

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



ANGRY EYES

ORIGINAL WORK BY HAJIME YATATE & YOSHIYUKI TOMINO

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MOBILE SUIT **GUNDAM SEED**

GUNDAM シード デスティニー **DESTINY**

Angry Eyes

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue005
PHASE 01009
PHASE 02
PHASE 03
PHASE 04
PHASE 05
EPILOGUE
Afterword

Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

He maneuvered around the slowly rotating artificial land.

A vast, cerulean expanse overwhelmed his vision.

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

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

The Orb Union.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hurry, Shinn!"

"Mayu! Come on!"

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

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

For an instant, Shinn was blinded by the light.

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah! My phone!"

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

"Never mind that!"

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

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

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

The world spun.

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

He looked around in a daze.

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

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

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

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

Where were Mayu... and his parents?!

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

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

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

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

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

"Mayu!"

He ran over, seeking his sister's figure, but then he froze in place. A small hand peeked out from the familiar sleeve of her clothing. But that was all.

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

Shinn jerkily turned his gaze forward. Then he noticed lumps scattered here and there across the gouged earth as if they were part of the upturned soil. The lumps, carelessly strewn on the ground—

clad in the remains of scorched clothing, lying twisted—were the transfigured remains of his family. Those who had touched him, spoken to him, and moved about just moments ago had been reduced to mute masses in an instant.

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

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

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

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

He howled at the sky like a beast.

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

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

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

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

"Roger that!"

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

—/I've got the power now.

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

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

Phase.01

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The great war that erupted in C.E. 70, engulfing the entire Earth Sphere, had its roots in the conflict between Naturals and

Coordinators. Ostracized by their superior abilities, the genetically enhanced Coordinators sought refuge in space, escaping the prejudice of old humanity. That was the PLANT of the past—the Productive Location Ally on Nexus Technology.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Back then, Cagalli had been by his side, sharing in their anguish and uncertainty, empathizing with each other's pain, and running at

the same pace. At times, it had felt unbearably painful, but looking back, perhaps it had been a fulfilling time in its own way precisely because they had been so desperate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, reality was far different.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a scene reminiscent of the Mediterranean.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Everything seems to be in one big mess!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Rey!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Chairman..." Rey watched as one of the aides hurried up to Durandal and hastily reported something. For an instant, a keen light

flickered in Durandal's eyes. With his coat tails flapping, he briskly strode toward the command center, his entourage following closely.

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

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

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

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

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

But their purpose was different.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Whoa... gotcha!"

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

"Are you all right?"

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

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

"Who are you?"

That color resembled a word Stella hated.

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

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

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

"You okay?"

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

"Who are you?" the girl murmured.

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

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

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

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

"Wha-...!?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, come on! Youlant!"

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

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

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

With that, he forgot about this brief encounter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Athrun agreed with that assessment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh...?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was no sun in this sky.

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

Stella silently nodded deeply.

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

"Idiot, it rains even in the PLANTs."

Sting interjected from the side, and Auel looked indignant.

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

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

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

Asked to agree with Auel again, Stella nodded.

"Yup."

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

A buggy pulled up in front of them.

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

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

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

No one viewed them with suspicion.

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

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

With that, the real operation began.

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

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

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

Stella leaped into the midst of the soldiers with a cry. While slashing one's throat with the knife in one hand, she spun around and

shot down the soldier behind her with the gun gripped in her other hand. Her movements not only rivaled but perhaps even surpassed those of a Coordinator. Each time her white dress fluttered, blood spatter painted mottled patterns.

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

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

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

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

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

"Sting!"

"Okay! Let's go!"

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

Generation

Unrestricted

Network

Drive

Assault

Module

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

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

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

"All good."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Uzumi Nara Athha had adamantly fought the Earth Alliance forces until the very end. He entrusted his ideals to Cagalli and others, allowing them to escape before he perished in an explosion alongside

the mass driver. His awe-inspiring way of life continues to guide not only her but also Athrun.

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

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

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

"That's right."

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

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

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

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

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

The new model, which mostly had moss green armor, retained some design elements from the GINN lineage. The monoeye in the head and the overall samurai armor-inspired form. But should they be casually showing them machines like this?

Durandal went on.

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

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

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

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

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

"My apologies. Representative Athha."

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

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

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

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

Cagalli's face changed color.

It had hit the mark.

Durandal observed this as he wove reasonable words.

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

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

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

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

What Durandal said was fair.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Athrun shared her sentiments.

Yet Durandal, unswayed, slowly shook his head.

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

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

"What the...?"

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

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

"Cagalli!"

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

"Wha...?!"

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

What happened?!

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

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

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

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

"Those are--!"

Athrun blurted out, and Cagalli murmured in dismay.

"Gundams...!"

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

"Stella! You take the left!"

"Okay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

—This is the ultimate machine. My Gaia!

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

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

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

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

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

In a heartbeat, the factory erupted into a voracious inferno. Athrun watched, his jaw set in a hard line, as three new model mobile suits, superior in every way, tore through the defenses. Those were likely

next-generation machines inheriting the lineage of his former unit, the Justice. Power that is too strong invites more conflict - Cagalli's fears had been right on the mark. It was clear now that their formidable 'power' had awoken avarice and fear, drawing covetous eyes toward ZAFT.

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

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

"This way!"

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

"Why? Why's this happening?!"

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

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

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

"Athrun!"

Cagalli called out in concern for him.

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

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

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

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

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

"Get in!"

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

"What?!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—*Damn it!*

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

harnessed the momentum, charging toward the enemy with a burst of raw power.

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

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

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

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

"Ngh!"

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

With no clear chance to disengage, Athrun's options dwindled to one: he must fight, and he must win. His jaw set, eyes narrowing with fierce determination as he stared into the monitor, the echoes of a haunting truth resounded within the cockpit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Just what were they doing?!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was likely also in enemy hands.

"Watch out!"

The Chaos pounced on the ZAKU from its blind spot. The ZAKU tried to take a defensive stance at the last second but didn't make it in time, losing its left arm to the beam saber. The Chaos attempted to

finish off the staggering ZAKU. But before it could, missiles fired by Shinn exploded on the Chaos' back.

"Hmph! Now we're even!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why is this happening?"

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

"Do you guys wanna start another war?!"

"This guy...?!"

Sting gasped, his eyes widening as the white mobile suit materialized before him. It was unmistakably from the same series as their stolen units—similar frame, distinctive head—but this one had just assembled itself in a breathtaking display of mechanical synergy.

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

"What the hell is this?!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shinn! Your orders are to capture them!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A sharp, commanding voice cut through the commotion.

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

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

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

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

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

"All right, let's go!"

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

With that, the bridge hummed into focused activity.

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

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

The crew, clad in crisp Earth Alliance uniforms, operated with precision, accustomed to the brisk pace of command. Beside the

captain's chair, the man who had issued the orders watched the developments on the monitor intently.

An inorganic mask obscured the upper half of his face, lending him an almost spectral presence among his crew. Only his blond hair, cascading over his shoulders, hinted at the man beneath the mask. This was Neo Roanoke, a captain whose enigmatic aura was as well known as his tactical genius.

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

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

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

"Gottfrieds, fire!"

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

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

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

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

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

There was no doubt the first Nazca-class, the nearby patrolling ZAFT ships, and even the Armory One control had been completely

caught off guard by the Girty Lue suddenly appearing and charging forward while firing its main guns and missiles wildly.

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

"Here they come!"

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

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

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

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

The tide of battle overwhelmingly favored the Girty Lue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mirage Colloid?"

Another officer suggested the unthinkable, his words casting a shadow of dread across the room. Indeed, the invisible assailant could

only be cloaked by Mirage Colloid, a technology forbidden under the Junius Treaty. The implications were alarming.

"Are they Earth Forces?!"

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

"Searching heat signature library. No matching ships!"

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

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

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

By the time the lead ship identified the units, those bazookas were already spewing fire. The shells pierced the bridge with terrifying precision, leaving no time for evasion or countermeasures. The Dagger Ls, relentless and precise, swiftly turned their deadly attention to the next warship, unleashing a barrage of fire.

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

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

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

horizontal sweep of its laser sword, aiming directly at the cockpit. Sting was forced to pull back hastily.

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

"Sting! That's our cue!"

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

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

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

"I said I know!"

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

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

Auel's accusations echoed in Sting's cockpit.

"How should I know?!"

Sting retorted, his tone sullen and tense.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Auel teased, following close behind.

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

"Athrun!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As the green unit landed, it fired again, targeting relentlessly. The white unit parried with its shield, narrowly avoiding a direct hit. But as it dodged, the black unit's saber swung perilously close. The blade of light mowed down right above the crouching white unit's head. The ZAFT machine somehow tried to gain distance but lost balance, parrying the following saber. At this rate, it would be finished!

Cagalli let out an involuntary scream.

"Athrun!"

"Hold on tight!"

Athrun ordered curtly and stomped on the pedal.

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

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

"Agh!"

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

"Cagalli!"

Cagalli, who seemed to have hit her head hard, was unresponsive. His focus split between her and the enemy on his monitor, and he saw another beam scorch the wall where they'd just been.

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

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

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

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

"Rey!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Move over, Lunamaria."

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

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

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

"I won't let you..."

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

His resolve steeled in the clash of laser and beam blades, the two machines locked in a fierce skirmish. Despite the intensity, Shinn's

spirit seemed to push the Gaia back, forcing it to retreat skyward with its verniers blazing.

The Impulse took off in hot pursuit, the sky now a vertical battlefield. The Chaos joined the fray, firing its beam rifle. Shinn executed a sharp turn, evading the shot, only for the Gaia to attack from the side. Shinn ascended sharply, dodging the Gaia's saber with agile grace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why won't it go down?!

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

"Retreat! Stop it, Stella!"

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

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

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

"Then you'll just hafta die here!"

Die...?! Die?!

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

"Auel!"

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

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

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

"Goodbye...?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nooo!"

She screamed and desperately turned her mobile suit around.

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

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

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

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

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

"You're not getting away!"

Shinn's voice was a mix of frustration and determination, his response slightly delayed by the suddenness of the enemy's retreat. Compensating for his initial hesitation, he slammed the throttle to full, his machine surging forward in hot pursuit. Behind him, Rey's ZAKU Phantom and Lunamaria's ZAKU Warrior fell into formation, their engines roaring in unison.

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

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

"Huh?!"

Shinn's train of thought was abruptly shattered by Lunamaria's yelp over the comm. Turning his attention to the side monitor, he saw

her ZAKU Warrior trailing black smoke from its verniers, visibly struggling to maintain pace.

"Luna, fall back!"

Shinn called out, his voice tense with concern.

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

"Don't overdo it, Lunamaria."

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

"Nazca-class, sunk!"

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

"Three more GuAIZ Rs approaching from aft portside!"

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

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

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

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

"Have they returned?"

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

"Not yet."

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

"Did they fail?"

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

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

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

It may sound cold, but lingering in this space any longer was not desirable. The mobile suits assaulting them were only increasing, and

there was no guarantee the blocked port wouldn't be restored sooner than expected.

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rey could almost feel the heat of Shinn's fury emanating from the white mobile suit ahead. He knew his comrade well—Shinn was instinctive, often reacting physically before mentally, driven by raw emotion rather than calculated response. Witnessing the havoc wreaked by the three stolen units, their blatant display of power

seemed designed to provoke and flaunt their dominance. Even the most stoic pilot would be incensed by such brazen aggression.

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

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

This was no time for idle speculation.

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

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

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

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

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

Rey declared, his voice steady but tinged with urgency.

"I know that, but...!"

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

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

"...?!"

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

What was that...?

Checking his controls, he found no mechanical faults; the sensation had vanished as quickly as it appeared, yet a subtle, almost

imperceptible pressure lingered, pressing down on him like an unseen weight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Heads will roll up top."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Durandal demanded immediately, his handsome features etched with concern.

"As you can see."

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

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

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

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

intercept attempt, only to see them vaporized by a secondary attack from the Abyss.

"This is bad..."

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

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

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

"Minerva! Send out the Force Silhouette!"

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

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

"Captain?"

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

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

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

Durandal, understanding the stakes, shrugged resignedly.

"No..."

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

"Force Silhouette, standby for launch!"

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

"Cagalli..."

"A...thrun...?"

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

"Are you okay?"

Athrun's voice was thick with concern.

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

"I'm sorry, I..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Athrun... where are we going?"

Cagalli's question pulled him from his reflections.

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

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

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

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

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

A fighter craft?

"What's that?"

The craft, marked with a distinctive white nose and red wings, streaked toward the sky, its unique rear fuselage a blur. Before

Athrun could not fully process it, the craft was gone, climbing swiftly into the zenith.

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

"Damn them...!"

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

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

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

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

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

"I won't let you!"

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

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

Now's my chance!

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

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

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

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

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

"This guy...!"

Auel echoed the sentiment, overwhelmed.

"It swapped equipment?!"

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

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

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

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

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

"You're going dooown!"

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

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

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

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

"Dammit!"

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

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

I absolutely won't let them get away!

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

"Captain!"

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

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

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

"What?!"

Arthur's complexion drained.

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

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

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

Her decision was immediate and decisive.

"Launch the Minerva!"

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

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

"I'm counting on you, Talia."

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

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

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

"Mr. Chairman, please prepare to disembark."

However, Durandal's response was unexpectedly defiant.

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

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

"But!"

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

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

Please permit it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Athrun began, his attention fixed on supporting her.

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

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

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

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

"Don't move!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A fourth new model!

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

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

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

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

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

"Damn! Where'd they go?!"

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

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

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

"Ngh...!"

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

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

"Shinn!"

"Huh?"

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

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

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

A mobile armor?!

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

There are more enemies?!

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

Intercepting these agile weapon pods in the dark void of space was nearly impossible. They flitted about, firing beams in rapid succession. Shinn raised his shield just in time and responded with his beam rifle, but by the time his beams cut through space, the pods had

vanished. The relentless assault from all directions threw Shinn into utter disarray.

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

His voice edged with panic and frustration, cut through the chaos. "What are you doing?! If you fly absentmindedly, you're no better than a target!"

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

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

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

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

At that moment—

"This enemy's not like any other!"

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

"What the?!"

Neo exclaimed, his confusion spiked with a surge of curiosity. Pushing aside his initial astonishment, he refocused and intensified his barrage toward the ZAKU Phantom. But with uncanny agility, the Phantom dodged every beam, weaving through the laser fire like a specter. In a deft counterattack, it targeted and successfully destroyed one of Neo's gun barrels with its beam assault rifle.

Indeed. This enemy is no ordinary foe.

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

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

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

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

Receiving Arthur's report, Talia raised her voice.

"Start engines! The Minerva is taking off!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Athrun..."

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

"Athrun?"

She echoed, her tone shifting.

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

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

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

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

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

"Close," Durandal muttered from behind.

"That must be their mother ship."

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

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

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

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

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

"How many enemies?"

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

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

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

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

Talia's initial relief was short-lived as the monitor displayed a dire scene. Beams crisscrossed around Rey's ZAKU Phantom, which dodged with agile corkscrews. Shinn's Impulse, drawing its beam saber to engage, was instead bombarded with beams, barely managing to defend with its shield.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Scrambling into his assigned seat, Arthur began issuing instructions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A battleship?"

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

Had the port been restored?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Huh...?

Looking around in surprise, Shinn stared blankly at the spot where the enemy machine had been—a now distant, shrinking point of light

against the vast backdrop of space. Why had the mobile armor suddenly fled, especially when it seemed to have the upper hand?

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

"The Minerva!"

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

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

"A retreat signal?! Why?!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ian Lee leaned forward, scrutinizing the image.

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

His commands came swiftly, expecting an imminent attack.

"Where's the Exus?!"

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

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

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

"Evade!" Lee commanded.

The 75mm Igelstellungen close-in weapon system turrets on the ship's underside sprang to action, intercepting and destroying the

incoming missiles. A final missile, slipping through the barrage, was obliterated at point-blank range, the blast shaking the ship violently.

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

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

"We're withdrawing, Lee!"

He had been waiting for those words.

Lee ordered the helmsman.

"Come about, engines to maximum!"

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

"Commander!"

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

"Sorry. Guess I got carried away."

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

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

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

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

"Missiles approaching!"

"Starboard rudder! Evade!"

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

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

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

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

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

Back on the Minerva, Talia echoed the sentiment of aggression, directing her crew as the Minerva advanced, firing its XM47 Tristan

guns. The enemy ship revealed as a blue-gray battleship, tried to escape but couldn't match their speed. They couldn't let it escape while carrying those three units.

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

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

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

"!!"

Talia's sharp command sliced through the air.

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

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

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

They got us!

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

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

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

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

With these heavy thoughts, Shinn made his way toward the pilot locker. As he walked, his gaze inadvertently caught on a ZAKU

Warrior, its left arm gruesomely destroyed. It seemed to be the same unit that had shielded him during the battle. Was that pilot also aboard the Minerva?

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

"What the?!"

"We're hit?!"

The corridor echoed with the startled cries of the crew.

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

"Bridge! What's going on?!"

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

"Dammit!"

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

"All stations: damage reports immediately!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did they get away?!"

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

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

"Mr. Chairman?!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes..."

Durandal's expression also darkened at that concern.

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

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

Talia fully understood the gravity of the situation.

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

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

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

"Don't worry about me, Captain."

His smile quickly faded, replaced by a serious tone.

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

"Thank you very much."

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

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

As if he had been waiting, Bart immediately replied.

"We can still go after them!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you."

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

"Captain."

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

"What is it?"

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

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

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

"What?"

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

"We detained the two and found that one is Representative Cagalli Yula Athha of the Orb Union, and the other claims to be her attendant. They requested medical attention and a meeting with Chairman Durandal."

"From Orb?!"

The astonishment was clear in Talia's voice, mirroring the disbelief that marred Durandal's features as he halted his steps toward the elevator.

"I acted on my own and arranged for the necessary medical care, and they are currently resting in the officers' quarters."

Her instincts had been right; trouble had indeed boarded the Minerva with them. Talia felt an urge to hold her head in her hands. Really, one crisis after another! Three mobile suits were stolen, Armory One was wrecked, and the ship launched without any ceremony. And now, letting the enemy slip through their fingers was dwarfed by the new dilemma: the princess of Orb had come aboard. Managing one head of state was daunting enough for any battleship!

In the dimly lit room, the only sounds were the faint whirring of motors and the low, murmured conversations of dedicated staff. At the far end, behind a sleek console, Neo peered into the shadowed corners where three circular beds were arranged in a cloverleaf

pattern. Under the translucent dome-shaped glass covers, his cherished subordinates, Sting, Auel, and Stella, lay in innocent repose.

Indeed, their sleeping faces were innocent and adorable like young children. As if they had yet to know any of this world's worries or fears.

"Yes. Forget all the bad things," Neo whispered silently to them and left that room.

Stepping onto the bridge, Captain Ian Lee caught his eye, a flicker of anticipation in his expression. "It looks like we've succeeded," he stated, an unspoken question hanging between them.

Neo positioned himself behind his designated seat, his posture relaxed yet alert.

"How much longer till we reach point B?"

"About two hours."

The operator answered, and Lee stared at Neo probingly.

"Do you think they will come after us?"

"Hard to say."

Neo replied readily.

"Because it's hard to say, so we should assume they will and continue along our planned route. One should always assume the worst, right? Especially on the battlefield."

Lee's grunt of agreement was low and grudging. Despite his reserved demeanor, Neo had found an unexpected compatibility with the captain. It might have been a one-sided perception, but it was a dynamic that worked.

Lee, driven by a sense of duty, broached another topic.

"How about their recovery?"

"They appear to be fine. They're sleeping like babies."

Neo responded, the image of their peaceful faces fresh in his mind. He remembered the maintenance room, where the pilots underwent 'maintenance'—a term clinically devoid of emotion, much like how mechanics tended to mobile suits post-battle.

The more precisely something was built, the more care it required to demonstrate its full performance.

Initially, the art of piloting a mobile suit was a skill that eluded Naturals, requiring the superlative reflexes and robust physical capacities inherent to Coordinators. When the Earth Alliance forces recognized the dominance of this novel armament introduced by their adversaries, their attempts to replicate such prowess met with significant hurdles. The endeavor to train Naturals to pilot mobile suits was ultimately realized through enhancements to the operating

system. However, a covert and more radical strategy was simultaneously pursued: engineering the pilots themselves.

These were not ordinary pilots but enhanced humans, crafted to embody the prowess of Coordinators. Unburdened by fear or doubt on the battlefield, these warriors possessed physical capacities that rivaled their engineered counterparts. Among them, Sting and his comrades represented the zenith of this project: individuals who, through hypnotic suggestion, had their fear of mortality erased and their innate capabilities amplified to surpass even the Coordinators. They were the epitome of ultimate pilots.

"However, I'm a little concerned that Auel used the block word on Stella. I find that somewhat distressing."

Neo confessed, referring to a report from the staff dedicated to their oversight.

Each of these enhanced individuals was burdened with 'forbidden words'—specific triggers ingrained to unravel the fabric of their conditioning. For Stella, the utterance of 'death' could shatter the illusion of invincibility carefully woven around her psyche. This forbidden word had the power to resurrect the suppressed terror of mortality, a fear meticulously erased during their sleep. The therapeutic bed they rested in bathed their minds in soothing images and melodies, purging not only fear but all residual memories that might impair their performance in upcoming sorties. This 'maintenance' was crucial in preserving their psychological edge as optimal combatants.

Lee's response came with a hint of scorn.

"Pilots that need to be returned to the cradle whenever something happens? Does the lab really believe they can be of use to us?"

It was clear Lee harbored reservations—not necessarily about the pilots themselves, but perhaps about the creators of such beings. In an effort to smooth over the tension, Neo argued, "But they're a lot better than the previous group, don't you think? They fully understand what we tell them and the work they're given."

Indeed, the trial of enhanced humans in the last great war had seen pilots augmented through implants and drugs that elevated their physical abilities to match those of Coordinators. Their combat skills were formidable, yet the drugs had obliterated not just their fear but their capacity for sound judgment, rendering them unreliable. Sting and his group, however, products of meticulous refinement, managed to retain their cognitive functions—though Stella occasionally displayed quirks that seemed inherent to her character.

To Neo, they were akin to mischievous adolescents, merely requiring a bit more finesse in handling—wasn't that characteristic of all young individuals? He saw this as a significant improvement, though Lee clearly disagreed, his disdain as palpable as if he'd tasted something bitter. Attempting to pacify his captain, Neo offered, "It can't be helped. We're still in the trial stages in many regards. This ship, the mobile suits, our pilots, and the world."

Lee nodded, seemingly convincing himself.

"Yes, I understand."

"The day will eventually come, when everything will begin in the true sense."

Neo affirmed with a hopeful smile, meeting Lee's gaze.

"Under our name."

Despite the lightness in his voice, Neo's smile, partially obscured by his inorganic mask, carried a somehow inhuman coldness.