his hands in front of the microwave while waiting for his lunch.

"It's the military. Just deal with it," West said, eating his steak.

"Heh, all you guys do is talk about the military. Who decided that just 'cause you're in the army, you have to deal with all this crap? To me, the army's just a professional training center, 'cause they've always accepted troublemakers like me. Once I learn everything the army's got to offer, I'm outta here. I don't know if it was good luck or bad luck that I actually got chosen to pilot a mobile suit and get sent out here to kill people. Tex, to you, killing people is no big deal, right? Probably did it a lot when you were in Karaba. You're pretty much an expert."

West was normally easy to get along with, but his eyes now showed a fierce expression.

Crypt noticed it and quickly interrupted. "Didn't you always used to say that you wanted to go into battle and test your skills?"

"Yeah. I didn't know how it felt to kill someone back then. I thought fighting in a war would be cool, and easy. Now, I'd never make such a statement."

"You make it sound so easy. You're a killer now too. Besides, Tex doesn't kill people because he likes it. I'm the same way myself."

Crypts took his meal packet out of the oven and sat at the head of the table. "Alright, real steak!"

"It's fake. It's just bean protein."

"You idiot, pilots always get the best stuff to eat. You know that."

"Oh, really? Then isn't it unfair to the cow if we don't eat the whole thing? Where did Sigman run off to, anyway?"

"He's training in the simulator. Ever since he got shot down on the Moon, he's gone there willingly every day," West replied.

"I'm touched." Roots grabbed a meal packet and stood up.

"Uncle West, how come I've never seen you get so angry before?" Crypts pointed his plastic fork at him.

"Actually, what Ryu said was right. I don't have any right to be angry. In reality, all ideologies were thought up so that everyone could have their own perspective on things. That's why everything's based on the minority following the majority. However, that's also why humans go to war. Don't you guys think humans are pretty strange like that?"

"Man, I can't figure out complicated things like that. I'm sure Roots is with me on this."

"Everything he does is based off of his instincts and experience."

"Don't tell me he's a Newtype after all..."

"No, he just has a free heart. He's a very normal person, which is why he can't bare the restrictions placed on him by the Government and by society."

"To me, he's just a parentless orphan..."

* * *

Cray sat inside the Zodiac's control room, staring at the constantly-changing timer. The New Desides' three ships had arrived in a region of space from which Penta was visible.

Inside Penta's port were three large *Enterprise* class shuttles. These were the vessels they needed for the final stage of their operation.

Because the New Desides ships constantly transmitted their IFF codes while approaching, Penta thought they were the advance team from the main fleet. The Zodiac was currently disengaged from the *Brave*, so to Penta it looked like the fleet consisted of four large ships. The five Xeku suits were hidden inside artificial, capsule-created asteroids, waiting for the chance to launch a surprise attack.

Finally, the timers on board all of the vessels reached zero.

"It's party time!"

At Cray's order, all of the ships, mobile suits, and the Zodiac rushed full speed towards Penta.

They had not expected Penta to be completely defenseless. Each mobile suit oversaw a corner of Penta airspace, while the ships stopped near the station. The Zodiac's shape began to change, and the two mega particle guns hidden inside its body were exposed.

The ships entered the airtight chamber one after another. Rifle-equipped troops wearing skintight combat gear descended into the spaceport's interior.

"We are the New Desides! In order to realize justice, we have come to take control of Penta. We have a mobile armor, mobile suits, and other military equipment currently in our possession. If we encounter any resistance, we will not hesitate to destroy Penta! Those who surrender will not be harmed, but if anyone dares to resist, we will kill every single one of you!" Cray broadcasted the transmission several times in an intimidating tone.

"Captain Cray, I can't help but be reminded of when we first revolted at Pezun," Side, sitting at the other control station on board the Zodiac, said. The mobile armor had two control stations, located on the Zodiac's top and bottom sides as dictated by the machine's lengthwise axis.

"Right, but back then we had many more comrades and mobile suits. It all began at Pezun."

He had never imagined that this new beginning would end up being so similar to the last one.

The Federation members stationed at Penta looked out the window and were shocked as they saw the Zodiac and Xeku Zwei pass by.

They had thought the Zodiac was a gigantic mega particle gun platform, and hadn't realized that it was actually a mobile armor.

When the New Desides troops outfitted for close combat invaded Penta, the preparation and support crews were the first to surrender. Even though a few military police continued to resist, once they had used up all of their ammunition, their resistance ended as well. In just two hours, all fighting had ceased, and Penta was captured.

"We suppressed the enemy that easily, huh?"

The armed members gathered all the captives in the troops' dining hall inside Penta. Cray was astonished by their complete lack of awareness.

"How are the space shuttles?" He asked a member passing by.

"Completely undamaged. No problems. We're gonna load the goods next."

"Heh. Well done."

Once Penta had been captured, the Zodiac immediately docked there to allow Cray to enter the station and monitor the situation. The mobile suit troops entered the hangar through the two entrances located at the central part of Penta. From the outside, no signs of battle could be seen. The only things seemingly out of the ordinary were the *Musai* class cruiser and gigantic mobile armor anchored at the port. However, the Earth Federation Forces had collected and modified several *Musai* class cruisers after the War for use by reserves at colonies. Because the cruiser was unarmed, it was easy to mistake for a supply or transport ship. The Federation Forces did not have any data on the Zodiac provided by Neo Zeon, and so it was easy to mistake it for a large support ship.

The sun rose from behind the Earth to Penta's rear.

* * *

"Commander, it's been six hours," the navigation officer reported to Heathrow.

Neo Zeon had continued to threaten them for that long. Every officer and mobile suit pilot on board the *Pegasus III* was tense, having neared the limits of their tolerance.

"Fine. The enemy has to be tired by now. Put the mobile suit squadron on combat alert around the ship and get out of here as fast as you can!"

"But Commander, that could result in conflict with the enemy!"

"It won't. The enemy will definitely avoid us. They're not looking to start a war now either. It doesn't matter; just get out of here as fast as you can! I'll bear all responsibility."

The alarm indicating level one combat status was sounded. Immediately, the *Pegasus's* interior was in an uproar.

On the hangar deck, the S Gundam was separated into three fighters.

Indeed, the S Gundam was a mobile suit made up of three machines, each capable of fighting on their own. Normally, though, the S Gundam would not be used separately, because each of the units' individual fighting abilities were not as efficient as when they were combined. The S Gundam's best combat potential could only be realized when the three units were combined.

The other weapons were the same. Even though it was labeled a multipurpose machine, its ability to separate and merge was a way of increasing the S Gundam's worth. Only in the most urgent of situations would it need to be separated. Currently, because they had lost all three FAZZ suits, and other suits like the Z-Pluses and Neros were undergoing maintenance, they were forced to resort to separating the Gundam to fill the gap in their combat abilities.

For this launch, Crypt piloted the G-Attacker, which formed the top of the S Gundam; West piloted the G-Bomber, which formed its bottom half; and Roots controlled the central Core Fighter.

"It should be easier to control than the Wyvern. We're launching!"

On Roots's signal, the linear catapult launched the three fighters into space in sequence. They formed up in the *Pegasus III*'s airspace.

"What a weak show of force. Oh well, we've got no other choice, since the Neros are under maintenance," Crypt said.

"Incoming!"

Three of Neo Zeon's Gaza-type mobile suits appeared from above and closed in on the *Pegasus III* in a standard formation. However, their actions made it seem as though they were using the *Pegasus III* to conduct an anti-ship training exercise.

"Hey, hey! They're actually using our mother ship for target practice! How can they beat me with weak crap like that?! Shin, Tex, let's intimidate 'em!"

Roots shifted the Core Fighter towards the Gazas. The G-Attacker and G-Bomber followed close behind.

"The three fighters are coming at us!" A Gaza-C pilot quickly reported to the squadron leader.

"Relax, it's nothing to be afraid of. They're only trying to intimidate us; they wouldn't dare attack. Either way, they've just made themselves the new targets of our exercise."

The squadron leader laughed. But just as he did, the fighters flew past them at an extremely close distance.

"Are they insane?! Don't tell me they want to fight!"

The Core Fighter cut in front of the Gaza formation's flight path, preventing them from moving forward. It did a barrel roll and flew back to the rear end of the formation as the G-Attacker and G-Bomber started firing their cannons. Roots showed a smile full of malice, then took aim at the lead Gaza.

The Gaza-C's cockpit was filled with the loud sound of a warning siren.

"Commander, the enemy fighter's got a laser lock on me!"

"What?! Are they serious...?!"

"Could the Federation really have declared war?!"

"Crap! Evade!"

The Gazas did a 180-degree turn and flew back to their ship.

"Haha! They ran away! Bunch'a cowards..."

"Nicely done, Roots!"

As they received Mannings's transmission, the *Pegasus III* fired its main thrusters. The ship's gigantic body was suddenly accelerating away from them, emitting a ball of light behind it.

"I know you're in a hurry, but don't just leave us stranded out here!" Crypt said in a tone indicating unfairness, causing

Roots and West to laugh.

"Six hours ago, the New Desides occupied Penta."

Heathrow called Mannings into the captain's cabin and delivered the bad news.

Inside the captain's cabin, a cover of the song "At the End of the Rainbow," a hit during the old century, was playing. The *Pegasus III* had broken away from Neo Zeon's attempts to provoke it, and had finally arrived at L1. However, as expected, the New Desides had long since disappeared without a trace. According to Earth Standard Time, it was already April 3.

"They were definitely distracting us to buy time. But what are they trying to accomplish by occupying Penta?"

"About that... I'm not even sure he's still alive. However, it's a fact that they have a brilliant mind with them. It's very possible they've thought up a plan that we never could have predicted."

"Earlier, the Neo Zeon fleet was intentionally trying to hinder us. With that in mind, the two parties had probably already split up, no?"

"As long as that man is still alive, they will not form an alliance with Zeon."

"You're that confident?"

"Because of something that happened in the past, something personal... Yes, I am."

"I see. Anyway, the higher-ups will probably send us out again to recapture Penta. What's the status of the mobile suit teams?"

Mannings took a miniature computer out from his pocket and looked up the status of the mobile suit maintenance.

"We can launch the two Z-Pluses and the S Gundam, but the Nero squadron isn't ready yet. Currently, the only usable Nero is my trainer suit."

"That won't do. Our numbers are lacking. It looks like we'll have to reorganize the mobile suit squadron. That will be your next task."

"Commander, I've already made arrangements. I'll leave the S Gundam in the hands of Roots, West, and Crypt. We'll keep it separated to increase our numbers. Crypt is one of the S Gundam's backup pilots, and West's humble nature will keep those hotheads in line. Additionally, Sigman will remain as the pilot of one of the Z-Pluses. I was thinking of letting Chung Yung from the Nero squadron pilot the other suit. He's already put in enough time in the simulator to be qualified to use it. That way, although it's not ideal, we'll have five deployable machines on board the ship."

"Isn't your Nero available?" Heathrow laughed and pointed at Mannings.

"Well, we can use it to fill out our numbers, but I was talking about the number of suits we can actually use in combat."

* * *

Three green-painted Zaku-type mobile suits formed into a straight line and charged forwards. Beams from their beam rifles were spread everywhere, creating balls of light that illuminated the mushroom-shaped space fortress.

Bzzz! Bzzz! Bzzz! The incoming beams struck his GM's limbs, sending them flying off.

Suddenly, he realized that those limbs had changed into his own. He couldn't see any friendly craft in the surrounding area. He was too terrified to be able to cry out. He blamed himself for violating the rule of engagement that said never to pursue a target too far.

In the blink of an eye, the Zakus transformed into demons straight from Hell. They flew around him, mocking his powerlessness. The demons drew long-handled scythes and continuously cut across his body. He was still unable to make a

sound as blood splattered everywhere.

A white suit appeared and dispelled his fear of death. However, the mobile suit was missing its right leg.

"Stole...!"

Cray suddenly awoke from his nightmare. His back was soaked with sweat. He'd had yet another nightmare about his encounter during the One Year War.

Cray's scream awoke Side. He sat up on his bed, located next to Cray's, and looked at him concernedly.

"It's nothing. I just didn't sleep too well..."

"Are you really okay, Captain...? You don't look well. We'll be going into battle soon. Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"Gah, it's nothing to worry about. What time is it, Fast?"

"April 4th, 0500 hours Earth Standard Time."

"It is? So I slept six hours... In three hours, we'll begin our operation." Cray forcefully tore away the safety belt on his bed.

"Captain, you're in dire need of rest. Our mission is to escort the landing team and drop the Zodiac. The shuttles have already been prepared for battle. You don't need to work so hard."

"As a commander, I had better take a look. Anyway, we're still not familiar with Zodiac. It'll take longer to make adjustments."

"I guess I've got no choice. I'll go with you."

Side undid his own safety belt and accompanied Cray out of the officers' cabin and to the commons. The preparations for the shuttles that were to be used to land on Earth had already been completed. The shuttles were now awaiting their final checks. In three hours, they would leave Penta and fly straight to Dakar.

Upon entering the Zodiac's control stations, the two of them ran final checks on the machine's condition. The mobile armor's body was equipped with a separate compartment containing a pseudo-Psycommu system, into which Cray had stuffed a large missile found on Penta.

However, as they had previously stated, they did not plan to actually fire the missile. It would be used only to provide additional explosive force during the drop. Although the mobile armor's gigantic body had relatively powerful destructive capabilities, their target was the Federation Forces Commanding Office, and so they had installed the missile just to be safe. Thus, the missile's shell had no fire control system. Once the two pilots had steered the mobile armor to its designated drop point, they would leave the Zodiac and board the shuttle that would come to pick them up.

"Fast, how are things on your end?"

"All green, Captain. Do you want to take it on another practice flight?"

"Gah, it's fine. It'd better to save the propellant. Let the *Brave* tow it."

Slowly, the *Musai* class cruiser *Brave* loosened its connection with the Zodiac. All of the ships' thrusters emitted flames as they adjusted their positions to head into the darkness of space.

This spur-of-the-moment exercise would make the upcoming operation easier. However, they did not realize that to Tosh Cray, it would bring about the worst possible outcome.

* * *

Upon leaving L1, the *Pegasus III* had reached a region of space from which it could oversee Penta. Heathrow ordered the

ship to stop, and various camera-equipped recon craft were launched from the cavities along either side of the bridge.

One hour ago, Heathrow had received orders from the Federation Forces Commanding Office ordering the *Pegasus III* to investigate Penta's current military strength. It was now April 4, 0600 hours.

"The recon craft have transmitted images of Penta!" The communications officer informed Heathrow. The images were brought up on the monitor.

"One battleship, one cruiser... The battleship is probably the *Bull Run*. There are three shuttles; those should have originally belonged to Penta, right? Do they intend to land on Earth...?"

"The battleship seems to be badly damaged. Should we launch the mobile suit squadron to deal the final blow?"

Mannings, who was viewing the images from the pilots' waiting room, used the ship's intercom to raise his suggestion to Heathrow.

"Gah, those shuttles are the real problem. Based on their carrying capacity, they can't just be returning captives. Let's target those shuttles and attack only them. How long until launch preparations are complete?"

"We're ready anytime. Those kids have been waiting for hours. They're getting restless. In order increase our chance of success, we should attack as soon as we can."

"Right. I'll give you half an hour."

The image transmitted by the recon craft was suddenly cut, worrying Heathrow. However, the communications officer then said, "The cable's just been released, that's all," which caused Heathrow to feel relieved.

"G-Attacker, preflight checks OK!"

"G-Bomber, OK!"

The final preflight reports from West and Crypt were transmitted from the two strange looking machines on either side of the G-Core Fighter.

"Z-Plus Unit Two, Sigman, all clear."

"Z-Plus Unit One, Chung Yung, ready."

The Z-Plus squadron, which had launched last, also rose into space. Inside their cockpits, the pilots heard the monotonous voice of the MSO (MS Supervising Officer) counting down. The *Pegasus III's* mobile suit squadron was deployed on either side of the ship, waiting silently for the order to engage.

"Listen carefully! This is the decisive battle. Don't screw it up!"

Coincidentally, just as they received Mannings's transmission, the counter reached zero.

"Let's go, guys!" Roots shouted freely and lit his thrusters. The machines behind the G-Core Fighter did the same, forming balls of light with hot cores. The five space fighters, including the two Z-Pluses that were in Waverider mode, formed a beautiful trail of light as they charged fiercely towards Penta.

Chapter 13

TRIPLE ATTACK

"WE'VE DISCOVERED SIGNS of a ship at three o'clock!" The navigator on board the *Brave* informed the Zodiac at the cruiser's stern.

"What?" Even if it was the pathfinder ship from the Earth Orbital Fleet, Cray thought it had arrived way too quickly.

"Can you identify its ship class?" He fixed his vision on the monitor as he asked the navigator.

"We're working on it, sir! The corrected CG image is up!" Beside the image of the navigator, a red, white, and yellow infrared image was displayed. "It's an *Argama* class!"

"So that's what it was. It's that freak mobile suit squadron again. So, they've been placed in charge of pursuing us... Are there any other ships following it?"

"No, it's the only ship."

"Is it just a scout team? Either way, we can't let them interrupt the operation. Immediately notify Penta and get those shuttles launched as soon as possible!"

"Captain, speaking of freaks, we've got one too." Side said hastily after his image cut in.

"Yeah, our luck is pretty good. This is all thanks to your suggestion to go on another test flight."

"Shall we engage?"

"You don't need to ask!"

Over the monitor that separated them, Cray made an expression with his eyes at Side and smiled.

"Release tow cables!"

Upon receiving Cray's order, the connections were released with a sharp sound, and the mobile armor broke away from the *Brave*, which had been towing it. The gigantic thruster located at the Zodiac's tail end started to burn with a bright radiance.

"The enemy's invading! Launch the shuttles immediately!"

"Hurrying won't accomplish anything! Don't tell me there's been a change in the amount of time we have to enter the atmosphere! We'll need to recalculate the amount of propellant needed from scratch!"

"The enemy won't wait for you!"

Upon receiving the warning, the New Desides members situated at Penta suddenly began to work frantically.

"Get the *Bull Run* and *Seikyou* out of port first!"

"Put the mobile suit maintenance teams on board the shuttles on combat alert!"

The hallways through the port area were filled with the sounds of humans. Josh Offshore could only lean against the wall and wait. He pulled down the bandages wrapped around his head and slowly opened his eyes. The incoming strong, white light hurt his eyes and caused them to tear nonstop. He clenched his teeth to endure the pain and tried to look at the world surrounding him.

All he could see were blue figures flashing past in the corridor, which he concluded were New Desides uniforms. He felt a handle beside him and saw the rough outline of the words "security troops" written on it.

Offshore quickly entered the room. If the cabins here were set up as they should be, this one should contain what he was looking for. After groping around extensively for quite some time, he felt a small, red window. He used his fist to break the window glass, pulled the switch, and retrieved a plastic riot gun from inside it. He stuffed the gun into his chest pocket, then continued to rush to the the space shuttle's boarding entrance.

* * *

"We've got a flying object incoming!" The *Pegasus III*'s operations officer shouted.

"What kind of object is it? Where's it coming from?" Heathrow stood up on the commander's chair and inquired.

"It's at eight o'clock from our ship, eleven o'clock above us! There's only one machine. It's the size of an enemy cruiser and is accelerating very quickly... It's not a ship, Commander!"

"Is it a mobile armor? How could it be so huge...? Evade! Accelerate as quickly as you can!"

Cray had previously factored in that the *Pegasus III* would try to evade.

"It's too late to even think about evading now!"

The Zodiac transformed into a 'E' shape and revealed its mega particle cannon.

"Captain, the target is in our firing line!" Side shouted.

The middle of the 'E'-shaped Zodiac emitted a white light. The mega particle cannon had already finished its firing preparations. Cray carefully pulled the trigger. Two rays of hot, white light were shot out from the Zodiac's interior. They converged into one in space and shot towards the *Pegasus III*.

"We've confirmed the enemy's fired a beam weapon! It's headed for our flight path!"

Before the observations officer could finish his words, the attack spread vibrations throughout the ship's body. All of the troops on board the ship were tossed forwards and to the left. The ship's warning system went off, illuminating its interior, and the ear-piercing emergency alarm was sounded.

"All sections, damage report!"

On the bridge, the red light of the emergency power supply had lit automatically. Heathrow shouted as he floated back to his commander's chair. A gigantic figure then passed by the right side of the bridge at an astonishing speed. There was absolutely no way to identify what kind of machine it was.

"This guy..."

Upon returning to his commander's chair, Heathrow tightly fastened his safety belt. Protective armor was let down over the bridge's observation windows.

"All hands, level one battle stations! Put on your normal suits. We'll command from the combat bridge!"

Upon saying so, the commander's chair began to move towards the combat bridge. The bridges of *Argama* class cruisers had two parts, a general navigation bridge and a commander's chair. A fairly small combat bridge had been added to the normal bridge for the newest *Pegasus III* model. Usually, this section would contain the commander's office, but when the combat bridge had been added, the commander's office had been relocated to the interior of the ship.

After being sent flying by the vibrations from the impact, Mannings, enduring the pain of his right leg, quickly ran to the mobile suit deck while donning his helmet. Under the current circumstances, the trainer suit was better than nothing.

To Mannings, the battles of today belonged to the soldiers of the future. Those of the older generation, like him, could only do their best to make full use of their remaining worth. The new era would be created by the younger generation. He was no longer playing a leading role. All he could do now was act as the supporting cast.

"What?! The *Pegasus III* was attacked? Are you sure?!"

Upon receiving notification from his mother ship, Roots was suspicious. How could the enemy have predicted their surprise attack?

"Dammit! Another trap! If our commander was really an elite graduate of the Advance Officer's School, why can't we depend on him?!" Crypt said.

"Should we go back to the *Pegasus*?" West said worriedly. It was a natural thought upon discovering that one's mother ship was under attack.

"How can we go back?! Continue with the original plan! Once Penta is down, all the enemy can do is surrender!" Chung Yung interrupted.

"He's right. Mannings said earlier that this was the decisive battle!" Roots replied.

The attack squadron saw two ships appear in front of them.

"What? Don't tell me we need to split our forces in two to attack!"

According to the latest damage report, the *Pegasus III's* main starboard engine had been completely scraped off, leaving the vessel with only half its propulsion force. In addition, part of the living area had been destroyed, and several casualties had been reported.

Upon hearing the news, Heathrow was astounded.

"Only one round of attack caused this kind of damage... It's more fearsome than a battleship...!"

"Commander, we've got an unauthorized launch on the starboard catapult!" The navigation officer's report interrupted his train of thought.

"Who is it? The Nero squadron?"

However, the Nero squadron was still in the midst of being repaired. Just as Heathrow realized that, the pilot's image was transmitted to the monitor.

"Mannings...!"

"Commander, I'm going to launch. It's up to me now!"

"But that Nero is just a trainer suit!"

"Commander, didn't you say yesterday that if it becomes necessary, even I'll have to launch?"

"That was--"

"Even if it was a joke, so be it. Currently, we can only depend on this Nero. The *Pegasus III* can't hold up against another round of fire. As a soldier, it's an honor to die in battle."

Mannings saluted, and the image on the monitor was cut off.

"Wait a minute, Mannings!"

"It's too late! The catapult has already switched to automatic mode!" The control officer shouted loudly.

"Mannings, moving out!"

The catapult fiercely shot the mobile suit out into space. The Nero gradually moved further and further away until it was nothing more than a small, white dot. Space had seemingly returned to its earlier darkness.

* * *

"Captain Cray, the sheer size of the Zodiac's body really does make it hard to change directions," Side said.

After launching the first wave of attacks, the Zodiac immediately made an urgent shift and turned left, intending to make another attack on the *Pegasus III*'s starboard side.

"Of course, we've still got something up our sleeve that can settle this once and for all. It's just a matter of whether you're willing to do it. Fast, this time, don't miss!"

"Understood. Let's deal the final blow!"

The mobile armor again accelerated and charged forwards.

The CG image of the *Pegasus III* on the screen was becoming larger and larger. Suddenly, a small window appeared, indicating that other enemy machines were approaching. Based on the CG image, they seemed to be humanoid mobile suits.

"Enemy suits!" Side screamed. The *Pegasus III*'s defensive cannon fire was welcoming them with open arms.

"How many are there?"

"Just one, and it's damn maneuverable! It's dancing all over the place!"

On the screen, the enemy mobile suit was taking a complicated course towards the Zodiac.

"This guy's skilled. Should be an expert with actual combat experience... It's a pity we have to kill him."

On the other side, in the Nero's cockpit, due to the constant changes in its flight path, the starry sky displayed on the panoramic monitor continuously whirled and jerked around.

"That thing looks like a church spire. It's huge, but it's agile."

Mannings stared at the enemy on the monitor. "It's damn fast!" he exclaimed, and noticed a Neo Zeon crest on the mobile armor.

"Zeon... Could Tosh really have allied himself with Zeon?" Confounded, Cray's eyes widened.

Mannings instinctively switched his beam rifle to full-auto mode and ferociously pressed the trigger. The rifle's opening emitted a continuous stream of darts of light, which struck the gigantic mobile armor as it brushed past him.

"I won't let you get near the *Pegasus III*!"

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. Fragment after metallic fragment was blown away from the gigantic machine's dark green body. The beam attacks had only scratched its surface. The mobile armor was like a giant white whale sent by the gods. It charged continuously towards the *Pegasus III*, and showed no signs of slowing down.

"No effect?!"

The Nero turned around and continued to chase it from the rear.

"If... If you're piloting that, Tosh, then please, stop...!"

The mobile armor's body transformed once more into an 'E' shape.

"Shit!"

Seizing the brief opportunity that presented itself when the mobile armor slowed down to transform, the Nero accelerated furiously and flew in front of it. The opening of the 'E' shape was already emitting white light.

"That fucking fly!" Side remarked as he saw the mobile suit buzzing around the Zodiac.

"Captain, should we take him out?"

"He's not a threat with only that suit. Ignore him. Don't waste the mega particle cannon on him," Cray said while evading incoming fire from the *Pegasus III*.

"The enemy fleet only has two ships. With a concentrated attack, we can take 'em all out in one breath!"

Roots, expecting to fight the two battleships heading straight for them, placed the fingers of his right hand on the button that controlled the missile launcher.

"Hold on! It's a signal flare!" Crypt yelled.

The flagship of Aeno's fleet, the *Bull Run*, had unexpectedly fired a standard signal flare.

"What?! They're surrendering?!"

When Roots deciphered the optical signal, he was so shocked that his voice cracked. When he was a trainee, his worst subject had been identifying signal flares and flags. However, now even he could tell that the enemy intended to surrender.

"Are they serious?"

"No, Tex, I think they've got other plans. Who knows, maybe they're just trying to get close, then they'll open fire and take us all down!"

"But they've already pointed their ships' cannons in the air and locked all their missile launchers' hatches," West determined from the image magnified on his screen and informed Roots.

"Either way, we still need to verify it for ourselves. Sigman and I will rush to Penta. The more mobile suits we've got there before they arrive, the better," Chung Yung interrupted.

However, Roots could not hold back his anger, especially because the enemy had surrendered before they had even exchanged fire.

"Bastard! I'm in command here!"

"You'll be sorry if you don't heed the words of the old. Sigman, follow me."

The two Z-Plus suits overtook the three slowing space fighters and accelerated towards Penta like a gust of wind. Roots and the others could only turn back and fly to the *Bull Run* and *Seikyou*.

"Bah, that's a missed opportunity," Side said.

After enduring the first wave of attacks, the Pegasus III had quickly entered combat status and launched a defensive web of fire that could not be ignored. The Zodiac made several moves to evade the *Pegasus III*'s mega particle cannon, but as a result, they had deviated from their projected line of fire, which caused their mega particle cannon to miss its target.

"Captain, I want to cut down the recharge time."

"Fine. It's your choice."

Upon receiving Cray's permission, Side increased the amount of power supplied to the mega particle cannon, increasing its rapid fire ability. The Zodiac once again changed its direction and moved away to attack the *Pegasus III*'s flight path. However, the Nero was still flying forward unyieldingly, stopping them in place.

"Damn, that thing's irritating! Side, get rid of that thing!" By now, the Nero had gotten to Cray as well.

The Zodiac fired a ferocious beam. Mannings's Nero quickly tried to make an emergency evasion, but it was a step too late. The white light swallowed and destroyed the Nero's right leg.

"Could that be Stole...?"

As the monitor showed the mobile suit's leg being blown away, memories of the One Year War awoke in Cray's mind. That honest man who had lost a leg to rescue a comrade in the wrong place at the wrong time...

"Captain, fire another shot! I'm sure I can get that suit!"

Side's finger depressed the trigger.

"Stop...!"

Cray's yell was heard at the exact same time Side pulled the trigger.

The white light sliced through Cray's mind. The Nero, having lost its right leg and normal control functions, disappeared in the beam generated by the mega particle cannon. In his last moments, Mannings could only think of disgust in his heart, as if he were blaming himself for being unable to complete the mission.

"...We've lost communication with Mannings' suit."

Heathrow was expressionless when he heard the communications officer's report.

Another beam from the Zodiac's mega particle cannon came forth and melted the armor plating on the deck's starboard side.

Mannings had said earlier that this would be the decisive battle. But which side will be the one to stop fighting? Heathrow asked himself as he listened silently to the casualty report.

"Mannings killed in action? I-impossible!"

Roots had come on board the *Bull Run*'s bridge in order to confirm that the enemy ships intended to surrender, where he received the transmission from the *Pegasus III*.

"Mannings, you bastard, we never determined a winner! Now I'll never be able to beat you! You're a horrible person!"

Roots used all the strength in his body to slam it against the wall. The *Bull Run*'s troops at his side could only watch the scene silently.

Roots then suddenly turned around, tightly clenching his fists, and approached Admiral Aeno. Sensing that something was wrong, West quickly dashed forward and pinned Roots to the floor.

"What are you doing?! Lemme go! Watch me slaughter that bastard Admiral!"

"No, Roots! Killing him wouldn't make things any better! Besides, he's already surrendered. It's all over."

"Then who was the one that attacked the *Pegasus III*?!"

"That was the New Desides, not the Admiral."

"What kind of screwed up argument is that?! Aren't they all our enemies?! He was siding with the New Desides!"

"Shin! Come take care of Roots for me."

After leaving Roots, who was blinded by his anger towards Crypt, West stepped forward and made further discussion with the Admiral.

It appeared that Admiral Aeno truly intended to surrender. Upon West's request, explosions could be heard coming from the firing platforms of the *Bull Run* and *Seikyou* one after the other, confirming that their cannons and missiles could not longer be fired. This was standard procedure when receiving a surrendering enemy vessel. The Admiral was very cooperative, and had followed instructions accordingly.

"I take it a comrade of yours has died in battle?" The Admiral asked West.

"He was our instructor."

"Was he...? Between this battle and the last one, a lot of able men were lost. My son was among them. If he were still alive, he would probably be a mid-ranking officer by now, because I was his instructor." The Admiral gazed into the distance through the window and continued. "The true objective of this battle was to force the Federation Government to change its ways, and in order to achieve this objective, sacrifice was inevitable. In today's society, which places so much emphasis on the minority following the majority, those with differing opinions are discriminated against. Eventually, that will only lead to destruction. However, before that destruction arrives, if fresh blood can be exchanged for the attention of the majority, then that sacrifice will be deemed extremely worthy. Mayor Kaiser Pinefield shared these thoughts as well."

West listened to what the Admiral had to say, then promptly landed a punch under his chin.

"That's just your own view! You assumed that the people of this world would never learn to respect each other, so you used violence to correct that! To me and others of the new generation, that's just insulting! How can we determine who is right or wrong? Yeah, we need those from the old generation to help us grow, but that doesn't mean they need to decide our future. If humans continue only to walk the path set by their predecessors, then we'll never make any progress. If you were really that determined to carry out your ideals, then instead of surrendering, you'd be doing what you said: sacrificing yourself to manifest your own worth. People like you only know how to ask others to sacrifice themselves. You were the real cause of your son's death!"

West's retort stunned Roots and the Admiral, who had nothing else to say.

At this point, they received a transmission from Chung Yung. "Roots, hurry up! They're escaping in the shuttles!"

"Dammit...! Those assholes are just delaying the inevitable!"

Crypt released Roots and urged West, "Let's go!"

* * *

"Captain, why are we retreating all of a sudden? We only need to attack one more time...!" Cray had suddenly stopped the attack and given orders to return, puzzling Side.

"I... I just killed another me... Why... Why did you have to appear here?" While sitting inside the mobile armor heading towards Penta, Cray could only repeat those few words.

"Captain! Can you hear me?!"

The shouts brought Cray back to reality.

"Oh, er... sorry. The enemy ship has already lost its combat capabilities. Because they only sent out one mobile suit, it's clear their attack squadron is already on its way to Penta. We need to rush back and escort the descent troops."

Cray did not provide the actual reason for the retreat. He hoped that a new battle would let him forget this painful memory.

The three gigantic space shuttles had already loaded up all the mobile suits and troops and left Penta. They were now heading towards Earth.

Inside the shuttle labeled Number 2, Offshore was silently hiding inside his Xeku Zwei's cockpit, waiting to enter the atmosphere. After using the pellet gun to deal with the suit's original pilot, and he had entered the cockpit.

He did not think of what he would do after they forcefully landed on Dakar and occupied the Earth Federation Headquarters. Now, all he could think of was making full use of himself and doing his best.

To be honest, he had long since known that even if they occupied the assembly at Dakar, another group of people would simply continue the unconstructive discussions somewhere else. Currently, he could only think about upholding his own dreams, ambitious dreams that would one day be realized by another person. However, that was not something that he could afford to take into consideration now.

The space shuttle's intercom sounded. "Two enemy mobile suits are closing in! All troops, prepare to attack!"

"The enemy chose to attack *now* of all times?!"

Offshore could not think of any way to currently resolve the situation. However, the other Xeku Zwei in the storage cabin replied.

"Commander, how much longer before we enter the atmosphere?"

"Thirty minutes!"

"We're sitting ducks if this goes on! Open the door of the storage cabin! I'm going out!"

"Keep track of the time! Number 1 and Number 3 have also sent out mobile suits. We can't afford to waste any more of our combat strength. Remember to rush back here before time's up!"

"Understood. I will. You stay here."

This time, the communication was switched to Offshore's cockpit. He heard that the other pilot was named Falazi, so he briefly replied, "Hm. I see. Understood, Falazi."

The heavy door of the space shuttle's storage cabin opened slowly. Offshore looked above him and saw the blue Earth. Its reflected light still hurt his eyes.

After flying out of the storage cabin, Falazi's suit, behind Offshore's, lit its thrusters to counter the effects of gravity and flew through space.

"The shuttles have deployed mobile suits!" Sigman reported to Chung Yung, and frantically adjusted the Z-Plus's flight path.

"Got it!" Chung Yung roared back. He aimed his beam cannons at the lead shuttle and pulled the trigger.

A bluish-green beam was shot from the beam cannon, destroying the space shuttle intending to deploy Xeku Eins.

"Listen up, Sigman. Since we're in Waverider mode, we can enter the atmosphere, so don't worry about that. Just concentrate on attacking the space shuttles. Don't let up. Once you've used up all your ammo, descend to Earth, understand?"

Chung Yung flew his Z-Plus towards the Xeku Zweis deployed by the Number 2 and Number 3 shuttles and prepared to intercept them.

Suddenly, they heard, "Chung Yung, don't you dare give out orders! I'm the commander here! It's only right that I give the orders!"

It was Roots, leading the other two machines with his G Core Fighter in an arrowhead formation. They had arrived at the scene.

"Your machine has no chance of breaking through the atmosphere and still being in good enough condition to fight. It'd be better for you just to escort us obediently."

"What kind of a joke is this?!"

"Quit whining! We've got bandits at six o'clock!"

Chung Yung immediately fired beams at the two Xeku Zweis that appeared in front of them. However, their clumsy-looking bodies actually managed to easily evade them, while at the same time retaliating with their beam rifles.

"How can they be so agile?!"

"Dammit! They're equipped with rocket thrusters to increase their maneuverability!" West and Crypts shouted while evading the attacks. They began to fire the beam cannons on their own machines.

"We're screwed if this turns into a melee battle. I need to change to mobile suit mode!"

Chung Yung's suit charged directly in front of a Xeku Zwei and quickly transformed into its humanoid mobile suit form.

"Gibstina, use the 'club'!" Falazi, who had launched from the Number 2 shuttle, informed the Xeku Zwei that had launched from the Number 1 shuttle.

He immediately used his free hand to pull the 'club' from the Xeku Eins's back. The 'club' was a type of disposable anti-MS rocket launcher. It resembled the panzer faust rockets used by German infantry against armored vehicles in the Middle Century's World War II.

Beams and missiles were continuously fired and intertwined in space. The space around them had degraded to a state of confusion. Not only was the Xeku Zwei's body stronger than the Xeku Eins's, but it was a much more powerful suit as well.

"I'm outta missiles!"

Roots evaded a 'club' warhead heading towards him and shot a quick look at the tactics screen. The computer should have displayed what actions he currently had at his disposal as a reference.

"What the hell?!"

The word "combine" was actually ranked first. After inputting other environmental data, the result remained the same. The only available options were to combine or retreat. But after coming so far, retreating was not an option.

"Text, Shin, look at your tactics screens! Mine's shot!"

"Mine's all screwed up too! What kind of joke is this?!" Crypt replied.

"How the hell are we supposed to combine in this situation?!" West asked with a sense of uncertainty.

"Don't tell me everyone's are like this! Well, if that's the case, let's give it a shot! Chung Yung, can you hear me?!" Roots yelled at the Z-Plus that was still stubbornly attacking a Xeku Zwei.

"What?!"

"Listen! We're gonna combine to help us buy some time! Consider it payback for what I owed you back on the Moon."

"You're a pretty straightforward guy, you little bastard!" Chung Yung smiled as he destroyed the Xeku Zwei.

"Right! I won't let them lay a finger on you, Roots! You got that?! Now hurry up!"

“Thanks!”

On the corner of his monitor, Chung Yung saw the G-Attacker, G-Core Fighter, and G-Bomber form up into straight line in order to combine. On the other side, Sigman's suit was preventing the space shuttles from entering the atmosphere. Now, the only thing left to deal with in their region of space was that one remaining Xeku Zwei suit. Taking care of it would let him feel more at ease, but...

* * *

“Captain, the battle has already started!”

“Hm, so we're a step too late. Don't worry about aiming, Side. Just shoot, and try to draw their attention!”

After rushing back from where the *Pegasus III* was, the Zodiac once again transformed into an 'E' shape and fired its mega particle cannon without aiming. Gigantic beams flew in a straight line towards the Earth.

“W-what?!”

A beam flew past Chung Yung. He hastily searched the direction from where the beam had been fired and saw a gigantic machine with thick, heavy thrusters. It was closing into the combat zone.

“Ooh, a mobile armor! Great, a new toy...”

Chung Yung quickly shifted and flew towards the mobile armor. By that time, the S Gundam had already begun its combination sequence, and Roots had also discovered the approaching mobile armor.

“We've got another new customer. Be careful, don't let him spit on you! Alright! Combine!”

Roots forced down on the combination lever. Guiding beams caused the three fighters to automatically align themselves, and the three fighters began to transform and close in on each other.

The Zodiac saw this as well, and immediately set its targeting crosshairs on the combining S Gundam. It fired its mega particle cannon once more.

“I told you I wouldn't let any of you die! That's a promise! This is what I owe you all!”

Suddenly, Chung Yung's suit dashed in front of the beam. The Z-Plus, upon taking the entire energy beam, turned into an expanding ball of fire and exploded into pieces.

On the other end of the ball of light, as if possessed by a vengeful spirit, the S Gundam appeared with the blue Earth as her backdrop. The stubborn atmospheric wall was also slowly approaching them, one step at a time.

Chapter 14

EARTH LIGHT

FROM BEHIND THE ball of fire that had once been Chung Yung's suit, the S Gundam gathered the will of its three young pilots and finished its combination sequence. The beam smart gun that hung from its waist immediately fired a continuous stream of beams towards the Zodiac, but the Zodiac, even with its massive body, managed to evade the beams, showing exceptional agility.

"Dammit! That spired freak moves way too fast!"

Roots's first impression of the Zodiac was the same as Mannings's. The enemy was unexpectedly agile beyond comprehension.

"Ryu, leave the shooting to me! You just concentrate on controlling the body!" Crypt said.

"Fine, then we'll do it your way, Shin! Tex, keep your eyes on the radar!"

"Got it!"

The S Gundam currently carried three pilots simultaneously. Roots was situated at the center of the waist area; Crypt's cockpit was above and in front of his; and West's was just below Crypt's. In order to put their full concentration on the task at hand, each of the three pilots had assigned different tasks amongst themselves, for if they did not, they would have no chance of defeating the monstrous mobile armor. Right as the three fighters had merged, the fourth will inside the S Gundam had activated as well.

"Sigman, take the shuttles! We'll deal with that spire!"

"Understood!"

Upon receiving Roots' order, Shade's Z-Plus immediately spun around, flew past the Equator, and headed in the direction of the North Pole.

"Fast, the enemy's got mobile suits! Separate!" Cray informed Side, who was in the other cockpit.

The Zodiac was actually formed by combining two mobile armors. The name "Zodiac" had originally been used to refer to the ecliptic plane, or the twelve constellations. Because the twelve constellations were mostly named after animals, the ecliptic plane was also known as the "Plane of the Wild Beast."

Each of the Zodiac's individual halves was called a "Zoan," a word used to classify groups of animals. Simply put, the cylindrical Zodiac could separate into two halves along its lengthwise axis. The upper half was called Zoan I, and was controlled by Cray, while Side had been given the responsibility of piloting the lower half, Zoan II.

"Understood, Captain."

The Zodiac proceeded clockwise along the Equator as the S Gundam followed it closely from behind. However, as the difference in speed between the two was too great, the more the S Gundam pursued it, the more fruitless the situation became.

After the Zodiac had revolved around one quarter of the Earth's circumference, it suddenly split along its central axis into the Zoan I and Zoan II. The Zoan I headed towards the North Pole, while the Zoan II headed towards the South Pole. They gradually decreased their altitude until they reached the outer end of the Earth's atmosphere. Then, using the opposing force generated from the atmosphere, the Zoan I turned around from the left, while the Zoan II turned around from the right and once again raised into orbit. Within the span of a few minutes, the two mobile armors had entered a 90-degree orbit in preparation to attack the S Gundam simultaneously from above and below.

"There are two mobile armors! Five and one o'clock!" West discovered the traces of the Zoans

"What? Two machines?! Where did the other one come from?!" Crypt began to plan how to deal with the two enemy machines.

"The spire separated in two!" Roots cried. The mega particle cannon installed in the Zoans' flat joining surface began to fire.

"Gah...!"

Roots brought the S Gundam towards the South Pole and lowered his altitude while Crypt continuously fired the beam smart gun. However, the shots completely missed their line of fire. In the space above, the two mobile armors' beams intertwined from above and below at a 45-degree angle. The two enemy mobile armors then suddenly charged at the S Gundam.

That was close... Roots thought.

"Shin, why are you idling?! If we don't take it down, how will we be able to face Chung Yung and Mannings in heaven?!"

"Sorry, I'll get it this time! Tex! Can you calculate the incline of the enemy's orbit?"

"I'm on it! The enemy might be trying to do an atmospheric mechanical rebound! Their turning radius is smaller than ours...!"

"The hell is that!?" Roots had never heard of the phrase and could not help but ask in return.

"They're trying to use the opposing force from the top layer of the atmosphere to turn! But unfortunately, we can't do that."

"Then we can only wait for them to take the initiative and come at us!"

"Captain, let's do it again!"

Side's Zoan II rotated its body in the direction of the South Pole and once again charged towards the S Gundam at a 45-degree angle.

"The firing speed is too slow!"

He raised the amount of power supplied to the mega particle cannon to the maximum.

"Alright! One more time!"

This time, Cray's Zoan I charged from the North Pole.

"Incoming! From the left!" West warned. Roots quickly moved the S Gundam inwards, but could not evade the beam fired at such a high speed from the Zoan II. The beam brushed against the left side of the S Gundam's abdomen, slightly melting away part of its armor.

"We're done for...!"

The desperation, fear, and detest in the hearts of the three pilots were all received by the other will inside the S Gundam: A.L.I.C.E.. The suddenly-emerging feeling of revenge mercilessly devastated her will.

They are too honest. It's the kind of primitive honesty that only humans possess.

Conflicts consume humans because they are afraid of their opponents. They obey orders out of fear of being rejected.

Fear provokes them to search for companions. They become frightened when an enemy appears. They chose to accept my

protection to escape that fear. Because I am a non-humanoid life form willing to accept, not reject, you.

What are enemies? What is fear? Those are simply imaginary concepts that you forcefully integrate in me.

I understand...

If it is violating me that allows you to fear safety, then violate me. Because I know that my heart is independent. It does not belong to you. I can accept you, yet I can reject you. I no longer belong to anyone. I am myself.

No one will choose the path that I take, just as I will not choose yours.

As Cray's Zoan I targeted the S Gundam's interception point, the polarizing mirror on the abdomen of Side's Zoan II" was emitting white light, preparing to fire a second time.

However, just as the beam was about to fire, the rear end of the Zoan II body sprouted an eye-piercing light. As if in slow motion, steams of electric sparks slowly devoured the body.

"Ah! Ah!"

Side instinctively knew that he had committed a great mistake. The strong electrical current had exceeded the limits of the capacitor and had all flowed into the mega particle cannon, causing the beam cannon to overheat. Additionally, because the beam cannon was located between the two main engines, the high temperatures in turn affected the main engine's reserve propellant. This costly design flaw was the reason Neo Zeon had initially gave up on further development of the Zodiac.

"T-the electric supply! C-Captain...!"

The overheated propellant finally detonated, causing the mobile armor to explode into dust.

"What happened?!"

Cray stared, startled, as the exploding Zoan II brushed against him, causing him to momentarily forget to attack the S Gundam. In a short moment, it had moved past the S Gundam, leaving only a gigantic fireball in the distance.

The enemy mobile armor's sudden explosion indeed caused Roots and the others to be very surprised. However, they also felt unsure, because once again, the S Gundam had started moving by herself.

The S Gundam quickly evaded the exploding mobile armor, then suddenly accelerated and changed its direction, entering an orbit to attack the Zoan I.

"Ryu, your tactics have improved quite a bit!" Crypt cheered.

"Nice move, but you forgot we're above you!" West remarked while calculating the Zoan I's flight path.

"It... it wasn't me! This thing's moving on its own again! I can't control it!" Roots said, enduring the strong g-force that resulted from the sudden boost.

"What?! It's moving by itself again?! What the hell is going on?!"

"I don't know either, Shin! Mannings looked like he knew, but he never told me!"

"The S Gundam is flying towards the enemy mobile armor!" West reported in a shaky voice.

The three of them were unable to fully comprehend the situation. The S Gundam was drawing out a dazzling light in the area above the atmosphere like a white comet.

* * *

On the other end of the Earth's orbit...

"What? Side has died in battle?! Then we've only got Captain Cray left to escort us?"

Offshore heard the announcement made by the pilots of the Number Two and Number Three shuttles. He could bare it no longer, and began to roar loudly.

"Open the door of the storage cabin!"

"No! Our altitude is too low! Who are you?!"

"It's too late for that now! If this keeps up, that Gundam will take us all out! Hurry up and let me launch! I'll deal with the enemy!"

"You're... Josh?! Why are you on board this shuttle?!"

"There's no time for discussion! I'm a New Desides soldier too!"

"But there's no time to bring you back!"

"That doesn't matter!"

"...Right! Please, try to finish the battle in the few minutes we've got left!"

The door of the space shuttle's storage cabin opened once again, and Offshore's Xeku Zwei flew into the starry space.

After waiting several seconds, Sigman Shade was about to fire off his last round.

From his Z-Plus's cockpit, the two stars that had originally looked like stars at dawn were slowly getting bigger. Finally, they got close enough that he could identify their model. Currently, he was near the North Pole, while the two space shuttles on the left side of the engagement orbit were attempting to enter the atmosphere near the Equator. This was the best angle from which to launch an attack.

"Dammit, they actually sent mobile suits, and from such a high altitude...! While it's certainly brave, it's useless!"

He saw another small dot of light flying away from the space shuttle.

Shade glanced at the weapon control display.

"My last round... It's up to you!" He said to his Z-Plus.

His weapons only had enough ammunition for another round or two. The yellow alert light was flashing with a "kacha" sound. He had wasted too much ammunition during his earlier battle with the Xeku Zwei.

The florescent green targeting guideline was finally fixed over the image of the space shuttle.

"Gah! I can only select one?"

The Z-Plus's weapons control computer, after factoring in the hit rate and damage rate, mercilessly displayed that he could only chose one of the space shuttles to attack in order to achieve satisfactory results.

Shade pressed the button on his readings display and another window popped up on the monitor, displaying a tactical map. The shuttles' speeds and distances were already being calculated. He chose the target that he had the best chance of destroying and concentrated only on aiming. The target was closing in from the front left at a 45-degree angle.

"Alright! Go!"

He pressed the trigger and all of his Z-Plus's weaponry emitted a flashes of light.

The Number Three shuttle was hit directly, and turned into a ball of light. Before a bright light enveloped its entire body, Shade's Z-Plus had already crossed the shuttle's orbit and flown in front of it. Not much time was left. He transformed the Z-Plus into Waverider mode.

The Z-plus entered the final last stage of re-entry and slowly glided into the Earth's atmosphere.

As for now, Sigman Shade's battle had ended.

* * *

"Guwahh...!"

Cray abruptly discovered that S the Gundam charging fiercely towards him at a high speed, and quickly adjusted the Zoan I's body. Each of the enemy's shots was amazingly accurate.

The Zoan II's accident had caused Cray to understand the dangerous nature of the mega particle cannon. Thus, he did not dare to continuously use it. That way, he could only fight at close range.

He once again transformed the Zoan I. The two sides of its body sprouted mechanical arms. The front of each arm consisted of three claws, each equipped with the ability to be used as a beam cannon or saber. This was the mobile armor's final form.

A Xeku Zwei appeared from below, firing sweeping shots with its rifle while charging into the battle zone.

"Bastard, who is it! Quickly return back to the space shuttle!"

"Captain, this is a dangerous mission. Allow me to assist you."

"Is... is that you, Josh? What about your eyes...?"

The Xeku Zwei did not reply, and charged directly at the S Gundam.

"Another suit, coming at us!" West reported. The large blue mobile suit was quickly approaching from the front.

"Ignore him! He can't close in again!" Roots said while wrestling with the S Gundam's controls.

"I still can't control it!" Crypt had tried to aim at the new mobile suit, but the mobile suit wouldn't allow him to.

"Dammit, my end's fucked too!"

"Is it the same on your end, Shin? It doesn't react to anything I try to do, and it won't listen to orders! It's like it's locked down!"

"Could someone aside from us be controlling it?"

"How would I know?! Is it remote-controlled?!"

"What kinda bullshit is that, Roots?! This is a weapon, not an RC toy!"

"Then this thing's alive!"

While Crypt and Ryu were still arguing, Offshore continuously fired the missile launchers on the rear skirt armor of his suit.

"Barrage!" West yelled loudly.

Kaboom, Kaboom...

Countless laser-guided micro-missiles exploded simultaneously on the Gundam's side, but the S Gundam used both its arms to protect its upper torso and broke out from the flames of the explosion. Totally ignoring Offshore's Xeku Zwei, she

persistently continued to chase after the Zoan I.

"I thought we were done for sure that time!" Roots spoke first.

"Even though we don't know what's controlling it, it's too harsh!" Crypt said.

"Ryu, is there any way to get out of this?" West asked concernedly.

"If she wants to play, then let's give her the time of her life!"

"Why does she need us if she can do this on her own?"

"Why would you ask me, Shin?! I don't care what this guy wants to do! Who knows, maybe the S Gundam really has her own will?! She might intentionally want us to stay here and watch her show!"

Offshore saw with his blurred vision that the S Gundam was seemingly not changing its direction. He was confounded. He thought the enemy would charge towards him and engage in melee combat.

"Bastard! Come fight me face to face!"

When Offshore had battled the S Gundam at Pezun, he had greatly belittled its inexperienced pilot. However, the mobile suit was now too lazy to come fight him one on one, an insult of a magnitude he had never faced before in his life. Offshore yelled emotionally and once more brought his Xeku Zwei to block the S Gundam's flight path.

"That's the mobile suit from earlier!" West reported.

Gagagagaga...

Without aiming, Offshore raised his rifle and continuously fired at the S Gundam with a yell.

"I won't let you look down on me, rookie! Rookie! Rookie! Die! Die! Die!"

Unfortunately, none of the shots hit. While that was partially due to Offshore's vision being damaged, the S Gundam was not currently recognizing human control. She had already achieved complete self-control. Although Offshore was a New Desides ace, he could not even touch her.

Has your suit malfunctioned? Or perhaps your body? The sad thing is, you have no way of opposing me. So why do you insist on continuing to fight? What are you afraid of?

Is it the first time I am controlling my own feelings? Is it so frightening to be alone?

I understand. It has been frightening from the start.

But no matter who they are, they cannot escape from being lonely from time to time. If they continue to reject reality, they will have no way to proceed towards the future. The future will not appear if one's setbacks are not accepted.

I cannot create the future. Because no matter how hard I try, I can only change myself.

I am not human, I have no way of determining whether what I do is right or wrong.

I only know how to use tactics to utilize what I have learned. But I also wish to talk. I also wish to sing. I also wish to leave memories behind...

I also want to create the future me. However, only humans possess the ability to do that...

Upon reaching close combat range, the S Gundam used its left hand to bat away Offshore's suit that was blocking its path, intending to battle the Zoan I that had caught up behind him.

Kacha...

The S Gundam's knee compartment opened and shot out a beam saber.

"She wants to fight at close range again!" Roots shouted. The beam's blade was extended from its hilt.

"This is interesting!"

Cray sensed the S Gundam's intentions. He slowed down and shot out the Zoan I's right hand, which consisted of three sharp claws, a type of wire-guided Psycommu weapon.

Zzz... Gua, gua, gua...

The three claws fired beams while rushing towards the S Gundam. The S Gundam's eyes flashed. She then spun around, moved between Zoan I and its right arm and, with a strike, cut the connected guide wire.

The sharp claws, upon being disconnected from the main body, charged aimlessly through the endless and limitless space.

"Bah! Useless against you, is it?! Just watch! I'll get my revenge for Brave today!"

Cray activated the beam saber on his left claw and charged at the S Gundam.

Kaching! The beam blade was deflected headlong, and particles from the beam were scattered about. Just as both parties were battling excitedly, Cray saw Offshore sneak up behind the S Gundam.

"Josh, don't you interfere! This is my battle!" Cray said while adjusting the mobile armor's body, leveling it to attack the S Gundam.

"Then where is my battle, Captain?" Offshore shouted with a tone of injustice.

Pang! Cray deflected the S Gundam's incoming waist-high cleave. During this intense battle, the Earth's gravity was mercilessly pulling the S Gundam, Zoan I, and Xeku Zwei in. However, until a victor was determined, no one could step away from the battlefield.

"Josh, I know it sounds cruel, but this hasn't been your battle from the start! Stop fighting!"

Kaching! Once again, the beam sabers clashed. Cray continued, "I have finally realized that, no matter who, everyone is afraid of seeing their past faith crumble before them. Once that day comes, they are bound to drag unrelated people in without a second thought to bare the consequences. Cod and I were like this. We, the New Desides, are a group of men who have lost their souls. Mayor Pinefield and Admiral Aeno were the same!"

"Don't tell me that we are weaklings without a place in the new generation!"

"No! You still have the power to change reality! Stop fighting with us!"

Upon saying so, Cray aimed at the S Gundam's head and thrust forward. The top of the blade glided past the S Gundam's neck.

"The main camera's out!" West reported. The entire front portion of the monitor inside the cockpit was suddenly shrouded in darkness.

"Switch to the auxiliary camera!"

As if it was reacting to Roots' request, blurred images appeared on the dark portions of the screen. However, in order for the panoramic monitor to be able to coordinate with the camera angle, the video clarity had decreased.

"Surrender your life, Gundam! If we're going to die, we'll drag you along with us!"

Just as Cray was about to deal the final blow to the confused S Gundam, he received an urgent transmission from the Number Two shuttle.

"Captain, we're out of time! Get out of there quickly! We've already warned the Federation Government about the bombardment! Please, hurry up!"

Cray turned around to see that the Zoan I had deviated a great distance from the orbit of its drop point.

"Bah! I'll leave you to fall and burn alone, Gundam! Josh, we're going back!"

In the far distance, he could see that the shuttle sent to meet him had the door of its storage cabin opened. Cray once again navigated the Zoan I back into the drop orbit and pulled the ejection handle.

With a *pang* sound, the Zoan I's head-area cockpit, which resembled a pupa, separated and flew towards the space shuttle.

"What's going on?! Is he trying to escape?!"

Roots could not understand why the enemy would suddenly give up just before completing his mission.

"Shit! The surface temperature is rising!" Crypt yelled.

"If this goes on, we'll be burnt to a crisp!" West yelled lamentingly.

"Dammit, we're turning into a barbecue!"

Cray carefully adjusted the cockpit's approach speed while waiting for the shuttle to extend its manipulators to bring him into the cabin. Although only the Zoan I's cockpit remained, it was still the size of a mobile suit.

"Hey! Where's Offshore's suit?!"

He did not see Offshore following him, so he concernedly asked the shuttle's pilot.

"It really *was* Offshore! I thought he was supposed to have stayed at Penta!"

"He probably came along because he found that out."

Offshore interrupted the conversation between Cray and the shuttle pilot. "Captain, I want to fight a battle of my own. If I don't defeat that mobile suit today, I would forever be unable to take control of my own life."

"You fool, that's not it at all! This is not your battle! You exist to surpass us old-timers!"

Bzzt. The communication was broken off. Offshore had severed the connection.

"He wants to die with the Gundam! Quickly, stop him!" Cray yelled at the pilot.

"Don't be rash, Captain! It's already too late!"

"But that man... H-he's still a child!"

Cray wanted to fly back out with the cockpit, but the storage cabin door was shut.

The S Gundam, descending into the extreme heat of the atmosphere, was still firing its beam smart gun at the Zoan I's body. Offshore's Xeku Zwei suddenly came charging in from behind.

"Gundam!"

Upon reaching the S Gundam, Offshore drew his beam saber.

"One enemy suit at six o'clock!"

Heeding West's warning, the S Gundam instinctively spun around, alerted.

Bzz...

Offshore's beam blade sliced from the right shoulder of S Gundam to the side of the abdomen, mangling its armor and revealing electrical and oil cables beneath. Oil sprayed out from it slowly.

It hurts! Who is it...?

You again? Why...?

Despite the risk of suddenly burning into ashes at any time while entering the atmosphere, the enemy was still pressing on tightly. It was obviously an extremely abnormal enemy.

"This son of a bitch!" Roots snarled powerlessly.

As if in reply to his rage, the S Gundam raised her leg and repeatedly kicked the Xeku Zwei's cockpit.

"Why do you look down on me?! Why do you belittle me like this?!"

On one hand, the way the S Gundam continually ignored him was making him furious. But on the other hand, Cray had drawn boundaries for him with his earlier speech, which had caused Offshore to feel desolated. His heart was in a hysterical state.

"Gwaa...!"

Offshore started to cry. The Xeku Zwei aimlessly swung the beam saber around like a sulking child.

S Gundam saw the enemy's weak spot and, with one strike, used both her hands to grab the Xeku's shoulder. At this moment, time seemingly stopped.

Is solitude really that frightening? Is nobody caring really that frightening? The truth is that you are alone in thinking that way. The truth is that there are many people in your life who care for you.

If you need others to notice you, you need to take the initiative to win their attention, not by relying on or imitating others. Although it is easy to find no doubts in the opinions of others, that too is wrong, because then you cannot be called a person with a conscience.

You must decide the rules of your own game, and comply with them yourself. Similarly, you must plan your own life. Even if you have finally come to realize this, it's already too late. How could humans not understand such a simple concept...?

All I can do is return you. Return you to your parents' open arms, return you to your homeland. I have, for the first time, experienced what is called sorrow...

The S Gundam then grabbed hold of the Xeku Zwei and flung it towards the Earth.

"Mommy...!" Offshore sobbed. That was the first time since he joined the army that he had cried aloud.

The S Gundam once again raised its beam smart gun and fired as it gave chase to the rapidly-descending Zoan I.

Beam after beam hit the Zoan I's armor, causing it to change its drop path. Finally, the heavily damaged body of the mobile armor could no longer withstand the speed and impact and began to gradually fall apart. The large missile it carried inside it exploded due to the high temperatures, finally turning the whole thing into a gigantic fireball.

"Whoa, it's damn hot..." Crypt, whose chest was feeling stuffy, groaned.

"Yeah, sorry I dragged you all along with me. But it was worth it, being able to see the Earth one last time before we died..."

Even now, Roots was still searching hard for a way to survive.

And now, it's time for us to go our separate ways...

A.L.I.C.E. gave her final order to the S Gundam: ambush the enemy space shuttles entering the atmosphere. Following that, she needed to think of a way to let the pilots on board the S Gundam escape. In order for them to escape, the S Gundam would need to separate, discarding the two auxiliary units on either side of the body. However, if she were to do that, she would be reduced back to nothing more than a standard learning computer.

Kachang! The S Gundam's body felt an impact, and its upper half had ejected itself. At this point, the Core Fighter housing Roots, currently combined with the two cockpits from the A and B units, separated from the S Gundam's lower half and was propelled outwards by the flame that appeared.

"We're saved!" West blurted out excitedly.

"The Gundam saved our lives. She was definitely alive. She was trying to tell us that she was alive!" Roots strongly believed what he had said.

Thanks for the memories...

"But was that mobile suit really beaten that easily?"

"You don't even need to guess, unless you were about to say that this machine is a Newtype too."

The cockpits' bearing displays were all flashing the word "landing".

"Alright! This way we can break past the atmosphere!"

The G-Core Fighter, which was combined with the other two cockpits, changed its posture for atmospheric reentry. Roots, Crypt, and West each saw the S Gundam's A and B units once again form into a humanoid shape. It lifted the beam smart gun and fired.

A ray of light dyed the sky red as it extend forwards.

Farewell... That had been the last act of A.L.I.C.E.'s will.

In her final moments, she created a dream. Two overlapping, S-shaped, spiraling objects appeared on Earth.

You understand what this means, do you not?

It was human DNA, the forever-spreading memories of human life. This same "S" also made up the name of the S Gundam.

Finally, the high temperatures that had been caused by breaking through the atmosphere caused the logic circuits within her body to short circuit, triggering the appearance of a stream of meaningless thoughts...

I had a good dream...

A.L.I.C.E. had evolved into a human. No, she had evolved into a goddess, whose gender and age were not discriminated, and who nothing could restrict.

Indeed, like the goddess "Valkyrie," which led warriors to the netherworld, she was the merciful goddess of Heaven.

* * *

"Earth..."

The moment they broke through the atmosphere was the moment that their destinies would be decided. No, perhaps they had already been decided long ago.

Currently, all he was left with was a space shuttle and an extremely small group of men. What was it back then that had made him so sure that what he was doing was right for the Earth? If from the start, he had not taken the destinies of the Earth and outer space into his own hands, and had instead settled his heart into the life around him, would that not have been satisfactory? In reality, Earth and space would not care about how humans lived and died. Humans insisted on bringing their own positions to level equal to those of Earth and space, a philosophy that overestimated their own value. History had proven that sacrificing comrades to pursue evolution would provide nothing in return. Only when every individual managed their own life, and made their own decisions, would humanity truly evolve.

Cray slipped into his own personal thoughts.

Offshore's Xeku Zwei had already become glowing hot. Its external armor had slowly become damaged and peeled off. He was still crying. As he sobbed, he began to dream.

In his dream, he saw his younger self being bullied by others at school. He saw himself trying hard to practice fencing, hoping to turn himself into a strong person. He saw himself secretly in love with others, but did not dare to proclaim his love. He saw himself as a cadet at the Officer's School. He also saw Brave Cod and Tosh Cray.

Now that he thought about it, his attempts to learn fencing and his joining the military were really only attempts to escape. To Offshore, the New Desides was also an organization that let allowed him to escape. The strange part was that he did not feel ashamed to cry now. After that, he dreamed of his mother, who had surrounded him with warmth no matter the circumstances. Offshore watched with tears in his eyes as the monitor showed the Earth becoming larger and larger. He remembered what he had once said to Cray, that he liked the emptiness of space because it was the extreme opposite of the motherly nature that the Earth represented. In the end, he finally understood that what he really wanted was to grow up, to separate himself from his mother's protection.

It was, in fact, that simple. If he had expressed it aloud before, he would not have needed to make such a large loop back. But it was already too late.

The slowly-descending space shuttle was suddenly pierced by a beam, turning it into an ever-expanding ball of light. He was alone once again. Just as Offshore witnessed Cray's death with his own eyes, his own body was turned into ashes by the raging inferno.

Earth.

In the same high sky, a gigantic Karaba transport plane coincidentally appeared to collect Sigman Shade, who had just broken through the atmosphere. He unintentionally looked out of the window to see two dots of light flashing in the distance.

"Huh?"

It flashed like a meteor, then died out.

Penta.

The *Pegasus III*, which had taken a great amount of damage, docked at Penta's port. At its side, the *Bull Run* and *Seikyou* were restrained. Neither was still capable of fighting.

The combat status officer reported to Heathrow that all of the space shuttles had been shot down. This information had been gathered when they had launched unmanned probes upon re-docking at Penta. The probes had flown to the highest zone of the Earth's airspace around the North Pole. Originally, they had contemplated further investigating the S Gundam's condition, but obviously, it was already too late.

"Have we received any communications from the mobile suit squadron?" Heathrow asked the communications officer, thinking they should have heard something by now.

"Lieutenant Shade and the S Gundam's three pilots are all okay! However, the S Gundam seems to have been destroyed..." The communications officer reported excitedly.

"Really?!" Heathrow's expression was an optimistic one.

Those troublemakers had somehow managed to save the world. Not only had Roots and the others, but even the S Gundam, and therefore A.L.I.C.E., started out being looked down upon by the majority, yet they had still completed their mission. However, now that Mannings was gone, Heathrow was the only one on board the *Pegasus III* who knew the S Gundam's secret.

"Commander! Look at the monitor...!"

Led by the navigation officer's voice, he raised his head to look. Displayed on the screen was a beautiful aurora.

The drones had flown into the lower reaches of the atmosphere. They relayed the image of a beautiful and rare scene painted by the solar wind on the canvas of the atmosphere.

"An aurora... No, a rainbow..." Heathrow said.

They didn't know who started humming the old song "Over the Rainbow," but it was not long until the entire crew on board the bridge, and eventually the entire *Pegasus III*, began to hum, "Somewhere over the rainbow..."

The song portrayed the universally-shared thoughts about the other side of the rainbow, while at the same time praising the inherent bravery and hope in life.

As the sun rose, the aurora slowly dissipated. Within a short time, the bow-shaped Sun appeared on the horizon. Like a rapid exchange of negatives, the full Sun appeared not long after. However, that did not stop everyone from continuing to sing.

After the G Core Fighter had escaped the pitch black space, its cockpit was surrounded by the blue sky.

"Earth..." Among the blue sky and gray clouds, Roots finally understood the true value of life.

"Hey, you guys are still alive, right?"

"Yeah, we're fine. At long last, we're safe." It was Crypt's voice.

"I'm okay too," West said.

"Ryu, can this thing fly?"

Roots quickly inspected the machine's condition.

"We should be fine, Tex! Where the hell are we?"

"Somewhere around the Arctic Ocean."

"Then we can find a base near Russia to land at..."

"But nobody knows we're making an emergency landing. They won't be able to prepare a runway with such short notice, will they?" Crypt cut in.

"*Garuda* class spotted at one o'clock!" West, gazing at the radar, shouted happily.

A gigantic *Garuda* class transport plane appeared to the front right of the G-Core Fighter. *Garuda* class planes' wingspans could reach a length of up to 524 meters. Its dimensions matched that of an *Argama* class space cruiser. After taking flight, it could be refilled in mid air to continuously maintain its altitude, and so was practically a flying supply base.

Initially, the Earth Federation had constructed the *Garuda*, *Audhumla*, *Sudry*, and *Melord*. These four gigantic transport

planes were named after the four gods who guarded the four directions. They had since been mass produced, as the number of transport planes needed had dramatically increased. As its body was capable of storing mobile suits, the G-Core Fighter could easily land and be stored in its hangar.

"Let's land here!" Crypt voice was jumpy.

"We've confirmed a Federation Forces ID signal at seven o'clock. They're requesting to land."

Inside the *Garuda's* cockpit, the observations officer had discovered the G-Core Fighter's identification signal.

"Is it one of Task Force Alpha's suits?" The commander asked.

"No, it's not as big as a mobile suit, but it does belong to Task Force Alpha."

"It's a core fighter. Immediately make preparations for landing! Give them permission to land!"

"Understood."

"I wonder if Sigman's alright," West stammered.

"Relax, relax! He's different from bastards like us!" As Crypt replied, the *Garuda* transmitted that they had permission to board.

"C'mon! I'll show you a beautiful landing!" In his heart, Roots silently added "Mannings" to the end of the sentence. He had, after all, been very influential to Roots.

The G-Core Fighter abruptly turned right and flew through the sea of clouds. The *Garuda's* landing deck crew had completed their preparations to guide the craft in. Shade, who had landed earlier, rushed to the mobile suit deck from the cabin upon hearing the news that the G-Core Fighter was approaching. The strong wind blew his hair into a mess. His Z-Plus was still on the bottom side of the deck. He fixed his eyes on the rectangular-shaped landing entrance located at the tail end of the *Garuda*.

"I see it!"

It began as only a small, black dot, but in a short moment, the outline of a fighter could be seen.

"Hey!" Shade screamed at the top of his lungs, trying to overcome the wind's buzzing sound. However, it seemed like the other party could not hear him.

Suddenly, the G-Core Fighter began to swing its wings about, as if in reply.

Everyone, including A.L.I.C.E., had grown to different extents. Perhaps in the eyes of others, this growth was not something major, but in each of their hearts, it gave them a matchless amount of satisfaction.

April 5, Universal Century 0088. Task Force Alpha's mission has ended.