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MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM

Awakening
Escalation
Confrontation

Yoshiyuki Tomino

Translated by Frederick L. Schodt
Introduction by Mark Simmons



[Gundam Mobile Suit 03] – Confrontation
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A WORD FROM THE TRANSLATOR

Gundam Mobile Suit is no ordinary three-volume science fiction series. It is but one part of a fantasy universe and a social phenomenon of gargantuan proportions. Made-in-Japan.

GUNDAM began in 1979 as an animated television series, titled "Kido Senshi Gundam," or "The Gundam Mobile Suit," but it had its roots in a long Japanese tradition of giant warrior robot animated TV shows for children (mostly boys). These stories were usually about struggles between good and evil forces, and adhered to formula plots—after an invasion by alien monsters or crazed robots, a young hero typically climbed into a "drivable" giant robot (a state-of-the-art model designed by his scientist father or uncle, who had been killed by the attackers), and then proceeded to save the world. As directors often lamented, because the shows were essentially commercials for toys based on the robot characters, they had to show robots in absurdly dramatic poses in as many action scenes as possible. The result was an endless series of hyped battles between thirty-stories-tall, sword-wielding, transforming warrior robots stomping through smashed cities.

Yoshiyuki Tomino, a veteran animation director, had long chafed at the constraints of the genre, and was determined to demonstrate that it had a greater potential. With GUNDAM, in 1979, he created a far more realistic storyline, and lavishly detailed both its characters and *mecha*, or high tech hardware. Influenced partly by Robert Heinlein's 1959 novel, *Starship Troopers*, he abandoned traditional Japanese robot concepts and made the "Mobile Suit," a type of armored suit or piloted exoskeleton, the centerpiece of his story. He paid attention to the laws of physics and limits of believability, and he introduced characters with complex personalities that were difficult to pigeonhole as simply good or evil.

The first television series did not begin with high ratings, but it ended as a sensation, and marked the start of a GUNDAM decade in Japan. It also gained a near fanatical following among a much older audience group than would have normally been expected—many viewers were junior and senior high school, even college students. The success of the first TV series thus led to a second in 1985, titled "Z Gundam" (Zeta Gundam), and then a third in 1986, titled "Gundam ZZ" (Gundam Double Zeta). The first TV series was re-edited for theatrical release as three features, and in 1988 an original theatrical release, titled *Gundam Mobile Suit: Char's Counterattack* followed. Yet another feature is planned for 1991. In conjunction with TV broadcasts and theatrical features, a series of original animation videos, "The Gundam Mobile Suit 0800" has also been on sale since 1989.

Films are only one part of the GUNDAM universe. Toys are traditionally merchandised in conjunction with animation in Japan, and GUNDAM has been no exception. But instead of gaudily painted, sturdy robot toys for little boys, GUNDAM is famous for its beautiful scale models of the show's *mecha*, detailed with an unprecedented aura of "realism." These, too, have been a sensation. On one Sunday morning in 1982 nineteen young Japanese were injured in a near riot that broke out at a department store where crowds were vying to purchase the models. Nearly one thousand different types of GUNDAM plastic models have subsequently been produced, and over one hundred million have been sold— nearly one for every man, woman, and child in Japan.

Books are another component of GUNDAM. The original edition of the first three-volume series of GUN-DAM novels was published in 1979 by Asahi Sonorama, and was followed in 1987 by another reworked edition published by Kadokawa. Authored by Yoshiyuki Tomino, the creator and director of the animation shows, the novels have allowed him to develop the *Gundam* universe with even more detail and sophistication than possible in the animation. Appealing to an even older age group, the books have also been wildly successful. The original three-volume GUNDAM series (this one) has sold well over one million copies, as has a subsequent five-volume Z GUNDAM series. In addition, over one hundred different illustrated and special-interest GUNDAM books have been marketed.

An entire generation of Japanese has been raised on GUNDAM stories and images, but the ultimate testimony to the concept's success is that there has even been a parody animation series created, called "SD (Super Deformation) Gundam." It, of course, has also been

accompanied by heavy merchandising; miniaturized, comical versions of the original GUNDAM scale models have been the rage among young children since 1988.

This Del Rey edition of *Gundam Mobile Suit* is an English translation of the 1987 Kadokawa edition of the first series of three novels. I have tried to be as faithful as possible to the original Japanese in my translation, while striving for an English structure that is as natural as possible. This may seem an easy task, but with a language as different as Japanese, it is not always so. Luckily, Yoshiyuki Tomino's epic is set in outer space, and most cultural and historical differences have been neutralized as a result, making the job of translator far easier, and giving the novels a truly international atmosphere. Careful readers, however, will occasionally note Japanese names and a uniquely Japanese flavor.

To hardcore U.S. GUNDAM fans a caution is due. In much of the English language promotional material that has emerged from Japan over the last decade, character names have not been transliterated into English in a unified fashion. I have therefore given priority to the original Japanese text, and some of the spellings I employ differ from those popular in English language promotional materials and fanzines. For example, the name of Amuro Rey's arch rival is often written as "Char," whereas I have chosen "Sha," which is closer to the original.

GUNDAM has inspired countless imitators in Japan and set a standard for science fiction that few have equaled. And despite the fact that neither animation nor books have been officially introduced in the United States, GUNDAM has already had a major, albeit indirect, influence on the American SF-fantasy world, in terms of both character and *mecha* design. With the Del Rey English language edition of *Gundam Mobile Suit*, American SF fans can now finally read the original novels of the story they have heard so much about. But the GUNDAM universe is vast and still expanding and these novels are but a small peek into it. Hopefully they will soon be followed by many others.

Frederik L. Schodt

CHAPTER 17

POWER AND AMBITION

"I'm just speculating, but if we could be absolutely certain that the Federation Forces really *were* going to converge around *Abowaku*, then, I, I . . ."

To Admiral Chapman Jiom's surprise, his superior— Gren Zavi, the Supreme Commander of the Zeon Archduchy—faltered in midsentence. For a man who normally spoke with unswerving conviction even when the two of them were alone, it was utterly out of character.

"I've been thinking," Gren finally continued, "that we could make *Abowaku* one of the targets for the System plan. Well? What do you think?" His last words were rushed, as if he were overly self-conscious.

Chapman was horrified. "If, if I understand you correctly, Excellency," he said tentatively, "you're ordering me to employ the System in our current campaign. If so, sir, I beg to reply that it is impossible."

Gren twisted his head and popped the joints in his neck. "What's the matter, Admiral?" he said, his voice suddenly hardening. "You're not worried about Dozzle, Krishia, and Randolph, are you?"

Chapman knew Gren was angry at him for his weak-kneed response. But he knew what Gren was really suggesting: targeting *Abowaku* as part of a plan to annihilate Dozzle and Krishia Zavi—Gren's own brother and sister—so he could rule unchallenged in a new postwar era. And because no witnesses could be permitted to survive such a dastardly attack, Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman—Gren's own right-hand man and the commanding officer on *Abowaku*—would also have to be sacrificed. There was no other way to explain the earlier hesitation and tone. But Chapman was not completely surprised. He had long suspected Gren might someday cook up such a diabolical scheme.

"They ought to be able to hold off the Federation Forces long enough for us to complete the project," Gren added. "Don't you agree?"

"Why, yessir." Chapman stroked his mustache with his ring finger and stared at some notes on Gren's desk in front of him. "You're quite right, I'm sure, sir. The parties you mention, after all, do command some of our crack units." He wished he had never heard Gren's words. And he wished he knew nothing about Gren's plans. But it was too late. He knew—and now his own position was in danger. Gren would be watching every move he made, listening to every word he uttered. And eventually he, Chapman, would have no choice except to execute Gren's crazy idea. Nonetheless, he raised his gaze to meet Gren's and finally managed to blurt out, "But the ... the ... conditions are too difficult, sir."

Gren stood up and pushed a button on his expansive office desk. The left and right wall panels rose up, revealing giant four-meter-square screens that showed the universe unfolding before them. "Well? Why? Speak frankly, Admiral."

"We can't control where the Federation armada is finally going to concentrate its strength, sir. And we have no guarantee that use of the System will terminate the war. As long as that is true, I believe your plan is impossible to carry out, sir."

"Hmph. I see your point. But surely it's possible to use the System for something *less* than a single-point attack. Can't we use it to sort of rake their forces? Eh, Chapman?"

"Well ... I, er, suppose so."

System was the code name of a top-secret Zeon project to convert a cylindrical space colony over six kilometers in diameter into a giant laser cannon. Using this Solar Ray to rake the enemy presented several technical problems, not the least of which was the fact that the angle of fire could be tweaked only between three and five degrees. But as long as the target was tens of thousands of kilometers removed, even that would easily cover an entire combat zone. It would not even be necessary to wait for *all* the Federation ships to converge at one point. If, however, as Gren seemed to imply, the goal was also to annihilate certain friendly forces—Zeon forces—and make it look like an accident, the plan would have to be perfectly

executed. They would need double, even triple guarantees that it would work as designed.

Gren continued. "I've already had Rank Kiprodon, the president of Side 6, which as you know is ostensibly neutral, sound out the possibility of a negotiated peace settlement afterward with the Federation."

"And is there such a possibility, sir?" Chapman immediately regretted asking the question so soon. Gren would probably pounce on him for it.

"You could say so," Gren answered mysteriously. He then turned away from the wall screens and walked in front of Chapman. He smiled thinly, and Chapman instinctively stood at attention, holding his files at his side. He knew Gren had made a decision.

"I'll leave the timing of the attack up to you," Gren said, casually sitting down at his desk again. "Can you do it?"

"With . . . with one condition, sir." Chapman haltingly replied. "I need at least three days to bring the System up to eighty percent of its power potential. I need you to wait till then."

"Our Revol I campaign has already begun. If the tides of war go against us, we may need to fire the System as early as this afternoon."

"But, *sir!*!" Chapman closed his eyes, raised his voice, and lodged the strongest protest he was capable of. The System was only fifty percent powered up, and to make up the difference he would have to do rush work on the over five hundred microchannels that linked *Mahar* with the solar batteries. It was obviously impossible. But that was just a technical issue—the moral issue was more complex.

Chapman Jiom was, however, an admiral with considerable personal ambition. He had been given a chance to win the favor and trust of the Supreme Commander, and he knew that if he succeeded, his future would be bright. If the war could be concluded on favorable terms, he would probably be treated like one of the Zavi family. In fact, without Dozzle and Krishia Zavi around to interfere, he would probably be given a position in power second only to the Supreme Commander himself.

At the same time, Chapman was a fairly rational man and he was fully aware of what could happen to him if he linked himself too closely to Gren's fate. Gren had, after all, just decided to sacrifice one of his most trusted men, not to mention hundreds of his own troops and his own sister. But if he worked fast to help him eradicate potential future problems such as Dozzle and Krishia, he was convinced he could avoid Randolph's impending fate. Going along with Gren, he quickly concluded, was a gamble, but it would be worth it. *The only obstacle left*, he suddenly thought, *will be Gren's father, Degin, and he's just a puppet*. In the end, his naive optimism in his own future and his limited understanding of the political scheming in Zeon won out.

"I know this plan entails an element of risk, Admiral," Gren said. "That's why I wanted to consult with you first. I don't have a hot line to General Revil on the Federation side and can't call him up and tell him to slow down, but I think I can spare some ships now dedicated to the defense of the fatherland and thus gain you another forty-eight hours."

"Thank . . . thank you, sir!" Chapman gushed. "With two days I'm sure we can bring the System power output up to the eighty percent we need. If you can just hold the targets in place, it'll work!"

"Good, I'm depending on you, Chapman."

Gren had whispered his final sentence, but Chapman understood its significance. Gren, Supreme Commander Gren Zavi, had called him—Chapman Jiom—not by rank but by name. It meant he had become the Supreme Commander's friend. He clicked the heels of his boots together, saluted, and exited his superior's office.

Gren watched as Chapman departed. Chapman was around forty-five and, he congratulated himself, probably just the right age and temperament for the job. Then he turned and looked at the wall displays he had activated earlier. They showed an enlarged real image of the space colonies that comprised the Zeon Archduchy, silhouetted by the sun. Most were of the sealed-cylinder type and had from six to eight giant solar-cell panels on their periphery, which supplied the residents inside with all the energy they needed. There were

two reasons Zeon did not use the type of cylinder common elsewhere in space—the type with three or more giant mirrors to reflect natural light inside—and instead used sealed cylinders. First, the centrifugal force generated by colony rotation simulated Earth gravity on the enormous inside walls of the cylinder and made it possible to use them for living space. A closed cylinder with no transparent glass sections to let in light meant that the entire wall space could be used as "ground" and that the colonies could house far more people; most Zeon colonies held up to twenty million people in seventy-kilometer-long cylinders as wide as eighteen kilometers in diameter. Second, it was believed that even the old models of sealed-cylinder colonies gave residents superior protection from harmful radiation during solar storms. Enough time had passed so that the third generation of colony residents was now emerging, and they appeared healthy, but there was still no guarantee that people in space would be safe forever. The sealed cylinders of Side 3, or what became the Zeon Archduchy, had been built as a type of experiment.

Instead of natural sunlight, a configuration of pipe-like structures resembling old-fashioned fluorescent lights ran through the core of the Zeon colony cylinders and served as an artificial sun, providing a regulated twenty-four-hour cycle of day and night. As in Federation colonies, in the Zeon Archduchy adjustments were made in the length of the day to replicate Earth-style seasons and form a human "mean time" among the various cylinders. It was a system that had proved quite successful, and there was little likelihood of change in the future. Sometimes people who had immigrated to Side 3 complained because the seasons approximated those of the temperate zones in Earth's northern hemisphere, and in the early days, whenever an emigrant from a tropical region or from the southern hemisphere became an official of the Mean Time Control Agency, he would ritually propose a change. But in recent years the populations seemed to have accepted the status quo or forgotten the difference.

Gren loved to look at the display of Zeon's colonies. From such a distant perspective, everything seemed so peaceful. As those around him often cautiously joked behind his back, their Supreme Commander acted like a feudal lord, gazing with self-satisfaction at the happy, productive lives of the lowly subjects in his dominion. "He acts high and mighty, his head in the clouds," some whispered, "even though his feet are still in the gutter."

But he also loved to gaze at the sight of the Milky Way. If he squinted his eyes just right when he looked at the wall displays, the millions of stars blurred into a mysterious, beautiful glowing river through the sky and made him marvel at its vastness and ponder the meaning of life. That he was capable of such philosophical introspection would have surprised his aides, for Gren was often assumed to be plotting what military-civilian ratio should exist on a specific colony or whom to reshuffle or demote. But as far as he was concerned those were mere details to be decided with a glance at the appropriate forms or the information regularly appearing on his monitor screens. He didn't need to gaze at the universe to make such mundane decisions. The gazing was done for the sake of gazing. Any thoughts generated by it were far more vast in scope.

Gren was fascinated with what could be accomplished with hundreds of colonies and with what they implied about human potential. If, as people said, the universe was infinite in size, men should act more boldly and assert themselves on a far grander scale than they had on Earth.

"There's no physical population problem out here," Gren muttered to himself, looking out at the universe. "Ten or twenty billion people are no threat to the natural order of things. But we can do without the baser element. They only hold the rest of us back. They're worse than scum."

Then he suddenly started to worry about *Mahar*. He made the display cameras pan until the full moon came into view on the screens. He could not see *Mahar* yet, but he could discern a few other colonies rotating in space with their huge solar cells deployed. Regularly scheduled transports plied their way between them, their red and green lights blinking in the blackness. Then he spotted it.

Mahar was one of the earliest and therefore smallest sealed colonies built. Six kilometers in diameter and thirty kilometers in length, it had been specially chosen for the System

project. Its citizens had all been evacuated, its inner walls had been coated with aluminum, and it had been turned into a giant carbon dioxide laser cannon. Because the power requirements for the project were staggering and because there was so little time, Gren had used emergency measures to harness energy from nearly one-third of all the solar cells in the Zeon Archduchy. But doing so had required appeals to the masses to conserve energy and make yet further sacrifices. He knew he had to keep appealing to their pride and reinforce in them the idea that they were a chosen, blessed people. If not, he ran the risk of creating fear and dissension, even fostering an antiwar movement. Governing might become difficult, and the last thing he wanted to do was sow the seeds of his own destruction by encouraging factions that opposed him. It was imperative that the System strategy lead to a quick victory in the war against the Federation.

"Hmph," he muttered. "Here's hoping Krishia, Dozzle, and Randolph can hold off the Federation attack as long as possible."

Gren liked to believe anything was possible, but at the same time, and in his own way, he knew the dangers of complacency and overconfidence. He knew he was no Napoleon, yet it bothered him that his own father—a puppet whom the Zeon citizenry still fawned upon as the "Archduke"—had once referred to him as a second-rate Hitler. But his father, he reassured himself, had probably said it out of jealousy more than anything else. He had gone to great lengths to maintain his objectivity. For example, he had placed Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman, his trusted lieutenant, in charge of the *Abowaku* space fortress and regularly listened to his advice, respecting him as a friend who could always provide it. It was, in fact, Randolph who had provided the inspiration for the idea of destroying Krishia. "I'm not saying there's not enough room in the solar system for both of you," Randolph had casually said several years earlier, "but your sister's too smart for her own good. She's the type that, if she'd been raised on Earth, would probably have revolted and formed her *own* Earth Federation."

It had been hard for Gren to realize that his baby sister was so clever and scheming. But as Randolph had pointed out, throughout the war she had always tried to promote her own agenda. Not too long ago, for example, he had learned that she was lavishing public funds on the mysterious Flanagan Agency. And around the same time he had begun hearing rumors of New Types.

Indeed, in the last few months the rumors had begun to take a more tangible form, and among both Federation and Zeon frontline troops it was increasingly said that New Types were not just enlightened Space Age men and women, as Zeon Zum Daikun had once prophesied, but extraordinary military warriors capable of finally bringing an end to the war. He had already received a battlefield report to the effect that the Federation had formed its own New Type unit, centered on a new Mobile Suit called a Gundam. And from the reports he received once every three days from Lieutenant Sharia Bull, he knew that Krishia had formed a small unit of Rik Doms to be *her* New Type unit, that she had put Commander Sha Aznable in charge of it, and that she was already preparing to reinforce it. Clearly, Krishia was ready for whatever was going to happen.

These aren't the New Types Zeon talked about, Gren thought. *They must have some sort of superpowers.*

If Gren began to overestimate New Types, it was partly because of Lt. Sharia Bull. He had deliberately planted Sharia in Krishia's command as a spy without telling him he wanted to destroy Krishia, but in the course of one meeting the lieutenant seemed to have read his mind. To Gren, it had seemed like a form of telepathy and had made him first start to believe the rumors about New Types. He recalled what the young revolutionary, Zeon Zum Daikun, had once said.

The universe is a new environment, which will compel mankind to change. If the first stage in mankind's evolution was his evolution from an ape to a human and the second stage was his breakthrough from feudalism to the rational science of the Renaissance, then the third will be his transformation into a new type of human, a man with profound sensitivity and insight and a far greater awareness of the vastness of time and space.

The transition to New Types will be a natural one. The act of walking increased man's range of movement and helped the concept of tribe and nation-state to develop. Powered

vehicles expanded man's awareness to a global level. And now civilization is advancing into outer space. By living and working in space, man's consciousness will transcend the boundaries of Earth and become truly universal. The vastness of space will be "home." And as man's consciousness expands, he will begin to tap the unutilized portions of his cerebrum — the over half of his brain cells unused since time immemorial, the enormous untapped mental reserves given by God precisely for the new environment of space. And when this happens, man will change. Man will become a more enlightened, refined, and compassionate being. It is space—the act of living in an extraterrestrial environment—that will act as the trigger.

O people of space! Now is the time to awaken! To realize your latent potential. We are at the dawn of a transformation of mankind. A true enlightenment of the human race. And we may finally be poised, ready to transcend what has always been thought the impossible—infinite space, and time itself. This is no idle dream! To live in a new universe, man must transcend the psychological limitations of his old environment!

The memory of Zeon Daikun's speech was etched into Gren Zavi's brain. His father, Degin Zavi, had financially backed the young revolutionary's activities. And when a true political movement had coalesced around Zeon Daikun, culminating in the formation of a political party, Gren had been influenced by his father and had thrown himself into the movement. But after several years of working with Zeon Daikun, both he and his father had eventually reached the same conclusion: the man's true talents were limited to those of a political agitator.

By the time the "Zeon movement" had begun advocating the autonomy of space colonies in the Earth Federation, Degin Zavi and Gren had secretly usurped most of its true power, but Zeon Zum Daikun remained a star. He was handsome, impassioned, and the type of man whom young women fell in love with immediately; his charisma was essential to turn the movement into a true political force. As public opinion began to coalesce and advocate the right of Sides to exist as independent states and the sacredness of Earth as mankind's original home, Degin and Gren emerged as leaders of the Zeon faction.

As Zeon Zum Daikun had often said, *It is the height of arrogance for those who remain on Earth to look up at the heavens and believe they can continue to rule over all its inhabitants. It is true that we—the space colonists—were largely shipped from Earth against our will as a population-control measure. But now we are developing a new identity and awareness. We are a new people. We live, eat, and sleep among the stars. We live in infinite space, and we will have access to infinite energy until the sun burns out fifty billion years from now. Our consciousness will expand, and infinite space will be our true home. God has given us the stars to live among.*

We are the people of the universe. We have struggled to survive in a harsh environment, and new generations of colonists testify to our success. Now, when we gaze back at Earth, we see a sacred blue and green orb—the cradle of civilization and a sacred home which we must eternally preserve and protect. Our new consciousness as people of the universe tells us that Earth was not created to be abused and polluted by a few members of an elite, privileged class. Men and women who have never been into outer space still believe Earth belongs to them and still continue to rape and plunder it, but their time has passed. Earth must be preserved as the sacred homeland of all mankind. It does not belong solely to an Earthbound elite! By continuing to dream of controlling all of mankind, they forever deny mankind its true destiny.

Autonomy for the Sides, sovereignty for the colonies, does not simply mean a revolt against sovereignty on Earth. It means that every human should move into space, that the government of the Earth and the area around it should be placed in the hands of an alliance of all Sides, and that the Earth itself should be preserved and protected as the sacred birthplace of all mankind. It is easy to expand the number of colonies required to accomplish this.

In ancient times the Christians fought bloody battles for control over the birthplace of

their religion, but there is no need for humanity to repeat this mistake over Earth.

Zeon Zum Daikun's ideas struck a sympathetic chord among the colonists on each Side, but the "absolute democracy" of the Earth Federation government also worked in his favor. The internal contradictions of a dictatorship of the majority created endless parliamentary procedures, which resulted in a rash of irresponsible legislation and an obfuscation of responsibility among individual politicians. Even minor policy initiatives invariably resulted in factional fighting among competing bureaucracies. It became impossible to satisfy anyone. Dissatisfaction spread throughout the system.

Some agencies of the Earth Federation government were aware of the seriousness of the problems developing and were sympathetic to the Sides, but when a hard-line Earth faction took over de facto control of the entire Federation system, its members' prejudices inflamed the desire for autonomy among the Sides and eventually created the conditions for a direct challenge to the authority of the Federation government. By the time the Earth Federation government tried to exercise control over the situation, it was too late. Their actions succeeded only in derailing the emerging Side 3 republican system.

On Side 3, already worsening relations between De-gin Zavi and Zeon Zum Daikun were aggravated when Degin and Gren conducted a massive purge of their opposition. In 0065 U.C., which came to be known as the Black Year, a special Secret Service under the control of Gren eliminated two hundred thousand members of the anti-Daikun faction.

The purge was carried out in a draconian way entirely contrary to the beliefs of Zeon Zum Daikun, and it even created a rift between Degin and his son, but it did make it possible for Side 3 to successfully declare its independence from the Earth Federation two years later and to officially form a republic. But it did not mean that the power struggles within the Zeon Republic itself were over yet, for five years after Side 3's declaration of independence, Zeon Zum Daikun died suddenly of what was reported as an illness—rumors persisted that his death might not have been entirely natural. And three years after Zeon's death, Degin declared Side 3 an archduchy and installed himself at its head.

Instead of acting resolutely, the Earth Federation government chose to sit back and watch the power struggle unfolding between the ruling Zavi family and the surviving Daikun faction and naively wait for the new Zeon state to collapse of its own accord. But that approach backfired, for it gave the Zavi family time to consolidate its grip on Side 3 and turn what had been a republic into a powerful dictatorship.

Why did Side 3 turn into such a different system from what its founder, Zeon Zum Daikun, had envisioned? Top officials in the Earth Federation government were aghast and perplexed. But it was really the result of Gren Zavi and his skillful use of the Secret Service. Gren had his own maniacal vision of how mankind should evolve in space, and to realize it he knew that simple autonomy for Side 3 would not be enough. He believed the Earth Federation government itself would have to be destroyed, despite the fact that doing so would require overcoming an enormous disadvantage in military and logistical strength. And to that end, he knew that he had to transform Side 3 into a military powerhouse, that he would need, not a vacillating democracy or republican government, but a totalitarian system. But since his originally stated goal was to fulfill the vision of Zeon Zum Daikun, it was convenient to keep using Zeon Zum Daikun's name. Thus the new state became the Zeon Archduchy.

Whether Degin Zavi was aware of all his son's machinations at the time was unclear, but Gren Zavi soon became Supreme Commander and managed to gain control of the Zeon military and the police, placing his brother, Dozzle, and sister, Krishia, in positions of power. In the few years since the founding of the Archduchy, he had finally come within sight of achieving all his immediate ambitions. If there was anything he regretted, it was that his younger brother, Sasuro, had been assassinated in the early struggle with the Daikun faction, for Sasuro would have been ideally suited to work in government administration.

Inevitably, Gren began to contemplate mankind's longer-term future. He possessed a brilliant, highly analytical mind and had an uncanny ability, even when grappling with a particularly knotty problem, to think beyond it toward a larger goal. And having a larger goal

always gave him the power to break through whatever short-term problem he might confront.

Five minutes after Admiral Chapman Jirom left his office, Gren began a meeting with another two officials, but then over his intercom speaker his secretary announced the arrival of Lieutenant Lambda Ral of the Secret Service.

"Tell him I'll meet him next door," Gren replied into his desk mike. He stood up, excused himself, loosened the collar of his uniform, and headed for the smaller reception room that he always used for more intimate discussions. Lambda Ral was standing, waiting for him by the door. As Gren entered, he noted with satisfaction that his secretary, Cecilia Eilene, had readied tea for both of them.

"Good to see you again, Lambda. Have a seat."

"Thank you, Excellency," Lambda replied, bowing slightly and sitting by the table. He seemed unusually nervous.

"How about a shot," Gren suggested.

"Don't mind if I do, sir," Lambda replied. As if on cue, Cecilia appeared with a little liquor cart, from which she produced a bottle of brandy and dispensed one shot into each teacup.

Lambda immediately lifted his cup to his lips and began to sip, but he did it with enough grace that Gren was willing to overlook the violation of etiquette it represented. Gren was a finicky man who normally hated meetings that involved eating and drinking with his men; at banquets, there was always someone who rubbed him the wrong way with his boorish manners. That most of his guests were visibly nervous when eating with him bothered him even more.

Slowly lowering his cup to the table, Lambda said, "I've scanned all of Lieutenant Sharia Bull's reports up to yesterday. Frankly, sir, his writing isn't what one would expect from a man of his caliber. His observations seem extremely shallow."

"Hmph," Gren said, savoring the brandy flavor in his tea.

"When he's simply reporting facts, I think he's quite objective and accurate even on minor details. The only personal, subjective statement he makes is to lament the death in action of Junior Grade Lieutenant Kusko Al. As far as your sister Krishia is concerned, he says he's only met her once and makes no mention of his impression. In summary, I can only say that he produces very run-of-the-mill, superficial reports."

"Perhaps he wants to avoid speculation."

"That's probably correct and would certainly be in character for him, but I must nonetheless confess I'm rather worried." When Lambda Ral finished his sentence, he coughed softly and looked up at Gren.

Noting Lambda's unusual demeanor, Gren decided to probe. "Lieutenant Sharia Bull always seemed an extremely cautious and conservative man. But I also trust your intuition, Lambda. You seem troubled. What is it?"

"Well, sir. . ." Lambda began. His entire body, including the manly mustache he sported, trembled slightly. "It's about Commander Sha Aznable, sir. I've learned something that affects me personally, sir. He's . . . he's one of the two orphaned children of Zeon Zum Daikun that my father, Zinba Ral, took with him when he fled to Earth years ago."

Supreme Commander Gren Zavi lowered his teacup to the tabletop and stared transfixed at Lambda. He had never dreamed of such a connection. Lt. Lambda Ral was an important official in the Secret Service, which he, Gren, directly controlled. He knew about Lambda's father, and precisely *because* he knew, he had been convinced when Lambda joined the service that he would never waver in his allegiance. And thus far he had never been disappointed. Lambda was the type of military man he intuitively liked—broad-minded, devoted, and appropriately modest.

"You're seriously trying to tell me that our Commander Sha Aznable, the star of Zeon's MS forces, is really Caspar Lem Daikun?" he asked, heaving a sigh of exasperation.

"That's correct, sir," Lambda gingerly replied. "Apparently, after my father fled the archduchy, he bought the family name of Mas for the Daikun children and changed Caspar's name to Edward Mas. Then in 0070 U.C., Caspar, aka Edward, managed to infiltrate back into Zeon and register himself under the Aznable family name. At age eighteen, he was accepted

into the Officers' Academy and graduated at the top of his class. Because of an emergency call-up, he graduated six months ahead of schedule."

"Any idea of his motive?"

"Not really, sir. It's awfully hard to get good intelligence from Earth, sir."

"What about Zinba Ral, your father?"

"I've seen a report that he's still alive, sir." Lambda Ral kept his head bowed slightly when he answered, as if unable to look Gren straight in the eye.

Gren, for his part, was still reeling from the unexpected news, but at the same time he did not want Lambda to take too much of the blame for this on himself. No matter what happened, he knew he could trust Lambda. He suddenly changed the subject. "Well, what about Claret? Have you both signed the papers yet?"

It was such an out-of-the-blue question that Lambda at first had no idea what his superior was talking about.

"You know. Claret Harmine. Your fiancée. It would be a better example to your men if you had an official marriage ceremony performed."

"Sir!" the startled Lambda replied as his mind recovered. "She hasn't consented yet. She says she'll only consider it if the war ends and I'm still alive."

"Ha, ha, ha. I like that. A strong-willed girl. Well, her wish is about to be fulfilled, because we're about to settle this thing soon. Tell her I ordered you to get hitched. I shouldn't get involved in matchmaking, but I did tell her I'd find her a good man."

"Er . . . thank you, sir. I'll do everything I can to persuade her."

Lambda knew Gren was trying to make him feel more at ease, but he was unable to stop a sinking feeling of despair in his gut.

"Don't worry so much, Lambda," Gren added. "I'll take care of Krishia's New Type Corps in my own fashion. Frankly, I agree with your opinion on Lieutenant Sharia Bull. I think he might be a turncoat. His reports are far too superficial. He's not following my instructions."

"Yessir," Lambda replied in nearly a whisper.

"If my sister has really put Caspar Daikun in charge of her New Type unit without knowing his true identity, it means I'll have to put my original plan into effect even earlier than I thought."

Lambda said nothing. He had no way of knowing what Gren had ordered Admiral Chapman Jirom to do, but he could sense something big was going to happen. And Gren's next words seemed to confirm it.

"I told you we were about to settle this thing for once and for all, right? You and the Secret Service, Lambda, are going to become pretty busy in the next few days. I hope you're ready."

Lambda detected an odd twinkle in Gren's eye when he spoke.

"Don't worry about what happened with Caspar Daikun," Gren continued. "I'm going to create a whole new postwar order."

As Lambda watched, Gren drained the last drops from his teacup. Then, suddenly, he understood. Gren had something up his sleeve, something so drastic that it could create a new world order and eliminate the problem with Caspar Daikun at the same time. But he could not imagine what that something might be.

"We need to make sure you can have your wedding soon, Lambda," Gren said with a smile. "There's just one more thing I want to know. Tell me what kind of man this 'Commander Sha Aznable' really is."

In response, Lambda proffered a voluminous file and said, "We've got several tapes on him. This is the result of our investigation, sir."

Gren glanced at the materials and marveled at Lambda's thoroughness. "Thanks," he said. "Good work. You're dismissed now, Lieutenant."

Lambda saluted smartly and left the office. Gren pressed a special button in a little drawer underneath the table, and his secretary entered from the door to the left. Cecilia Eilene was a buxom young woman dressed in a moss-green pantsuit outfit, the chic cut of which highlighted her long legs. Her long hair was brown, almost black, like her eyes. She had a heavy layer of lipstick on.

"I'm not very good at situations like this, Cecilia," Gren said.

"But sir, Lieutenant Lambda Ral seems like a very forthright man. The kind who can be trusted."

Gren nodded in agreement, and Cecilia smiled at him. Then she left the room. She was doing her job well. Two years earlier he had hired her specifically for her ability to size people up, and she hadn't disappointed him. But he wasn't about to let her observe him now. He flicked a switch on the intercom panel, deactivating the miniature observation camera built into it, and then pulled a video card from the file Lt. Lambda had left. It was a standard shirt-pocket-sized card with around three hours of images recorded on it. He plugged it in a slot, and an image began moving on a wall monitor.

The card appeared to be a copy of an amateur tape of Sha Aznable, and the images were of poor resolution. First Gren saw a young couple walking down a path on the campus of the Officers' Academy. The man—apparently Sha—was blond, wearing sunglasses and walking arm in arm with a girl, laughing. The girl seemed to notice the camera first. Then the man walked directly over toward it, waving his hand and saying, "Hey! Who gave you permission to film us?"

Then a voice, apparently the cameraman, came from off-camera. "Heck, Lulush asked me to . . ."

The girl came closer, asking in an irritated tone, "Why are you always so uptight, Sha?" But the young man continued to confront the camera, threatening, "Stop it or else."

At that point the screen went blank for several seconds, and then a different image appeared of a party at the academy. This time the video seemed to have been shot by a professional. After a panoramic view of the dance floor, the camera zoomed in on one couple, showing a close-up of a man wearing regular untinted glasses, his blond forelocks shaking above their frames in time to the music. It was Sha Aznable. He was an excellent dancer, and his partner was trying hard to keep up.

To Gren's surprise, he suddenly noted a shadowlike scar on Sha's forehead and wondered where it had come from. The dance sequence continued for several more minutes and then switched to scenes from the graduation ceremony at the Officers' Academy. Gren saw himself presenting Garma Zavi—his own younger half brother—with the special dagger given to the cadet with top graduating honors. The camera then moved to the next officer in line after Garma—to Sha Aznable—and lingered briefly on him. It was then that he remembered. Garma had not really been the top in his class, but since he was a Zavi family member, the ceremony had been tailored so he would receive the dagger anyway.

Hmph, Gren thought. *I should've given the dagger to Sha, after all. If I had, I would've gotten a better look at him, and I might have recognized him as the son of Zeon Zum Daikun just by his bearing—it's uncannily similar.*

After graduation, Sha had performed spectacularly in battle, and Gren had received steady reports of his promotions. Garma, for his part, had also always recommended Sha highly to him. It was just like Garma to have done so, Gren recalled. He had always seemed a little guilty over having stolen the graduating dagger from Sha. *Such a baby*, Gren thought, remembering the finely chiseled jaw of his half sibling.

The monitor next showed scenes of Sha Aznable as a lieutenant in the Zeon Archduchy military, wearing his distinctive face mask. According to one story Gren had heard, the mask had been specially allowed because Sha's eyes had been damaged when the automatic protective filter on his helmet had failed in battle. But while looking closely at the image on the screen, Gren realized the true reason Sha had taken to wearing the mask: He had infiltrated Zeon and begun wearing it to get nearer to the Zavi family without being recognized as Caspar Daikun! It was the only plausible explanation for wearing something that covered half his face all the time. As an infant, Caspar had often played with both Gren and Krishia Zavi, and Zinba Ral had surely reminded him of it many times as he grew up. It was entirely conceivable that Zinba had in fact specifically raised Caspar, the son of Zeon Zum Daikun, to infiltrate the Archduchy one day and destroy the Zavi family, and thus avenge his father's death. In fact, that was probably why Zinba Ral had left the care of his own son, Lambda Ral, with a foster parent and defected to the Earth Federation with Zeon Zum Daikun's two young children. He would have had no way of knowing how difficult this would

eventually make life for his own son later, but he would simply raise Caspar to fulfill Zeon Zum Daikun's original goal and, once the lad was old enough, let him loose to perform his task. It had obviously been a long-term gamble, but Zinba Ral was a crafty old fox and probably knew Caspar would be toughened by problems along the way and turn into a seasoned warrior with a mission. As Gren all too well knew, it was Sha's internalized sense of mission off or on the battlefield that made him a real threat.

Hmm, he next thought, *I could have sworn Caspar's sister was named Artesia, or something like that*. He began poring through the other documents in the file that Lambda Ral had given him, searching for her name. Finally he came across a reference to the fact that she had immigrated voluntarily to Side 7 and hoped to become a physician. There was nothing else on her, but that wasn't a problem. The problem was Caspar and the fact that he clearly was becoming an increasingly formidable enemy. The more Gren thought about it, the more he realized that Caspar was slowly closing in on him. Caspar had made enormous progress toward his goal in a relatively short time, befriendng Garma Zavi, graduating at the top of his class, and being steadily promoted in the ranks until he had won the confidence of Krishia—without her ever learning of his true identity. If Krishia *had* known, Gren was convinced, she never would have taken him under her wing.

Now the real question was whether Caspar Daikun, aka Sha Aznable, was really a true New Type. *Maybe Sha's use of the nickname Red Comet*, Supreme Commander Gren Zavi thought, *is less of a conceit than it seems*. Suddenly he imagined the vengeful spirit of Zeon Zum Daikun reincarnated in his young son.

CHAPTER 18

DOZZLE ZAVI

Being slapped by a girl didn't really hurt much, but the pain lingered a long time. Lieutenant (jg) Amuro Rey pondered this mystery briefly and then fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Five hours later he was jolted awake by an alarm. He thought about changing his underwear but then remembered he had done so before hitting the sack. Perhaps, he speculated, he was unconsciously preparing for the possibility of death. He got up, dabbed some lotion on his curly, reddish hair, massaged it vigorously and ran a brush across his head. Then he donned his dog tags, pulled on his trousers and jacket, and dashed out of his room. In the hallway he grabbed the first lift-grip he found and let it pull him horizontally through the weightless air. When he reached the pilots' room, he found his comrades—Kai Shiden, Hayato Kobayashi, and Kria Maja—already changing into their lemon-yellow combat suits.

"Yo, Romeo," Kai joked. "You owe me a dinner after the way you moved in on her!"

"Sorry, but you'll have to wait till this campaign's over," Amuro retorted. Then, turning to Hayato, he said, "Next thing I know, you'll want one, too."

"You bet," Hayato replied. "And it'll cost you an arm and a leg. You stole our favorite Wave!"

Neither Hayato nor Kai knew that the woman they referred to, Petty Officer First Class Saila Mas, had slapped Amuro earlier. They just knew he had slept with someone they had both had designs on, and they were determined to extract a penalty from him. It was an unwritten rule among young men on Federation ships that the perpetrator of such a deed had to pay a price, either in the form of treating his comrades or forfeiting the right to visit the canteen for a month. There was a price to pay for being a Romeo.

It was ironic, Amuro thought, because he had lost some of his physical interest in Saila when she had told him that Sha Aznable—the faceless enemy he knew only from combat—was really her brother. He had been attracted to Saila at first mainly because he knew she could give him something Lala Sun couldn't, something, it was safe to say, that was mainly physical love. And she had not disappointed him. In the process, they had established a "relationship," but that had been more of an accident than anything else. They hadn't come together to become soul mates or to build a life together. He had sought something that he couldn't get from Lala Sun. She had sought something her brother—Sha, or Caspar—couldn't give her. They had both sought substitutes for something else, and their love was therefore a simulated love, incapable of satisfying the true hunger in their souls. In the end, the spirits of both Sha and Lala Sun had formed a barrier between them.

When Saila had told Amuro earlier that she wanted him to kill her brother if they met again in combat, she hadn't really meant it. She had been perversely motivated not by hate but by frustrated love for her brother. But Amuro had been unable to forgive her. He had tried not to let his feelings for Lala Sun come between them, but she had not tried to do the same with her brother. She had naively assumed he would be able to understand her inner feelings simply because he seemed to be a New Type.

As far as he was concerned, if it hadn't been for Sha Aznable, he would not have had to kill Lala Sun or even Kusko Al—that he had met them because of Sha was a thought too painful to contemplate. He placed enormous, almost naive, weight on sincerity, and since he simply couldn't comprehend Saila's statement, it remained between them like a festering wound.

During his duel with Kusko Al's Elmeth, he had confronted Sha with Saila's statement, hoping to throw him off balance and destroy him. Projecting in his thoughts, <Sha! Don't try to stop me! > he had added, <If you do, I'll have to kill you, too, just as your sister asked. > To his astonishment, it had worked. Sha had reflexively projected back, <Is it true?> clearly acknowledging receipt of his message and proving that sworn enemies—MS pilots—could communicate in the midst of combat. Partially out of spite, Amuro had replied, <It's not

possible to lie on this level of communication, Sha. If you don't believe me, ask Artesia—or Saila! >

The enemy red Rik Dom had seemed to shudder, and then a scream, accompanied by a gush of rage, had reverberated through his cerebrum, astonishing him with its intensity. But by hesitating a few seconds for an answer in the heat of emotion, he had also given Sha an opportunity. The Rik Dom had evaded him and disappeared into the Corregidor shoal zone. He knew he had damaged it, but he also knew that in MS combat anything short of a mortal blow was useless. He had hesitated, and he had lost Sha. Only another New Type in the area could possibly have understood what had transpired between them.

Now, in the pilots' room on the *Pegasus II*, as Amuro zipped shut the triple layer of fasteners connecting his helmet to his jacket, he bitterly regretted not having killed Sha when he had had the chance. He felt failure as a military pilot, and as an only child he also felt a weird jealousy over the intensity of Saila's relationship with her brother. And that had perversely propelled him into telling her about the interchange. He knew now he never should have mentioned it. She had tried hard in her own way to apologize after making her impetuous, crazy request about Sha. She had tried hard to bridge the distance her words had created between them. And he had ignored her efforts. When she had slapped him after he told her what had happened, he had known why.

He rotated a knob on the left ear of his helmet and lowered his sun visor. He wondered if he was rushing too much, but he was still the last one out of the pilots' room. On the wide-range helmet receiver, he immediately heard the chatter going on between both Kai and Hayato and, mixed in with it, Saila Mas's voice. Pretty blond Saila. Her voice was practically inside his head. He tried mouthing the words, *Saila, I love you!* and was amazed at how beautiful they sounded.

Half the engines in the *Madagascar*—the flagship of Commander Sha Aznable's newly formed 300th Autonomous Squadron—had been disabled from damage received in the fight with Amuro Rey's unit. Sha had been out in space at the time in his Rik Dom, but it had been his judgment call rather than that of Lieutenant Commander Bruce Marshall, the captain of the ship, that had saved it from total destruction. As soon as Sha had witnessed the Gundam destroy Lt. (jg) Kusko Al's Elmeth, he had ordered all survivors in his unit to retreat. With Lt. Sharia Bull bravely supporting him, he had engaged the white Gundam Suit once more in order to gain time, and it had retreated of its own accord, clearly fearing a pincer attack. Then, after shepherding three surviving but heavily damaged Gattle fighter-bombers to safety, he and Sharia had finally returned to the *Madagascar*. The 300th had then withdrawn from the area, using the Corregidor shoals as a screen. With the Gattle fighter-bombers effectively out of action, its only remaining viable forces were four surviving Rik Doms.

In the pilots' room on the *Madagascar*, student recruit Lieutenant (jg) Leroy Gilliam hung a coffee tube on the holder next to him, turned to Sha and Sharia, and choked, "I ... I can't believe I survived and Cramble died."

"There's a reason you're alive, Leroy," Sha said, trying to console him. "You got two gold stars for sinking two enemy battleships before, right? And you're young. It's an advantage." Sha removed his helmet as he spoke, temporarily muffling his voice.

As an astonished Sharia Bull watched, Sha also proceeded to remove the face mask he always wore. He had a far more gentle expression beneath it than Sharia had ever imagined. It was odd. Sha had a pessimistic side to him but he also had an ability to think beyond the immediate present to the future. Most such people Sharia had known had a piercing expression, a look of excessive cleverness. It was true of Gren Zavi and Krishia Zavi, and it had even been true of Junior Grade Lieutenant Kusko Al. But Sha was different. He radiated youthful energy and had the aura of a genuinely refined individual. Perhaps, Sharia thought, it was from his upbringing, but that should have been more than canceled out by years of hardship in the military. Even Leroy was astounded. Sha seemed far too youthful and dignified at the same time.

As if suddenly aware of the reaction he had created, Sha turned and grinned. "Don't tell me this is the first time I ever took my mask off in front of you," he said. "Don't let it bother you if it is. I never take this thing off in public, even in front of the Supreme Commander. But there's no point in hiding anything from you men."

Leroy felt a thrill when he heard Sha's words. He had long ago overcome any resistance to having such a young leader, and now he felt genuine respect and trust. Sha had an almost princely quality to him.

He and his comrades had often discussed New Types among themselves, and they had unanimously recognized Kusko AI as someone with New Type pilot skills, but Sha, they often felt, was the more evolved as a New Type human. The problem, of course, was that no one had really defined a true New Type. Was it someone who simply had extrasensory perception? Or was it someone who might help transform the human race? If it was the latter, as the late Zeon Zum Daikun had seemed to indicate in his speeches, then Kusko AI's paranormal abilities were clearly too predominant and she was not well rounded enough as a human. The MS pilots had therefore secretly pinned their hopes on Sha.

Most people, Leroy knew, were ordinary. And if the true New Type concept could apply to ordinary people, then New Type characteristics should also manifest themselves in a very ordinary way. Before joining the 300th Autonomous, he himself had been tested and identified as someone with New Type powers, but he certainly didn't think of himself as an esper or a paranormal or anything like that. Before the war he had excelled in gymnastics, and for the last five years he had worked out just to stay fit. He had also wanted to become a painter, and he was proud of the fact that his artistic ability was above average. He liked to think, in fact, that he had the emotional sensitivity of an artist and the detached, objective makeup of a philosopher. But that was all. Then, when he saw his superior's uncovered face, he believed he finally understood: *Ordinary people can be New Types.*

Ultimately, his opinion was based on the reaction of one normal person to another. He might have felt differently if Sha's hair had been a little less blond or if the scar on his brow had extended more toward the bridge of his nose. But he was a budding artist who secretly idolized Michelangelo, and when he looked at Sha, except for a slightly more average, less imposing physique, he noted a resemblance to Michelangelo's statue of David. It was a subjective opinion but one that clinched the issue for him. When he saw Sha's uncovered face and basic nobility, he was finally convinced he was in the presence of a true New Type.

The tiny briefing room on the *Madagascar*, once filled with MS pilots, now held only three. The space seemed enormous and cold.

"I've ordered the captain to rejoin the *Swamel*," Sha commented, referring to Krishia Zavi's flagship as he sipped from a coffee tube.

"Does that mean we're retreating, sir?" Leroy asked.

"How can we possibly go forward?" Sha quickly fired back. "Where would we go, anyway?" He knew Leroy was cursing himself for asking such a dumb question, but he deliberately refrained from being too hard on him. "Listen, Lieutenant," he said with a smile. "I'm all in favor of a better idea if you have one. Let me know if you do, okay?"

"No sir," Leroy answered. "You're absolutely right. We should link up with Her Excellency Krishia and then decide what our next move will be. The way we have our forces deployed under the Revol I strategy should make it difficult for the Federation to attack us."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because we're pretty evenly matched in terms of local strength, and because Revil seems to be severely underestimating Excellency Dozzle Zavi's true power."

"But Revil's the type who'd do a structural analysis of a bridge before crossing it. What makes you think he's underestimating anything?"

"Well, you're right, sir. But he seems too preoccupied with our System project. Obsessed with its being some sort of secret weapon. I think he's rushing to try and destroy *Abowaku* as a result."

"I know you're speculating, Lieutenant, but I still think your logic's a little weak."

"Of course it is, sir. But there's something else to consider. It's true the Federation Mobile

Suit unit has been running all over us, but even if the Gundam model MS were specifically created for a New Type pilot, and even if it were equipped with something like the Elmeth's psychom interface, it still wouldn't be enough to tip the balance of power in this war. And that's true on our side, too. Throughout military history, I don't think a single superweapon has ever been enough to end an entire war. I also don't think a single individual with paranormal powers has ever done anything spectacular enough to go down in history before. History isn't decided by individuals, anyway, but by a horde of them. So unless one strikes at the core of the problem—"

"The core of the problem, eh? So how does that apply to the Earth Federation?"

"Well, sir. Their Jaburo command post on Earth is already an empty shell. It's not even worth trying to annihilate. I'm not even sure the problem's just the Federation."

Sha said nothing. He put down his coffee tube, stood up, and stared at the dozen or more intercom monitors on the wall of the room, his back to the other two men. Leroy watched him, then turned and glanced at Sharia Bull, whispering, "Think the commander's going to tell us what to do?"

Sharia laughed gruffly and said, "Maybe, but don't hold your breath. The situation's too complex to predict an outcome yet. We don't have enough time, and we don't have enough people on our side, either."

Sha heard Sharia's words behind him, imagined a smug look on the man's face, and felt mild disgust. There was no way Sharia could have known unless he were a paranormal freak, but when he had said that he was looking for a better idea, he actually had also been thinking about the earlier interchange between himself and the Gundam pilot and about his sister Artesia.

He was more sensitive than he had originally thought. In fact, during his last battle with the Gundam, if he had not experienced a burst of sensation in the midst of all the killing, his consciousness and that of the Gun-dam MS pilot would never have linked, and their communication would never have been possible. From what the upstart young Gundam pilot had conveyed to him during their confrontation, it was clear that he knew Saila Mas was really Artesia Daikun, a secret only Zinba Ral, who had raised the Daikun children, was supposed to know. And there was only one way the Gundam pilot could know—if he was close to or involved with Artesia. Bitterly, he remembered how the Gundam pilot had destroyed both Lala Sun and Kusko Al. At least his sister hadn't fallen for a wimp.

He turned and looked at the two men behind him. "You're probably wishing someone like the Gundam pilot was on our side," he said. "But he's not."

"Well, he would have made a nice addition to our team," an unfazed Sharia replied. "Assuming he didn't hate the Archduchy too much."

"No. I don't detect that in him," Sha said.

"Do you think maybe he's a real New Type, sir?" Leroy asked tentatively.

"Probably," Sha answered. "At least in the sense that Zeon Zum Daikun once referred to. I think he's probably a harbinger of true New Types."

"A *harbinger*," Leroy said, "I like the sound of that word, Commander. The world was changed by the Renaissance of ancient Europe. With New Types, maybe mankind's about to experience another renaissance."

"Who knows?" Sha replied, coolly. "Words like 'renaissance' or 'enlightenment' are just abstractions coined by historians, aren't they? Who knows what the people of the time really thought? The point is not to get too carried away."

"But sir," Leroy protested, "the ancient artists and philosophers were surely aware of what they were doing. Think of Dante, da Vinci, and even Raphael."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Sha answered curtly, "but I've never even heard of them. And I'm just not certain how evolved we can claim to be ourselves at this point in time."

"I ... I see," Leroy replied almost wistfully. He had left out Michelangelo's name, but it was probably a good thing. If his superior had said he had never heard of him, either, he would have been crushed.

Then Sharia quietly spoke up. "I still think we've touched on something important here. We need to change the status quo. We need to change the whole system of doing things."

One of the wall monitors suddenly flickered to life, showing the captain of the *Madagascar* making a report. Fighting had broken out again in the region they were retreating through.

Sha turned to Sharia and Leroy. "Just between you, me and the stars," he said with a wink, "we will."

Vice Admiral Dozzle Zavi's assignment suited his character: he was in command of the Zeon Archduchy's mobile assault forces. Dozzle had a personality utterly different from that of his half brother, Supreme Commander Gren Zavi, and was often described as both manly and coarse. He had the physique of a born soldier, but as his closest confidants knew, he had a complex about his appearance and feared it was too intimidating. Perhaps in reaction, he was extremely kind and gentle to his wife and children and to his troops. He was famous for always recommending his men to Gren for promotion, usually with some sympathetic remark about their difficult family situation. Those who knew his true nature were intensely loyal and would follow him anywhere.

The normally peaceful Dozzle was furious. General Revil, leading the Earth Federation armada, appeared to be ignoring *Solomon*, where Dozzle and his forces were based.

"I don't know what the man's got up his sleeve," Dozzle grumbled, "but he grates on my nerves. He doesn't seem to think we're worthy opponents." Until twelve hours earlier, he had planned to keep most of his ships in close to *Solomon* for its defense. But now, because Revil appeared to be concentrating his attack on *Abowaku*, he had decided to take a gamble and move his forces out, even if it left *Solomon* exposed.

Dozzle was a true warrior, the kind of man who liked to be where the action was. He had once personally piloted a Zak MS to the front during the Battle of Ruum, ostensibly to "observe" the situation firsthand but actually to engage in combat. His aides had panicked and sent out three Suits to escort him. Gren Zavi had laughed when he heard about his younger brother's exploits and had reproached him for his foolishness, but Dozzle's bravery had only increased the respect his men had for him, convincing them that even if he were an admiral and a Zavi family member, he was with them all the way. They would have followed him into hell.

Dozzle had even commissioned the development of a new model Mobile Suit-like machine for himself. Currently undergoing field and flight tests, the Vig Zam, as it was called, was heavily armored and, because it had legs but no arms, only vaguely humanoid.

If Mobile Suits often resembled giant infantry soldiers, the Vig Zam looked more like a tank. It was many times larger, and with sixteen mega-particle cannons deployed around the periphery of its fuselage, which looked like two soup bowls welded together, it was capable of blasting anything in a 360-degree radius. Because Zeon engineers had succeeded in developing a particle accelerator mechanism of unprecedented compactness, the cannons had virtually no barrels and thus had difficulty covering the area immediately above and below the Vig Zam fuselage, but that was more than compensated for by the machine's fundamental agility.

Like Mobile Suits, the Vig Zam was not yet perfect.

Before most Suits were formally deployed, they underwent rigorous prototype and field tests to identify and solve potential problems, but after two years of operation they still needed many improvements. Engineers were desperately trying to make them more compact, give them more power, and find a way to enhance their performance in formation.

The Vig Zam, however, was a product of Dozzle Zavi's character and the Zeon military organization. Whatever his scientists and engineers came up with, he wanted to try out himself; if something didn't work, he would demand a modification. And in pushing the Vig Zam to its technical limits, he and his engineers were following in the tradition established by their brilliant Nazi German counterparts in another age. In totalitarian political systems where nearly everything was decided according to the whim of a leader, individual initiative was often crushed. But under the wing of the military in the same system, science and technology often flourished, even if the individual engineers and scientists involved originally had utterly

different agendas and goals. As history had shown, if the possibility of technological progress existed, regardless of its application, few scientists were capable of resisting a summons to work by their political leaders.

In the beginning Archduchy scientists made excuses for their cooperation with the military, extolling the benefits of spin-offs to the civilian sector and emphasizing that the technologies they were developing were morally neutral and could be used for peaceful purposes as well as for war. But when war actually came, they fervently sought to ensure their nation's victory and gave their all to developing pure weapons of destruction.

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Vice Admiral Dozzle Zavi took off in his flagship, the *Gandow*, with a Vig Zam in tow. His total force, divided into three battle groups, consisted of over 100 ships. Fortunately for Dozzle, the battle group centered on the *Dross*-class carrier *Midro*, normally assigned to the defense of *Solomon*, which arrived at its staging point late and was therefore able to strike a wing of the Federation armada. In a one-sided battle, fifty combat-seasoned Zaks, accompanied by Jiko attack ships and Gattle fighter-bombers from the *Midro* group, easily annihilated over twenty Federation ships. The Zeon pilots had boasted prior to the battle that the Federation Flying Manta fighter-bombers would be no match for them, and they were proved correct.

Dozzle himself had no such luck with the 127th Autonomous. Several hours after leaving the Corregidor shoals, the 127th had linked up with the 203d and the 165th and, with them, was approaching *Abowaku* from above. Both the 203d and the 165th each consisted of a battleship and five cruisers, heavy and light, while the 127th included the *Pegasus II* and the *Cypress*. Dozzle's group consisted of the *Gandow*, accompanied by eight heavy and light cruisers, and a guard of thirty Zaks.

Up against thirty Zaks, the Federation group's twenty Bowl machines and ten GM Suits were clearly outclassed. The Bowls were an early, rudimentary version of Mobile Armor and were toylike compared to Zaks. The GMs were a mass-produced version of Mobile Suits, an interim model designed to be used until production of the Gundam and Gun Cannon prototypes could be ramped up. On paper they had specs comparable to those of Zaks, but in actual performance they were outclassed because Zeon pilots were far more experienced. The Federation group's ace in the hole was Amuro's little unit, consisting of Junior Grade Lieutenants Kria Maja in his GM 325, Hayato Kobayashi in his C109 Gun Cannon, Kai Shiden in his C108 Gun Cannon, and Amuro Rey in his G3 Gundam. It was immediately clear that Amuro's unit was more than capable of holding its own against the Archduchy force. It had, in fact, begun to demonstrate an astoundingly high level of performance.

Normal Suits were lightweight space suits—independently functioning life-support systems, pressurized and temperature-controlled—and no matter how well made, they would always be an awkward fit. Pilot Suits were far easier to wear. They used a high-grade, five-layer woven blend of glass fiber and flexible plastic and were worn close to the skin. They had roughly the same fit as the pressurized suits once worn by fighter pilots on Earth.

To Amuro, even his Pilot Suit seemed to interfere with his reflexes. He had never thought of himself as being particularly well coordinated, but during training he had demonstrated better than average ability, and in combat his strengths had been mysteriously amplified. And the more he improved, the more the Pilot Suit seemed to get in his way. It irritated him. He wished he could operate the MS naked. And if only his skin could withstand absolute zero temperatures, and if he did not need to breathe, he would have loved to get rid of the MS altogether. Then, he fantasized in a moment of overconfidence, he would easily be able to detect all the alien forces in the battlefield of space before him.

The next instant his left monitor showed a Zak coming toward him. He put the Gundam into a sharp turn and fired a blast from his beam rifle. It was the third Zak. Kai and Hayato, riding in their Gun Cannons fifty kilometers out on either side, were doing a good job of driving the enemy Suits straight toward him, and Kria, holding the rear in his GM, was giving him the room he needed to fire. His little unit, he proudly realized, had already evolved into a highly effective fighting team.

Then he heard Hayato yell at him again from his port side. Beams of light streaked through the blackness, and through them an enemy Zak with a squad leader's antenna-like insignia swooped toward him. It was the fourth Zak.

Amuro fired and scored a hit. He was dazzled for a second by the explosion that followed, and another Zak took advantage of it to slip into his blind spot. He panicked, pulled his beam-rifle trigger too fast, and missed. The Zak veered sharply to the right, spinning in Kai's direction, but seconds later was enveloped in blasts from the Gun Cannon's shoulder guns and exploded in a ball of light. Working as a team, Amuro and his three comrades had already bagged seven enemy Zaks, an unprecedented number of continuous kills.

To Amuro's great embarrassment, his preoccupation with his Pilot Suit and his overconfidence had allowed a Zak to blindside him. Worse yet, the pilot had been a young hotshot and clearly not a seasoned veteran.

His situation resembled that of the ancient samurai swordsmen he had once read about. When two samurai of relatively equal standing faced off, they were often able to divine a certain logic to each other's moves and adopt an appropriate counterstrategy. But this became exceedingly difficult if one of the warriors was extremely skilled, as a true master rarely revealed any pattern to his opponent. Normally, however, with practice there were ways of dealing with even the most unpredictable opponent. The biggest threat to the expert swordsman was an opponent who had already mentally resigned himself to death and was attacking in a suicidal rage. Then it was usually better to avoid a frontal attack, avoid seeking an immediate kill, and instead work to weaken and isolate the opponent first.

Amuro knew he was no samurai. He was riding in a sixteen-meter-tall Gundam Mobile Suit. But his situation resembled that of the samurai in that his enemies could conceivably plunge out of the blackness toward him from any direction, at random. He knew that if only he could put his mind into a Zen-like state of nothingness, he would be able to detect the presence of an approaching enemy. His real enemy now was overconfidence, not his Pilot Suit. It was functioning as designed, protecting his physical body. And whatever irritation he felt was shared by the Zeon pilots.

The moment he finally regained his mental equilibrium, he detected an enemy presence. *This is the gift!* he thought, exulting in his good fortune. *The gift of New Types!* He thanked the stars his powers of insight and intuition seemed to be increasing, for he knew true victory was not going to be achieved by eliminating a few Zaks in the battle zone. True victory, the theory went, would be obtained only by destroying the enemy fleet flagship—in this case Dozzle Zavi's *Gandow*—and Amuro knew it was located somewhere thirty degrees below and to his left.

It was one thing to understand the theory. It was another to try to put it into action and identify the true center of the enemy's strength. He was operating in the real world of space, not the world of fantasy films and holoscopes. Pilots had to visually identify the enemy, but against a background of black space, with its millions of burning stars, visually sighting and identifying an object over one hundred kilometers away was no mean feat. It was especially hard to distinguish between enemy and friendly ships. Harder than in a confused dogfight on Earth. Harder, some old-timers said, than locating a single grain of sand on a long beach.

Amuro nonetheless intuitively detected a force capable of controlling the entire combat zone. *What is it?* he immediately wondered. It was more powerful than anything he had ever encountered, so strong that it flowed through the Gundam's armor as a heavy, insistent, undulating wave. He shifted his Gundam onto a slightly lower vector and turned on his laser oscillator for a few milliseconds, signaling in a burst to his left, right, and rear, trying to tell Kai, Hayato, and Kria to follow him. In a diamond formation separated by twenty kilometers, the four Suits then dropped toward the sun. And along the way they took out two more Zaks and a *Musai*-class Zeon Cosmo cruiser.

Vice Admiral Dozzle Zavi donned his Pilot Suit and strapped himself into the captain's seat in the Vig Zam's cockpit. The machine's nuclear fusion engine fired with a pleasing sound.

"What's the delay?" he demanded of the pilot and copilot seated in front of him. "Let's get

those Federation Suits!"

"There's something odd about them, sir," one pilot replied. "Two or three are streaking toward the *Gandow* right now, just like the Red Comet does!"

"Don't mention Sha to me now!" Dozzle barked, infuriated, as he donned his helmet. "Red Comet"—Sha Aznable's nickname—was the last thing he wanted to hear. He had cashiered Sha earlier for failing to protect his younger brother, Garma, in battle. And afterward his sister, Krishia Zavi, for some weird reason had reinstated him to her unit. Now the mention of Sha's nickname only served to remind Dozzle of the irritating fact that he had dismissed Sha too soon. It felt like a personal criticism.

"Tell the *Gandow* we don't need an escort," Dozzle barked. "We'll destroy the entire Federation MS unit with this Vig Zam. Cut this machine loose!" Dozzle was getting more and more emotional and reacting more and more impetuously.

The *Gandow* released the Vig Zam's tow line as commanded. With three rocket nozzles in its underbelly belching flame, the machine leapt into space, accelerating as fast as a heavy cruiser under full power as it climbed to meet the approaching enemy MS unit.

"I don't care if we *are* being attacked by some prissy New Type unit," an enraged Dozzle shouted. "McLaughlin's group and the *Midro* should be smashing through the Federation line from the rear right now. If this Federation unit thinks it can run over us the way they have the others, let 'em try!"

Dozzle had every right to be angry. His *Gandow*-led fleet from *Solomon* represented the cream of the Archduchy's mobile forces in the area, but in the last twenty minutes a tiny force of enemy Suits had wreaked havoc with his plans, destroying half his ships, cutting a swath through them like a sickle through a field of grain. Even worse, they were aiming straight for his own flagship, the *Gandow*. The more he thought about it, the more humiliated he felt, for he knew that if it weren't for the unit harassing him now, he could easily be smashing a hole in the entire Federation line.

"I don't believe this New Type crap for a second," Dozzle exclaimed. "Designing humans to function like machines in battle. Hah! Crank up the fear quotient, and at some point even the best human pilot'll pee in his Pilot Suit!"

"One o'clock, sir!" the Vig Zam pilot yelled. "Up eleven degrees!" As Dozzle watched, an image flickered two or three times across an upper right monitor and then stabilized. It showed a telephoto view of a light gray Mobile Suit.

"What happened to the white Suit I've heard so much about?" Dozzle demanded. "Is that it?"

"Yessir!" the Vig Zam pilot yelled back, his voice trembling. "Looks like they've tried to camouflage it, sir." He was fast approaching the psychological state his commander had referred to. But he would never notice unless he survived and later checked the urine flask he was hooked up to.

Dozzle kept yelling. "They can't possibly have more than one beam cannon, and that means we've got over ten times more firepower than they do. Get them in our sights! Hurry!"

"*Four enemy Suits!*" the Vig Zam pilot screamed. In response, four beam cannons on the Vig Zam's prow fired for several milliseconds, and the effect was like a curtain of light, for each cannon could be moved incrementally to create a diffused strafing effect. As they watched, the Federation Suits all swooped as if avoiding the blasts and then re-formed again, heading straight for not the *Gandow* but the Vig Zam.

"Four Suits?" Dozzle shouted in disbelief. He could scarcely believe his eyes. The entire Federation MS unit was now bearing down on *him*! He felt the flesh on his back crawl in cold fear. He could understand how the enemy, out of sheer luck, could evade a beam blast. But he could not understand how, at nearly the same instant, they could have corrected course to attack *him*. He was no fool. He was battle-seasoned enough to know intuitively this was no ordinary enemy. It possessed a terrifying resolve.

"Put up a barrage of defensive fire!" he commanded, shouting. "Initiate evasive action. Let me operate one of those cannons!" He grabbed the controls of a cannon in front of him, activated its sights, and saw a simulated model of the enemy approaching on the screen, generated from data provided by laser sensors—at close range the model was fairly accurate.

He got the lead enemy Suit in his sights, put his finger on the trigger, and fired three times. And the Suit somehow evaded each blast.

Another chill ran down his spine. With renewed horror, he knew his earlier hunch had been correct. There was no way to explain logically how the enemy could have possibly avoided his carefully armed shots. For a second he wondered if the computer-generated sights on his display had been skewed, but he knew their electronics were so simple that it was out of the question.

Dozzle yelled to no one in particular, "Does this mean they're operating the same way people say Sha Aznable does?" In an attempt to evade the attacking Suits and rise above them, he made the Vig Zam accelerate in a full power climb. Six g's forced the men back into their seats, but Dozzle nonetheless managed to recheck the cockpit monitors to see how the enemy formation reacted. Again, the images were a simulation, a computer-generated extrapolation of data received from sensors over a ten-second period. But they were better than nothing and at least gave an indication of the enemy's relative size and mass and the speed of its approach. "The Suit riding tail in the formation seems a little slower than the others," he mused aloud. Knowing he was rising "above" the enemy somehow made him feel better. In a weightless environment words like "above" and "below" were technically meaningless, but humans still adhered to spatial concepts relative to their own physical position. And in that context, being on "top" of the enemy meant a great deal. But unfortunately for Dozzle, it was a two-way street.

On Amuro Rey's cockpit monitors, the Vig Zam appeared to be climbing up toward him from "below." He knew he could not count on his men hearing him clearly, but he radioed his observations anyway: *"Some sort of new Suit's coming at us fast! It's not a Zak! It's not skirted! And it's not an Elmeth! I've never seen the thing before!"*

Normally, making a radio call would have distracted him momentarily, but this time it did not. He sensed another three beam blasts directed at him, evaded them in the nick of time, and continued plunging toward the enemy machine, restraining his fire until he was in effective range for his beam rifle. Kai and Hayato, on either side of him, seemed to be doing the same, but the double shoulder guns on both of their Gun Cannons erupted in flame. Explosions occurred near the enemy machine, indicating a near miss.

Amuro suddenly knew he had to act fast. For some mysterious reason the "force" that he had sensed controlling the battle zone no longer emanated from the nearby Archduchy battleship but from the machine charging straight toward him. He swung his beam-rifle scope in front of him, lined up the sights with the legs of the approaching enemy, and fired. A band of light leapt from the barrel of his gun.

In the cockpit of the Vig Zam, Dozzle gasped in astonishment. The pilot and copilot groaned in fear and did the only thing they could think of, which was to keep the Vig Zam steady on course. They knew no Zeon MS pilot could have sniped at them with such precision on the first shot, not even the Red Comet.

Dozzle screamed. *"Roll this bird over! Ignite reverse thrusters!"* The pilot obeyed, and an intense g force bore down on them, riveting them to their seats and nearly snapping their collarbones. They felt the blood drain from their heads, but there was no time to become dizzy. A second enemy blast creased the "prow" of the Vig Zam and some of the particles on its periphery hit home, for along with an odd *whissh* sound that seemed to emanate outside their helmets, they felt an intense pressure. Instinctively, out of terror more than anything else, they began madly strafing the enemy formation.

"Knock those bastards out of the sky!" Dozzle yelled, at the same time saying a silent prayer of thanks for the pressurization in his Pilot Suit. He was remarkably fit, but he knew the Suit had kept him from losing consciousness.

The beam blast from Kria Maja's GM25 created a burst of light with an unusually evanescent quality when it hit the enemy machine. Amuro knew it wasn't a fatal blow, but he was grateful that Kria was on his team and not on the enemy's. "Nice follow-up, Kria!" he

barked into his mike. He was impressed. Kria had waited until Amuro had fired before initiating his own attack, just as he was supposed to. Kria had qualified at the same time as he, but GMs were a mass-produced Gundam type of Suit that had only recently been put into active service; he had joined the 127th only after the battle inside *Texas* and therefore had relatively little MS combat experience, but he was learning fast. He could already evaluate a combat situation instantly and, while supporting Amuro's Gundam, calmly carry out his assigned tasks.

* * *

The Zeon machine responded with wild beam blasts of greater and greater intensity. Amuro then knew it was time. He altered the Gundam's course vector one hundred fifty degrees to one that would take him "under" the enemy machine, all the while keeping his attention on the Zeon battleship in the area approaching from his left. He checked the sights on his beam rifle and fired first one, then five blasts. He saw the flash of a direct hit and exulted in the possibility of having destroyed the weird two-legged machine in front of him. And then he let out a curse. "*Damn!*"

Kria's GM, which had maneuvered to his left side, suddenly exploded in a ball of light. Amuro couldn't tell if the fire had come from the odd Zeon machine or the battleship; the computer in his Suit merely indicated in bright dispassionate yellow on his upper left monitor that a friendly Suit had been destroyed. Kria's last words, barely audible through the static, were, "*The bastards!*"

Using the light from Kria's explosion, the two Gun Cannons turned toward the Zeon battleship. Amuro instinctively knew his comrades were telling him to concentrate on the two-legged machine, and he immediately searched for it. In the light, he soon spotted it again, minus a left leg. Sparks were intermittently flying from the severed stump like blood spurting from a fresh wound, but the main engine still seemed to be intact, and it was closing in on him nearly as fast as a Zak.

He wasn't sure if he should aim for the engine or what he thought was the cockpit, for he had never seen any mobile armor like it before. And while he deliberated, the machine fired a cannon on its left side. In an instant the Gundam's shield melted, and its left arm was scorched by particles on the beam's periphery. Luckily, he had been able to make his MS leap upward, this time positioning himself above the enemy.

"*Your time has come!*" he screamed as he fired. A particle beam blasted a hole in the top of the machine, hitting what he thought must be the main engine. The fuselage shook and slowly tilted but did not explode.

Suddenly he felt uneasy. What had happened? Hadn't his beam blast been powerful enough to pierce the machine? He sighted again, shifting his aim to the area where he assumed the cockpit should be. And then he saw such a bizarre sight that his trigger finger froze in terror. As he watched, paralyzed, a mysterious black mist suddenly roiled forth from the fuselage cockpit without diffusing completely into the vacuum of space. The mist seemed to be reaching out, trying to ensnare him. He instinctively knew he must not let it reach him and tried to maneuver the Gundam out of the area but, cursing, discovered that his own coordination seemed to have been affected. Luckily, the Gundam began a smooth retreat anyway.

For a moment he wondered if he were confronting some sort of supernatural apparition. Theoretically, gases were not supposed to be able to retain their shape so well in space. Perhaps, he tried to reassure himself, what he had witnessed had simply been unusual smoke from an explosion in the fuselage. He desperately *wanted* to believe his own theory, but seconds later, when the mist re-formed in front of him again, his theory collapsed. For a few seconds he felt as though he were looking at what the old people had called "ghosts." Two eyes seemed to be staring out from the misty black form at the Gundam, at him. Perhaps they were background stars peeping through the mist, but for a second it was real. He shuddered and wondered if he were hallucinating. The eyes seemed filled with hate. What in heaven's name was happening? He was just an MS pilot, and this was beyond the scope of his imagination.

The next instant he sensed a rapid sequence of pings, as if bullets from a machine gun or a

rifle had hit the Gundam fuselage. Even his headset picked up the noise. He stared at the top of the enemy machine directly below him. It was still belching the strange mist and was so close that he could visually make out what looked like a Normal Suited figure, standing erect on the upper deck, firing away—with a *rifle*, of all things. The bullets were bouncing off the Gundam armor. It was an odd, almost comical scene. The man was tiny in relation to the machines, and there was no way in the world he could destroy a Gundam Mobile Suit with a rifle. But there he was, slapping in a new magazine and continuing to fire away brazenly.

Then Amuro finally knew. The mysterious force he had been sensing in the area belonged to this figure. Anger began to well up inside him. It was this man, he realized, who had been the source of the frightening black mist he had seen. The man was a fanatic. "These people are the cause of the war!" Amuro raged aloud.

Vice Admiral Dozzle Zavi screamed in protest: "A single Mobile Suit can't determine an entire battle!" Then, as an image of his wife, Narsi, and infant son, Mineva, flashed through his mind, a blast from the Gundam's beam rifle vaporized both him and the Vig Zam.

CHAPTER 19

RETREAT

From General Revil's perspective, the Cembalo campaign was not going well. The Federation armada, with himself and Vice Admiral Karel heading the primary battle groups, was steadily closing in on *Abowaku*. The vanguard, including the 127th, continued to perform well. But several units following the 127th, which were scheduled to assault the top of the umbrella-shaped fortress, had already been roundly trounced. Should the armada lose even one of its remaining main fleets, he would be forced to rethink the entire campaign.

At least the 127th is still proceeding with its attack, he thought. He was worried. Was it really safe to stake so much on such a tiny unit? He believed in the *Pegasus II* and its three Suits, but he had to think about the entire armada. There was still a deep-rooted prejudice in the Force against Suits, a belief that they were just another fighting machine with a weird humanoid shape.

"We'd better take *Abowaku* quickly," he muttered. He wanted to avoid heavy losses, but the Zeon forces arrayed before him, including Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman's men on *Abowaku*, were putting up an impressive defense. He was particularly disturbed by the use of "satellite missiles," or what were in effect huge chunks of asteroid material with old-fashioned recycled chemical rocket engines strapped to them. Like giant boulders hurled over huge distances, satellite missiles were relatively easy to avoid, but they were also cheap to assemble and thus could be used in vast numbers. They were a crude, comic-book approach to weaponry, yet they had already destroyed several state-of-the-art ships in the Earth Federation armada. They were an absolute victory for Zeon in terms of cost/performance.

On *Abowaku*, after the first wave of satellite missiles was launched, the approaching Federation ships seemed to disperse their forces laterally, fanning the defenders' fear of being surrounded. Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman, in charge of the fortress defenses, nonetheless remained calm. "Hit each unit," he commanded. "Remember, they're most vulnerable where overextended."

In the command center of the Federation flagship *Drog*, General Revil was quick to detect the change in *Abowaku* tactics. "Pull in our forces more," he ordered his officers. "Concentrate on a weak point in their defense and break it." His order was acknowledged and conveyed, but in one of the quirks of warfare it was misinterpreted. The entire armada, instead of moving forward, began to retreat. Someone misinterpreted his order to pull in as pull back, and the code *The Cembalo strings are broken* was transmitted from his flagship to the entire armada. And it meant not *attack* but *retreat*.

Revil secretly raged at whoever had botched his orders, but he was smart enough not to scream publicly in the command center. They were in the midst of a ferocious battle, and he knew what had happened. On displays throughout the command center, remote telescope cameras showed Zeon's space fortress *Abowaku* and repeated flashes of missiles being fired. Only an utter idiot would fail to feel terror at the sight. Retreating was the logical thing to do.

Many of the other staff officers were also furious, especially since the enemy had only just been engaged and it was too early to declare a clear victor. But Revil's next order restored their spirits.

"We've no time to lose!" he barked. "Our group will move to destroy the *Solomon* forces in front of the Corregidor shoal zone. Vice Admiral Karel's group will support us."

On the *Pegasus II* Brite Noa felt the blood pound in his brain. "What the hell's going on?" he shouted to no one in particular. "If the others retreat and leave us behind in this area, we'll have the living daylight's pounded out of us!" The two other vanguard units, the 203d and the 165th, had already absorbed considerable damage in the earlier battles. But they were all still plunging straight for *Abowaku*.

Saila Mas, the communications officer, glanced up at the ship's operator, Ensign Mark

Kran, and answered Brite. "There's no mistaking the signal, sir," she said. "It's in alpha gain code, and it clearly reads *The Cembalo strings are broken*."

"The code's correct, skipper," Mark called down from his perch on the bridge crane. "But it seems odd. There's no way to confirm the movements of Revil's group at this point, but the Fotofac squad has already run into other Zeon forces out of *Solomon*. I can't believe Revil'd abandon them, sir."

"Looks like we're left guessing in the dark about our own armada," Brite grumbled, leaning back into his chair. As he watched from the bridge, he saw an explosion on yet another warship nearby. Two other Federation vessels, apparently from the 203d, pulled alongside it, trying desperately to rescue the surviving crew. A monitor suspended above him flickered to life, and a man dressed in a Federation captain's uniform appeared on the screen. "*Brite, this is Gror, commander of the 203d. The 127th is to immediately proceed to support the Fotofac fleet. When we've completed taking in survivors, we'll follow. The strings do not all appear to be broken yet.*"

"Yessir!" Brite quickly answered with a snappy salute. He turned and looked at Saila. She had her back to him, but she seemed to understand what he wanted, for she immediately announced over the communications system, "C108, return to ship! Return to ship!"

Brite ordered the *Pegasus II* to turn around. Then he jumped out of his seat and barked, "I want the ship immediately inspected for damage and the pressure level rechecked." He looked somehow relieved.

Lieutenant (jg) Mirai Yashima, manning the ship's helm, took the time out to check its operation and gently scolded her skipper while she did so. "I wouldn't relax too much," she said. "Trying to reach *Abowaku* or joining up with the Fotofac fleet—both run the same level of risk."

"What kind of a comment is that, Mirai?" Brite retorted, walking over to her. "Do I look like I'm relaxing?"

"A little, sir. Don't forget, we just lost Kria Maja, one of our best pilots, and we only have three others left. It just seems to me we should try and maximize our chance of survival."

"Knock it off, Mirai," Brite angrily whispered in her ear. "You're starting to sound like my mother or my wife."

"Sorry," she apologized, startled by his reaction. She turned and stared silently out the window of the bridge. Behind her, she could hear him angrily ordering the others about. She could not help smiling to herself. *You're getting too sensitive, Brite*, she thought.

The *Pegasus II* was depending more and more on Amuro Rey, Kai Shiden, Hayato Kobayashi, and their Mobile Suits. Immediately after returning to the ship, the young pilots had to prepare frantically for yet another sortie. While mechamen checked and resupplied their Suits, they changed their sweat-drenched underwear and redressed in the locker room. There was no time to mourn Kria's death.

"You think Kria had an amulet with him?" Kai wondered aloud.

"He always was a little careless about that stuff," Hayato answered. "Maybe he didn't believe in it."

"What about you, Amuro?" Kai asked. "You ever get an amulet from your favorite petty officer?"

Amuro was startled by the question. He had been thinking of Kria. Kria, so long and lanky, with a tinge of green in his eyes. He replied slowly, "Naw." He had never thought of asking her for one.

"Whoa, pardner," Kai said, suddenly looking very serious. "Cut the jokes. You're not trying to tell us you've made it this far without one, are you? If you were a certified New Type, I wouldn't worry, but, hey, let's be realistic."

Hayato, donning his helmet behind Kai, chimed in. "Yeah. Don't forget, Amuro, we're the ones who'll be leading the final assault on *Abowaku*. This sure as hell isn't the time and place to worry whether amulets work or not."

"Yeah," Kai added. "And don't give us this stuff about only trusting in your own intuition, blah, blah. It won't fly. We *need* you out there, pal. You're our shield, and don't get me wrong

when I say it, but we're dead without you. If you weren't along, nobody in the world could get me to go on the next mission."

"Yeah, Amuro. She *must* have given you one," Hayato said mournfully.

"Sorry, guys. It just wasn't like that. I know it's hard to believe."

"Wasn't like that?" Kai retorted. "Hey, it's just like Saila Mas to do something like that, to really screw things up for us in a big way. Tell you what, I'll go ask her myself. I'll be back in a second."

"Kai! Knock it off! We're launching again any minute."

"That's exactly why we've got to hurry. Right?"

"Amulets" were snips of pubic hair carried by pilots to ward off bad luck. Taken lightly for years, the superstition was now widely believed. To some outside the Force it seemed a juvenile, even somewhat obscene practice, but to the pilots it had a simple, profound meaning. They were going into battle, and if a woman could give them something symbolizing her desire for them to return alive, it would somehow help the odds. Originally it was thought better to have an amulet from a woman living on Earth, but since Waves were now working and fighting in space, they were also potential donors. In the vast emptiness of the universe, the amulets were a tangible reminder of life. Among the military they were no laughing matter.

Kai switched on the communications link to the bridge, and Saila Mas appeared on the wall display, looking a little tired. "Requesting permission from the skipper," he demanded in a loud voice, "for Petty Officer Saila Mas to come to the pilots' briefing room."

Saila looked startled, but she did as asked and relayed the message to Brite behind her. Amuro, watching her over Kai's shoulder, couldn't help marveling at her beautiful profile.

Brite appeared. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Just do us a favor this once, skipper," Hayato pleaded. "Amuro needs to say good-bye to the petty officer."

"And we don't have much time, sir," Kai interjected.

Brite frowned but reluctantly consented. "Understood. But only for ten minutes." As they watched, he tapped Saila on the shoulder and called for a stand-in for her at the communications console. When the other crewman arrived, Brite turned back to the monitor camera and said, "I don't want you boys to start thinking this is your final mission. Amuro! You there? You hear me, Amuro? You're to come back alive—not dead! Without you the *Pegasus II* is a sitting duck."

"Roger, sir." Amuro moved in view of the camera so Brite could see him. Kai, standing beside him, took a page out of the little notebook pilots carried and waved it in front of the communications camera so Brite could see. It had an amulet taped to it.

"Here's the problem, skipper," Kai said into the mike. "This idiot doesn't have one of these!"

"Hmph!" Brite exclaimed with genuine anger. "So Saila bungled it again, eh?"

Kai quickly shut his notebook. Amuro couldn't resist ribbing him. "Hey, Kai, who'd you get that from, anyway?"

"I wouldn't tell you even if hell froze over," Kai retorted, quickly slipping it into an inner jacket pocket.

What had once seemed an amusing superstition, Amuro realized, was now a deadly serious ritual.

When Amuro was finally alone with Saila in a corner of the briefing room, he tried to broach the subject as casually as possible.

"What?" Saila said, puzzled. "What's this about an amulet?"

"Kai and Hayato are angry at me, Saila. They say their lives are at risk unless I get one from you before we take off. They keep bugging me about asking you, so I thought—"

"But Amuro, I don't have any amulets. The closest thing I have is a locket with a photograph of my dad in it, and I can't give you that."

"No, no. That's not what I mean, Saila. You know, the type women give to men going off

to fight these days. The ones that're real popular."

"Popular?"

Saila finally understood. Her expression hardened, and she stared directly at Amuro. "Do you mean to tell me you're asking me for *that* just because Kai and Hayato want you to? Are you serious?"

"Kai and Hayato are serious. It's not really that big a deal to me, personally."

"Well, tell them *no*, then."

"But Saila. I, I know how they feel about it."

"Well, I don't. For the life of me, I don't understand how you have the nerve to ask me just because *they* want you to."

"Well, I'm sorry," Amuro said.

"Why don't you just *pretend* I gave you one," she said, standing up and walking out the door of the room.

Amuro tried to follow her, but she had already grabbed a lift-grip in the passageway and rounded a corner several meters ahead of him. When he turned the corner, he could see her still traveling away from him, her blond hair intermittently highlighted by the emergency lamps lining the dimly lit passageway. It was too bad about the amulet, but he would have to forget it. He just wished they could have spent more time together. He wondered if Waves used amulets and if men normally presented them with one.

When Amuro reached the flight deck, he felt a familiar sensation—the tension before going into battle. The Gundam's left hand, scorched in the fight earlier, was apparently beyond repair.

"Weld the shield on the damn thing if you have to!" he shouted to one of the nearest mechenmen. Then he jumped and sailed up to the gangway on the second floor of the flight deck hangar. All the talk about amulets had at least taken some of the tension out of him.

Feeling suddenly hungry, he decided to drop into the mess hall, where he ran into Kai. Hayato was still working on his Suit with the mechenmen down on the flight deck. He ordered a hamburger, took a seat, and started to wolf it down.

"Well?" Kai demanded.

"Got 'em, Mack," he said, deliberately trying to imitate an old gangster movie he had once seen. "Three, to be exact. But I can't show 'em to you. I cut a deal with the petty officer."

"Hmph," Kai said, peeved.

"Hey, look, if she thinks you're going to leer over something that private, do you really think she'd hand 'em over that easily? She's got her pride, you know."

"Heh heh heh. I know what's going on, Amuro. Basically, you're awful naive when it comes to this stuff. You're just stuck on the girl, right?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing." Kai finished off his tube of coffee and prepared to return to the flight deck. "You've got a healthy attitude. Keep it up, boy scout!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Amuro watched Kai leave. He felt like he had cleared a big hurdle, but he wondered why he had not pushed Saila harder. He *had* wanted the amulet. He had wanted it for himself. And yet he had only been able to tell her how Kai and Hayato had been pushing him to get it from her. He wished he had had more confidence. He wished he weren't so sensitive and self-conscious around her. He wished he were older.

After strapping himself in the seat of the Gundam's cockpit, Amuro communicated with the ship's bridge several times and then finally got a channel all to himself with Saila. Taking advantage of the opportunity, he quickly said, "I asked you because *I* wanted it, Saila. *I* needed it."

"Understood, G3. One minute before launch this line will be turned over to the flight deck controller."

She had acknowledged his statement without deviating from her official tone. He suddenly felt relieved, more relieved than he would have felt even if she had handed him an amulet. Even if it was all a lie—and he was prepared that it might be—he was overjoyed.

Then the tense voice of Callahan Slay, the flight deck supervisor, echoed in his helmet headphones: "*Junior Grade Lieutenant Amuro Rey, cleared for catapult.*"

"I read you loud and clear, Callahan! Take care of C108 and C109 for me!"

"Roger, sir!"

Amuro heard Hayato and Kai's steady voices echo in his ear: "*We're counting on you, G3!*" Then his main engine fired, and the g force suddenly pushed him upward. Once more the Gundam Mobile Suit plunged into the star-strewn blackness.

Krishia Zavi's forces had been granted use of a small section of *Abowaku* for their command center. It was a cramped area, and the room Commander Sha Aznable, Lt. Sharia Bull, and Lt. (jg) Leroy Gilliam were in—the armory—was no exception. It made Sha feel even more irritated. In his drive for self-perfection Sha seemed mature beyond his years, but his occasional inflexibility betrayed his youth. They were waiting for Commander Garcia Dowal of the Flanagan Agency, and he hated having to meet people he did not particularly like.

Garcia, pallid as ever, hurried into the room with his files in hand. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said, ignoring the salutes from Sharia and Leroy, seated behind Sha. He then sat in the chair facing Sha.

"Please allow me to be frank, Commander," Garcia said to Sha, speaking with more courtesy than normal.

Sha merely nodded, wondering what in heaven could have made the former clerk so agitated.

"The overall battle seems to be going in our favor," Garcia said. "Revil's mysterious change of course has effectively led most of the armada to retreat into the Corregidor shoal zone. Losses at this point are fairly evenly divided between us and the Federation. *Abowaku* still survives. At one point things were going so well for us that the General Staff thought we might have been able to conclude the entire war. There is one major problem, however." Garcia suddenly stopped talking and glared at Sharia and Leroy seated behind Sha.

"Don't worry, these are the New Type candidates your agency recommended," Sha said. "They may even know what's going on better than you do. And by the way, you can forget about rank in here."

"Aha. Now I see. Sorry. Well, let me be frank, Commander," Garcia said, repeating his earlier intro. "To tell you the truth, until I heard that His Excellency Dozzle Zavi's unit had been annihilated, I didn't really believe you were qualified to lead true New Types."

"What's this about Dozzle?" Sha demanded, suddenly startled. "Did you say annihilated?"

"That's right. Apparently by the white Federation MS. I'm sure you know what's going on. You're in charge of our own elite, experimental New Type unit, complete with Rik Doms and an Elmeth—a unit, I might add, Her Excellency Krishia thinks of as the centerpiece of her forces. Frankly, when you came back from the last battle with the Federation MS unit, having lost over half your men, I thought you were simply incompetent. But now I know I was wrong."

"What makes you say that?" Sha asked, wishing Garcia would hurry up and get to the point.

"His Excellency Dozzle was in a new, state-of-the-art type of Mobile Armor called a Vig Zam, but even that didn't help him. And that's not all. Another fleet out of *Solomon* had the Federation Forces in its area on the run. But then two hours later the same New Type unit arrived and destroyed over forty of its ships."

Sha turned and looked at Sharia in disbelief.

With a pained expression, Sharia remarked, "They're raising their level of performance with every battle. It's possible. With just the Gundam and the two supporting red Suits."

"It still seems too much," Sha said, still incredulous. Turning back to Garcia, he asked, "No one's double-checked this information yet, right?"

"Well, true. And we still don't know why General Revil abruptly detoured to the

Corregidor shoal zone. But it's even odder that *all* the ships in Dozzle's unit were destroyed and that not a single Zak survived. Normally in an engagement, even in what we call a defeat, at least one-fourth of the Zaks are able to escape. Frankly, I don't know what's going on or if it's just because of the Gundam and its pilot. But whatever it is, the Federation New Type unit has become terrifyingly powerful. That's why I have to apologize to you, Commander Sha. I doubted you at one point, but you came back alive after encountering the same unit that annihilated everyone else. That means you're one of the few that can actually hold your own against it. Please forgive me."

"Hmm," Sha said, ignoring the praise. "I think I get the picture. About Revil and his little 'detour,' though, I think that until this last battle even he didn't know how powerful his New Type unit is. But just to change the subject, whatever happened to the request I put in to you?"

"For the extra Zaks?" Garcia said with a wry grin. "I managed to procure five more for you. And we can pull pilots for them out of the second New Type unit Krishia's planning. The order has already gone out, and they should be arriving here in a few hours."

"Good. And right now I really need the leg of my Rik Dom repaired. The Federation Gundam's going to arrive here soon."

"Here?"

"Correct. It still hasn't been destroyed, right?"

"True. Or at least we have no information to that effect."

"Then it's on its way," Sha said. Then he added with a grin, "And by the way, about those five Zaks. We'd really prefer Rik Doms."

"I ... I'd be glad to petition Her Excellency for you," Garcia said, gathering together all his notes. Then, standing up, he announced, "I wish you the best, Commander."

"Don't worry. I'll do my best," Sha replied with a smile and a snappy salute.

After Garcia departed, Leroy uneasily asked Sha, "The Gundam pilot worries me, sir. I've never heard of anyone's performance increasing exponentially in such a short time. You think it's really possible?"

Leroy was expecting an answer, but he didn't get one because both Sha and Sharia Bull were too busy asking themselves the same question. They knew Garcia's report had to be taken with a grain of salt. Battlefield reports were often inflated thirty to fifty percent. If, for example, five Mobile Suits destroyed an enemy cruiser without confirming who would take credit for the kill, the reports sometimes listed five, instead of one, enemy ships annihilated. To prevent this problem, both Archduchy and Federation forces planted still and video cameras with panoramic views in combat zones and used them to record the action whenever possible. But it took hours to confirm later how many ships a specific Suit had bagged. Still, although Garcia's report certainly had had fuzzy areas, the urgent manner in which he had presented it suggested that a serious debacle had occurred. From the perspective of the intelligence experts on *Abowaku*, at least, the Federation's New Type unit had clearly pulled off an incredible feat.

Lt. Sharia Bull was the first to break the silence. "I guess we can't afford to assume it was a onetime freak accomplishment, can we?" he muttered.

Sharia stared at the ceiling as he spoke, and his gaze was so intense that Sha wondered if he could see straight out into space. All he could see was the ceiling's shiny, spotless gray plastic finish. He turned around in his chair with his chin propped on his hand and asked, "Tell me, Lieutenant, can you see through walls?"

"Are you kidding, sir? I'm not a superman."

"Glad to hear it. It makes me feel better. But what the hell do you think's going on, anyway?"

"I don't know, but Kusko AI said a kid named Amuro Rey was piloting the Gundam, right? I wonder if we can't communicate with him somehow."

"Forget it. Like you said, we're not supermen."

Leroy felt strange watching his two superiors staring at the ceiling, conducting such a bizarre dialogue. "Seems to me it's important," he ventured, "not to overlook the fact that this same Amuro Rey had enough charisma to charm Kusko AI. And he was younger than her, if I

recall."

"She was twenty-two, right?" Sha said, suddenly turning to Leroy.

"Yes, sir," he answered reflexively. "And she wasn't always easy to get along with. I don't think she would've fallen for anyone two or three years younger than her unless she was attracted to his innocence and sensitivity. But I'm sure there was something else about him that she found intellectually interesting. And I'll bet it was his New Type potential. It's just possible that this Amuro Rey character's evolved enough to understand what we're trying to do. Maybe he *would* cooperate with us."

"Well," Sha replied, "we can't exactly arrange a powwow with him in the middle of a battlefield, can we? Don't forget, I saw what he did to Lala Sun in combat. He can also be impulsive, rash. I'd hesitate before I'd put a lot of trust in him."

"All I know about Ensign Lala Sun is what I read in Commander Garcia Dowal's reports, sir. Maybe she's the one responsible for triggering Amuro Rey's New Type abilities. After all, as I understand it, she was a real rarity—someone with outstanding, quantifiable New Type potential."

"Hmm," Sha said.

"If we locate the Gundam, sir," Leroy said, "I'd be glad to initiate communication."

Sha turned around and didn't answer Leroy.

"I'm sure you know, Commander," Sharia said, "that we don't need to spend much time in contact with him."

"I know," Sha replied stonily.

"It's a little hard for me to say this," Sharia continued, "but with all due respect, maybe you've got too much of a grudge against him to appreciate the possibilities. You've already encountered him before. Don't you think he'd answer if you approached him point blank?"

Leroy was so astounded by Sharia's bluntness that he nearly fell out of his chair. He remained silent and waited to see what would happen.

"Sure," Sha said. "I admit I don't like him. Ever since Lala Sun, ever since I first met him, I've had nothing but embarrassing defeats. And you know what happened in our last encounter."

"You think he plays dirty, right?"

"No. I just think he's a little too single-minded," Sha answered with a low, self-mocking laugh. He had not told anyone how Amuro Rey, the Gundam pilot, had somehow communicated with him in combat, suddenly bringing up his sister Artesia's name and claiming that he had been asked by her to kill him. The Gundam pilot's effrontery had been bad enough. Even worse had been the thought that his sister might want to resolve her feelings toward him in such a way. It was almost too much to bear, because he also knew that the physical distance between them was gradually shrinking, that she was coming closer and closer. It made him feel profound self-disgust—disgust over the way he had treated her long ago, deserting her when she had needed him most.

"Sorry to have brought that up, Commander," Sharia said. "On another tack, there is one variable in the equation that even makes me nervous. We won't know unless we do a thorough check of his combat history, of course, but if this kid's *too* developed as a New Type, we may not be able to deal with him at all."

"You're referring to what Leroy was suggesting earlier, about his New Type potential?"

"Right, sir. If, for example, he's so developed he's already become some sort of esper, then he's also probably on his way to becoming a New Type military freak, a dedicated killing machine. We'd be slaughtered, and the only thing left would be Amuro Rey."

"Any way to prevent that?"

"I don't know. But we'd better find out in a hurry whether he's a real New Type or a monster. If the latter, we'd better do everything in our power to destroy him. We may even have to use some pretty dirty tricks to do it."

"Dirty tricks? You mean something like using Artesia?" Sha had uttered his sister's name, but not specifically for Sharia Bull. Sharia ignored it, and Leroy was left to wonder if Artesia was some sort of spy. The atmosphere was too strained for him to want to pursue the matter. When it was important for him to know more about this mystery woman, he was sure the

others would tell him.

Lights flared three or four hundred kilometers ahead of the *L-3* like fireworks on a distant shore, indicating the destruction of more Zeon and Federation ships. A *Columbus*-type transport, the *L-3* was built with a skeletal structure designed to carry containers; its only defenses were six missile tubes gracing its prow, stern, top, bottom, and sides. After carefully wending its way through debris in the Corregidor shoal zone, it finally made visual contact with the *Pegasus II*.

It used to be commonly assumed that gravity-free conditions existed uniformly throughout the open areas of space, but around Earth there is actually a constant interplay between the gravitational forces of the Sun, the Earth, and its moon. With the Earth revolving around the Sun, and the moon revolving around both, there are in fact points in space where the gravity of all three neutralize each other, the most dramatic being Lagrange points—where the Earth Federation built its groups of space colonies called Sides. And just as there are regional differences in tides on Earth, in space, in addition to Lagrange points, there are also other, smaller gravity-neutral areas, many of which are poorly defined and difficult to measure. In the Space Age, a great deal of debris—mainly landfill—from decades of colony construction had collected in them, creating what were called shoal zones. Occasionally old satellites were even found in them, relics from the early days of space exploration.

On the bridge of the *L-3*, Lieutenant (jg) Matilda Ajan watched as the oddly shaped *Pegasus II* came into view. Then she grabbed the ship phone and announced, "*Prepare to unload the Number 14 starboard container block immediately!*" She began thinking of Amuro Rey, the young pilot whom she had last run into on the Federation's *LH* moon base. She knew he was attached to the *Pegasus II*. He had always seemed incurably naive and romantic, but she felt indebted to him.

Her fiancée, Lieutenant Woody Maiden, was a straight-laced military engineer whom she had fallen in love with at first sight, but she had a contrary streak in her that never allowed her to admit it. Just when she had been frantically trying to figure out a way to get him to propose to her, Amuro had happened to be around, and luckier yet, Woody had taken notice of him. After she had mentioned Amuro's name in an off-handed way several times, Woody—the stalwart, reserved Woody—had become visibly jealous. Eventually he had gotten the message and had asked her to spend the rest of her life with him.

"*You mean you want me to be your wife?*" she had asked.

"*Damn straight!*" he had replied.

When the current campaign was over, Matilda planned to have a real wedding, and she hoped Amuro Rey would come. "I wonder how he's doing?" she whispered to herself, only to be overheard by the young skipper of the *L-3*, standing behind her.

"You say something?" he grumbled.

"I was just wondering if we were going to tie up alongside the *Pegasus II*, that's all."

"Now how the hell do you think we'd have time to do that?" the skipper said, irritated. "If we had time to socialize, we sure as hell wouldn't do it here. This is the Corregidor shoal zone, and we could be hit by floating debris any moment!"

"Yessir! Yessir!" Matilda replied with a slightly sarcastic smile. She carefully watched as containers from the *L-3*'s cargo bays were ejected from the ship and floated into the *Pegasus*'s open stern hatch. Then she turned and looked at the skipper again. He was in the process of communicating with the *Pegasus*.

"You mind?" she asked.

He slammed a magnetized file he had been holding down on the metal console panel in front of him and made an odd motion with his chin. She knew it indicated no and took the bridge mike in hand.

"Junior Grade Lieutenant Matilda Ajan of the 28th Supply Corps, wishing to leave a message for Junior Grade Lieutenant Amuro Rey of the *Pegasus II*,"

Behind her, the L-3 skipper muttered something about private communications being punishable under ship's regulations, but she ignored him. On a monitor before her she could see a pleasant-looking Wave from the *Pegasus* busily preparing to record her message.

"Tell him," she said, "that I'm getting married when this campaign's over and that he's invited to the wedding."

"Did you say 'wedding'?" the blond petty officer on the *Pegasus* asked, startled.

"Wedding" was such an unexpected word, given the environment they were in, that it didn't register at first.

"Yes. Give him my greetings. And wish him good hunting!"

"Understood! Consider it done!"

Matilda smiled when she heard the chipper reply. She had encountered the petty officer twice before but did not remember her name or much about her. She knew intuitively, however, that Amuro Rey probably had fond thoughts of her.

"Hey," the L-3 skipper yelled behind her. "No private chitchat, remember?" He angrily grabbed her shoulder and tried to turn her in his direction, but she was faster than he was and brushed off his hand. Her cheeks were flushed with indignation.

"The *Pegasus II* is directly under General Revil's command, and Amuro Rey is the key pilot on the warship!" she admonished him. "I frankly consider it my *duty* to establish friendly communications with him!" It was not a very logical response, but she had said it with enough emotion to throw him off, and for the moment her performance had won out. On the monitor, the *Pegasus's* blond communications officer chuckled, and then the screen went blank. The L-3 skipper, humiliated on both sides by two attractive women, just sulked.

"Don't worry, Captain," Matilda said, patting his arm as if to console him, "you look great." She then walked over to the other side of the bridge.

He stared at her shapely back and for a second almost forgot about being angry. Then he shouted, "Rules aren't created just to be broken, you know!"

"I'll remember that," Matilda said softly.

On the *Pegasus II*, the pilots and core crew—those with the most New Type potential—spontaneously gathered together in the briefing room for a brainstorm-ing session led by Brite Noa. Lieutenant (jg) Sleggar Row, true to form, barged in on them, joking, "Maybe you guys are all just hallucinating again."

"Sleggar," Brite said, sounding very much like the ship's captain, "if you're just here to make trouble, you'd better leave."

"I don't know what Amuro saw out there," Kai was saying, "but when we contacted Dozzle's fleet, I really felt the presence of something powerful. How about you, Hayato?"

"I'll say," Hayato answered immediately. "I'm not sure whether it was really from the Mobile Armor Amuro told us to aim at. But whatever it was, the closer we got, the more powerful it felt and the more I knew we had to destroy it. Kai and I never actually established visual contact with because we had to train our sights on the *Gandow* flagship and cover for Amuro. But I don't think that contradicts what Amuro says about a 'specter-like' force out there. It's just that I was in a combat zone right behind Dozzle's unit, and I didn't sense anything *that* powerful. I'm sure it could exist, though."

"I felt something," Mirai said. Then, turning to Saila, she added, "You did too, didn't you?"

"Yes," Saila answered, choosing her words carefully. "I think I know what Kai's talking about. There are 'forces' out there that are concentrated and those that are not. And I can understand how Amuro would have sensed them in Dozzle's unit."

Brite turned to Amuro. "Maybe this requires a leap of the imagination," he said, "but do you suppose Dozzle Zavi himself—Dozzle, the individual—could have been the source of what you saw?"

"But sir," Amuro protested, "do you really think a commander—a vice admiral—in the Zeon Archduchy would expose himself at the front in Mobile Armor?"

"From everything we know about Dozzle Zavi, Amuro, it sounds *exactly* like the sort of thing he'd do."

"He's one of the top Zavi family leaders, right?" Amuro said, clasping his hands together

on the desk top in front of him and laughing in bewilderment. "You mean to say that maybe the apparition, or whatever it was that I saw, was generated by some sort of weird Zavi psychospasm of rage and frustration? Sounds a little too farfetched."

No one in the room responded.

Sleggar Row leaned over Saila in a typically boorish attempt to grab her attention and grumbled, "Hey, you really believe all this stuff?"

"It could all be real," Saila said, trying to signal for help from Kai by raising her voice. "If not, I'm sure Kai *would do something about it*."

Kai came to her defense immediately. "Knock it off, Sleggar. Amuro's already proposed having a party tonight."

"A what?"

"A party," Amuro interjected. "It's a way for me to repay my fellow pilots for something."

Sleggar glanced at Amuro and Saila. Saila met his gaze for a second and then smiled as if to confirm what Amuro had just said.

"Hey, hey, sweet Saila," Sleggar said in his typically coarse fashion. "Did you really let the kid do that to you? Where's that leave *me*? Baby! Tell me it's not true!"

"Sleggar! Kai! Amuro!" Brite finally yelled. "Cut the yapping! We've got important things to discuss here! The *Pegasus II* may take independent action soon, so some of what we decide now may have life-and-death significance for all of us later. Save the jokes for later. We don't have much time."

"Jokes?" Sleggar said. "Whoa, that's below the belt. We're not joking here, skipper."

Amuro and Kai looked at each other. Both of them had noted Brite's words. Amuro shot a questioning expression in Mirai's direction. She understood what it meant, gently tapped Brite's hand, and asked, "Scuse me, sir, but what are you talking about? What do you mean by 'independent action'? Did you get new instructions from General Revil?"

"No," Brite said, as if surprised she had asked. "Not at all. I was just speculating. It just sort of suddenly occurred to me, that's all."

"Really?" Sleggar said. "It didn't sound that way."

"Hey, Sleggar," Kai said in a clipped tone. "He can say anything he wants to here. This is a brainstorming session, right? And it may be our last."

Sleggar adjusted the collar of his uniform and turned toward Brite. "Sorry, skipper. Speculate all you want."

"Well," Brite continued, "considering how much we've already accomplished on the *Pegasus II* this far, I'm beginning to wonder what our true potential is. It's just a fantasy, but I've been thinking maybe we could even take on Supreme Commander Gren Zavi ourselves, without the rest of the armada. And do it soon. Like tomorrow or the day after."

Amuro let out a low whistle.

Mirai, shocked, nonetheless managed to quip, "I never knew you had such a vivid imagination, skipper. I'm going to have to rethink my whole impression of you."

"Maybe it's crazy," Brite added with a sheepish grin. "As I said, I'm just speculating. I guess I'm trying to make two points. First, if it's true that Amuro's New Type abilities actually allowed him to detect a specter-like 'malevolent force' emanating from Dozzle Zavi, then I think we seriously have to rethink the root cause of the entire conflict. If specific individuals are responsible for its continuation, then one logical candidate is Gren Zavi. Maybe our main mission should be to eliminate him. Second, I think the current Earth Federation's position—that *Abowaku* is Zeon's final line of defense—is a little naive. It's even occurred to me that maybe the Archduchy's deliberately letting us get this close. Confusion among our own forces has given them valuable breathing room. Frankly, I'm worried the rumors we've heard are true—that they've prepared some sort of ultimate, secret weapon. What do you all think?"

Amuro best expressed the sentiments of the others. "So that's why you're in a hurry," he said in a near whisper.

Brite knew that during peacetime it usually took the collective will of the people to transform a system of government. But the *Pegasus* was at war, and in war a successful localized military action could fundamentally alter the balance of power and even topple the

existing order. The Earth Federation Forces had been able to resist Gren Zavi thus far simply because of their material superiority, but if they were really only a lumbering aggregate of individuals with no overriding philosophy, no basic values, and no vision, as many complained, then all Gren Zavi would need to achieve his dreams would be a single dramatic victory. It was entirely possible that as Brite had tried to imply, they were already ensnared by his consciousness. He wanted to say it—that it was all a matter of consciousness. He started to speak, hesitated for a second, and to his surprise Amuro spoke for him.

"We've enjoyed General Revil's support," Amuro said. "But never that of the entire Earth Federation. And without it we'll lose the war. But if Gren Zavi is the main force behind this war and he really does have such a powerful presence, we'd be able to detect it even easier than we did with Dozzle."

"A malevolent force," Kai said, only half joking. "We're dealing with an incredible monster."

"And what the skipper's saying isn't all speculation," Mirai added.

"Exactly," Amuro answered. "If we have the ability to detect such a force, we should go ahead and capture Gren Zavi. If it'd end the war, I think maybe we should do it." The word "maybe" betrayed the doubt behind his confident expression.

"Think we could persuade General Revil to help?" Sleggar asked, finally beginning to realize what his mysterious crewmates were really suggesting. "And even if we could, think there's a chance in hell of us partying over to the *Drog* today and having the brass that surround him let us see him? Let's be realistic, guys. We've got the most powerful warship in the entire Earth Federation Force. If we've got time enough to screw around with ideas like this, the first thing they'd tell us to do would be to destroy *Abowaku*."

Sleggar was right, but Amuro's next observation startled everyone. "There's something else that worries me even more than that," he said. "If, like the skipper, we take this fantasy to the limit and we actually do succeed in deposing Gren and ending the war, what's going to happen then? For starters, we'd probably be punished for violating military discipline. And an even bigger problem is that the Earth Federation's General Staff Headquarters—Jaburo—would still be around. That's an idea I don't like."

"You mean it might take ten or twenty years to get promoted in the military," Brite said with a wink, "and eventually be given high-ranking government positions?"

"No," Amuro said with an unexpectedly serious expression. "I think you can assume that whatever happens to us might not be that positive."

"Why?"

Amuro turned and looked at everyone in the room. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "It's not that I don't believe in democracy. It's just that using simple majority rule to decide everything makes me a little nervous, especially because in the Federation government the final decisions really represent a consensus of the interests of the politicians themselves. I can imagine a scenario where we succeed in destroying Gren and then people start asking why. Why, out of all the Federation Forces, was the *Pegasus II* able to do it? The answer, of course, would be that we're New Types. A bunch of paranormal espers. A bunch of professional killers. They'd start to even question whether New Types and normal people can coexist. They'd say we'd dominate normal people and threaten everything they value. Just think of the possibilities. Everybody fibs once in a while in the real world, but they'd say that New Types can see right through normal people, read their thoughts like a book. They'd say that we're a supernatural phenomenon, that we're not humans in the normal sense of the word, that we're freaks that should be banished from normal human society. What are we going to do if people start talking this way? Forget about being promoted. We should worry about surviving."

"Not the most eloquent speech I've ever heard," Kai muttered, nodding and looking at the others. "But not bad. I think Amuro's right."

Sleggar, trying to look as informed as possible, turned and asked Saila, "Listen, you know Zeon Zum Daikun, the guy who first talked about New Types and founded the republic that became the Zeon Archduchy? Wasn't he murdered by the Zavi family?"

"Zeon Daikun?" Saila replied cautiously. "I don't know about that, but I do know he was a good man. And he wasn't talking about the kind of New Types that Amuro's been referring to."

He was talking about an enlightenment that *all* mankind would experience. But I can see Amuro's point about the possibility of New Types being purged by society at large."

"Amuro's right," Brite added. "The Earth Federation needs us as long as there's a war on, but who knows what'll happen when the war's over? The average person may usually know what's right and wrong, but usually he also winds up going along with what his government says."

"Let's not deal in generalizations," Mirai said suddenly. "Don't forget we may be forced to make some decisions on our own real soon. We'd better have a clear idea what we're going to do then."

"We could always fight just hard enough to stay alive," Kai interjected.

"No," Brite answered firmly. "If we do that, we'll probably be targeted by some final weapon Zeon's developing, and that'll be the end of us."

"Skipper," Amuro asked, "how do you know that?"

"I don't know, Amuro," Brite answered. "I'm just guessing based on some circumstantial evidence."

There had to be more to it than that, Amuro thought. He suddenly realized that Brite's own intuition and awareness were increasing. "You were right," he said. "We should get rid of Gren Zavi."

"How?"

Amuro grinned and said, "Well, we obviously can't pull off a frontal assault, but maybe there's someone close to him who would cooperate with us, be a co-conspirator. That would help." He had no idea what he was trying to say. He was just fantasizing, letting his mind go, and relying on his own intuition.

"Co-conspirator?"

"Right. I'm thinking along the same lines as you, skipper. Someone, for example, like Sha Aznable, the Red Comet."

"You mean initiate contact with their New Types? But Sha was under Dozzle Zavi's command."

"That's why I say, sir, maybe the whole thing's a fantasy."

"I think we'd better take a break from this discussion," Brite finally announced. "We'll be resting in third combat position until we get further orders from Armada Operations."

"Hmph," Sleggar muttered as the group dispersed, summing up with unexpected brilliance, "maybe I'm a little slow compared to the rest of you New Type candidates, but I fail to see how anyone here could be a freak. Seems like the ultimate criterion for a human is to be able to fall in love, and that's already happened."

* * *

Amuro slipped off the lift-grip and looked back at the ship's passageway he had just traversed. At the other end, under one of the emergency combat lights, he could see Saila standing and talking with Mirai. He felt awkward because he had not invited her to join him in his room.

A gulf had existed between them ever since she had made her crazy statement about killing her brother, Sha Aznable, but he still wanted her. He was a male with normal desires, and his nerves were frayed from combat. He thought about inviting her. He thought of how nice it would be to spend even ten minutes alone with her and feel her touch, and he wondered if she felt the same way, if she missed him, too. He felt a pang of guilt at his thoughts, at his desire to wait for her, after all. But he was unable to turn and walk away.

Only a few minutes earlier he had been having philosophical discussions about New Types. Now he was hoping for some physical attention from a woman. The contrast made him wonder how anyone in a normal human body could really become a true New Type. He felt like an utter fool, standing and waiting for Saila.

He waited for a minute, and it seemed like an eternity. He suddenly resolved to forget her for now. He loosened the collar of his Pilot Suit, turned around, and started to head for his quarters.

To his astonishment, Saila skipped off the floor and grabbed onto a lift-grip running down the passageway toward him. From his perspective, she was flying through the air. She was

headed in his direction, coming toward him. In his rational mind he hesitated, fearing he was expecting too much, but then he saw her float away from the lift-grip right to him, her blond hair shining beautifully in the light. He wondered if other men felt the way he felt now and suspected they would have been more cool, confident, and detached.

Saila floated up to him and stopped with her soft breasts against his chest. "Well, what happened, Mister Amuro Rey?"

"I ... I was afraid you wouldn't come . . . that's all."

"You didn't ask me, so I thought I'd probably better not come. But Mirai said I should. And there's something I wanted to tell you, anyway."

Amuro was no longer listening. He put his lips over hers. He knew by her response that she wanted him to touch her, that he could feel free to be with her. And he felt happy.

"Amuro," Saila said, turning her head and pulling away from his embrace. "You're violating military regulations, you know."

With the wonderful sensation of her kiss lingering in his mind, he opened the door to his quarters, entered, and turned on the light. "By the way, you took that message from Lieutenant Matilda Ajan, right? Do I really have to attend her wedding ceremony?" he asked.

"Well, maybe she likes you, Amuro," Saila said with a giggle. "She probably thinks you're cute."

"Cute" was the last word he wanted to hear. He had never really expected anything of Matilda. She was an awfully attractive Wave, and he had always enjoyed seeing her. To her, however, he had just been another earnest pilot cadet.

"She said she's having a military wedding, Amuro. And I'm sure she just wants to invite a few people who've been nice to her. I'm sure she has lots of friends outside her immediate co-workers."

"No need to reassure me. Either way, I won't have to decide whether to go or not until this campaign's over."

"But that's just it, Amuro. For a woman, a wedding's important. It's like an affirmation of life. 'Course I don't really go along with that stuff myself. Matilda's a little too feminine for me." Saila put her hair up, stood up, and crossed the room toward the shower. It was a joy to watch her move, Amuro thought; she looked fantastic even in a khaki military-issue bath towel. But he also knew they would never have enough time together. The war was still on.

He began to ponder some of the things that had been said at the meeting earlier. He was irritated by his own fickleness. It seemed that as soon as one problem was solved, he immediately started thinking of another. He was just glad that he had not raised the issue of Sha again, or Saila would have thought that was the only reason he had invited her to join him. It would be better to interact with her on only one level now, and that was physical.

When Saila came out of the shower, she gave him a quizzical look, but he did not respond, and entered the shower room himself. In order to compensate for the weightless environment, showers on board ship used pressurized steam blasted from all angles. To prevent drowning there was a barrier in the shower that isolated the head and kept it dry. He rested his head on a chin rest and resolved to discuss Sha with Saila later, after all.

When he emerged, to his surprise he found she wanted to talk about her brother. She had come to Amuro's room partly because she, too, had been unable to stop thinking about what Brite had said and partly, since Amuro had brought up Sha's name, because she felt the need to resolve the issue between them.

"Caspar always said he was going to avenge Father's death," she began. "But that was seven or eight years ago, before we parted. We were both still kids then. I received a few letters from him after he entered Officers' Academy on Zeon—not the usual video cards but old-fashioned typed letters. He never wrote anything beyond the usual pleasantries, but I got the sense that he was maturing and that he wasn't just in the academy to carry out his crazy plan for revenge. I really felt he was growing wiser and wiser. And you know what? He told me he was a classmate of Garma Zavi, the youngest son of 'Archduke' Degin Zavi. He said they were really good friends. Can you believe that?"

"You know, Saila, Garma Zavi was piloting the Gow bomber we ran into after leaving Side 7 and your brother was probably in the same area. I wonder what it all means?"

"I don't know. I didn't have the same awareness of him then that I do now. The official combat reports I read were all so rough, it was impossible to really tell anything from them. What do you think?"

"Seems to me, if I recall rightly, that he didn't defend the Gow bomber. I'm sure it wasn't intentional. I don't think he was in a position to do anything about it."

"Maybe some people in the Archduchy thought he was responsible for the death of a Zavi family member, but I don't think my brother's that careless."

"Let's hope not. But tell me, Saila, getting back to the discussion we all had earlier, how do you think we can contact your brother? That's our main problem. The second problem is deciding whether or not he's actually approachable."

"I don't think my brother's basically changed much, Amuro. But you know, there's something else I've never told you about him. Remember the *Texas* colony? I met my brother there before it blew."

"You *what*?!" Amuro practically gasped. Saila had her face turned to the side and was staring into space as if embarrassed.

"I . . . I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry? You don't need to feel sorry, Saila. I don't care if you met him. I just want to know *how*, in heaven's name, you managed to meet him. There was a pitched battle going on inside the colony."

Saila shrugged. "I felt as if Caspar were calling me," she said. "But you know what? When we actually came face to face, he seemed just like the brother I remembered. He had never even sent me a photograph of him all those years, but I recognized him right away. He warned me not to get involved in the war. I could get emotional about it, but he was my *brother*. Tough, and gentle at the same time."

Saila's information was extremely important to Amuro, for it gave him a new insight into Sha's character. If both Sha and Saila had the same New Type attributes, then Sha's feelings toward his sister could perhaps be exploited. It was a dangerous, naive idea, but everything he had heard about Sha so far seemed to confirm his rapidly forming opinions.

Both Amuro and Saila were being sentimental. But it made both of them happy.

CHAPTER 20

A STIRRING

Looking at Claret Harmine made Krishia Zavi wish she had not been born with such a long face and beady eyes. Claret was two or three years older than she was but looked considerably younger. She wore her hair up, with the beautiful nape of her neck exposed, and exuded femininity.

"Well?" Krishia asked icily. "Where have I met *you*?" She couldn't quite place the woman but knew she had seen her before somewhere.

"I went to a couple of the Supreme Commander's parties a long time ago, Excellency. Perhaps we met then."

And you were probably one of the party girls Gren loved to invite, Krishia thought. The letter in front of her from Prime Minister Darshia Baharo formally introduced Claret, but something about it bothered her. Why was such a person being presented this way by the Prime Minister?

"You were a friend of Gren?" she asked.

"It was many years ago, Excellency."

"Does Darshia know this?"

"Yes."

Claret Harmine then proceeded to claim that her past was a major reason Darshia had given her the assignment. "When the war's over," she said in a hushed voice, "I plan to marry Lieutenant Lambda Ral of the Secret Service. I'm sure you know, but he's the eldest son of Zinba Ral."

"Aha. I see." The woman had a complex background, and it irritated Krishia that she had neither the time nor the means to investigate it further. "Tell me, Miss Claret," she asked, "if you're responsible for obtaining the information presented in this letter, shall I assume you're also the one who sold it to Darshia? Do you have a grudge against my brother Gren?"

"Forgive me, Excellency, but that's a question I'd rather not answer. I wish I could say no."

"Well, that certainly makes it hard for me to trust you, doesn't it?" Krishia picked up the letter from her desk and walked over toward the giant aquarium in her office. The red swordtails, as usual, were swimming around and around in a school, their scales flashing in the light. The fact that Darshia's letter had not come through official channels was definitely odd, but it also made her suspect it was genuine.

After the Federation armada had mysteriously shifted its offensive away from *Abowaku* to the Corregidor shoal zone, several regular transports from the Archduchy had arrived at the fortress, and Claret Harmine had been aboard one. She carried false identity papers listing herself as one of Krishia's household servants and brought several trunks of Krishia's personal effects, trunks that had been hand packed by one of Krishia's senior domestics. Unknown even to Claret, her elaborate cover had been arranged not only by Prime Minister Darshia Baharo but by none other than Archduke Degin Zavi himself. She had been dispatched as a special emissary, but without Degin's help she never would have made it past Gren Zavi's Secret Service agents.

Krishia's natural suspicions were aroused by the mysterious machinations behind Claret's mission. That Darshia had tried so hard to protect her suggested that his own position had been compromised. He had written the letter on special paper that would dissolve immediately in stomach acid and hidden it in Claret's belt buckle. If Claret had been caught by one of Gren's operatives, all she would have had to do was swallow the letter.

The letter appeared to be entirely in Darshia's handwriting and concluded with his signature, but its contents were so horrifying that Krishia immediately wished she could double-check its authenticity with computer analysis. It was too bad the equipment for that was under the control of the commander of *Abowaku*, Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman, a fanatical supporter of Gren.

The letter contained a warning. The Earth Federation armada would soon reach *Abowaku*,

Darshia wrote, and when it did, Gren Zavi planned to activate the System strategy, probably targeting *Abowaku* itself. That meant, Krishia realized, that Gren not only was willing to sacrifice his own troops and one of his most faithful admirals but wanted to eliminate her.

"Tell me, Claret," she asked, "do you think Darshia's fully aware of the implications of this information? And, equally important, is Lieutenant Lambda Ral informed of your assignment?" Then she remembered something about Claret Harmine. Several years ago, she recalled, Claret had been one of several women with whom Gren had consorted.

"Two days after I first reported to the Prime Minister," Claret answered, "he summoned me and ordered me to convey this information to Your Excellency at all costs. I was also ordered to explain the circumstances in which the information was obtained. The Prime Minister told me that I was the most qualified person for this assignment. As for your question about Lieutenant Lambda Ral, no, I don't see him every day, and he doesn't know what I'm doing here today."

Claret continued talking, and Krishia learned that because the authorities were rushing to perform a final check on the System project, security was being heavily enforced; the Secret Service was inspecting every military ship leaving the Zeon Archduchy, and all troops involved in the System project had been prohibited from leaving their stations. Lambda Ral had apparently complained to Claret that he was so overwhelmed with work that he was unable to move freely and that he also had to look extra busy simply to maintain Gren's trust. Krishia made a mental note of this final comment; Lambda Ral seemed unusually insecure in his relationship with Gren.

"Didn't you say just a minute ago that Lieutenant Lambda Ral was the son of Zinba Ral?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"And Zinba Ral, as I recall, was one of the central figures in the old Daikun faction."

"That's correct, Excellency. Lambda never told me the whole story, but he did mention he had recently obtained information on the whereabouts of Caspar and Artesia Daikun."

"Caspar and Artesia? You mean he uncovered information on Zeon Zum Daikun's two children, who were reported to have been taken from the Archduchy by Zinba Ral? So the rumor was true?"

Claret said nothing, and Krishia didn't waste time pursuing the matter. She was sure Claret herself didn't have the answer. The strange thing was that Gren would let a man near him who confided in his girlfriend so easily; Gren was fanatical about secrecy, but from what Claret had said, Lambda Ral obviously blabbed far too much. What, she wondered, could a lieutenant in the Secret Service—and a man Gren certainly knew was the son of Zinba Ral—be thinking? What could his real motivation be?

The names of Caspar and Artesia Daikun brought back strong memories for Krishia. In the old days, when Zeon Zum Daikun and her father, Degin Zavi, had struggled to establish the Zeon Republic, she had often played with the two young Daikun children. They both had looked as if they had stepped out of an illustrated children's storybook—lovable, fair-haired, and perfect infants—and she had been extremely fond of both of them. She practically blushed at the memory, but around the time she had reached puberty, she had secretly fantasized of one day meeting a fair-haired man and one day having children like Caspar and Artesia.

"Thanks for the information," she said. "You're dismissed for now, Claret." There were gaps in what Claret had said, but she knew they could be filled in later. And even if Zeon Daikun's two orphaned children were still alive, it was inconceivable that they could have any effect on her current situation.

The instant Claret Harmine's purple suit disappeared behind her office door, Krishia suddenly thought of something. Perhaps Lt. Lambda Ral felt nervous about his relationship with Gren precisely *because* of the information about the Daikun children. Perhaps they *could* affect what was going on.

She stared at her office door and suddenly realized young Caspar's presence was much stronger in her subconscious than she had believed. She could almost imagine him walking through the door in front of her. *Perhaps, she mused, it has something to do with my taking Sha Aznable under my wing.*

Then, in a revelation, she made the connection. *Could Sha . . . Sha Aznable actually be Caspar Daikun?* The thought was so shocking that she bit down hard on her lower lip. But the next instant she smiled, and a warm feeling welled up inside her. *If so, what a fine man little Caspar has grown up to be.* She felt an almost maternal instinct. Sha sometimes became involved with the women around him, but he always did it with tact and lived honestly, devoting his entire being to his work and his profession. He was, in fact, one of her favorite young men. If he was actually the little Caspar she had once known, she could not think of any reason not to rejoice at the thought.

She turned her gaze to the red swordtails swimming clockwise in her aquarium and tried hard to regain her composure. *I wonder why he changed his name when he returned to Zeon,* she thought. Sha had always seemed a little unusual, in a nice way, for a military officer, and now it all made sense. *What a surprise,* she thought with a slightly hysterical laugh.

With her mind so fixated on the image of the little Caspar she had adored, it was hard not to feel proud of him even if he had infiltrated the Archduchy under an alias. She did not condone his actions, but neither did she blame him entirely. After all, she was also partly responsible; something in her subconscious had prevented her from making the connection between Sha and Caspar. Perhaps, she thought, she had instinctively known that she could better use Sha for her own purposes if she did *not* know his true background.

She reflected on the fact that Caspar had surreptitiously obtained the Aznable family register, that he had been at the top of his class in Officers' Academy, and that he had distinguished himself with valor in combat as someone with New Type potential, and she found herself respecting him all the more. He had taken a roundabout way, but what pluck he had! If he had merely wanted revenge, she knew it would have been far easier for him simply to rally the remaining progressive forces on Zeon and use them to carry out an assassination plan. His methodology was beyond her comprehension, but she admired his idealism intensely. It reminded her of his father, Zeon Zum Daikun, who had tried to obtain power through the will of the people. Sha, she thought, must be a true New Type, a product of the Space Age.

If she was incapable of objectively analyzing the situation and realizing how dangerous Sha had actually become, she was nonetheless on guard. *I can understand it in a way, Caspar,* she thought, as though addressing the lad of her memory, *but you're still naive. Watch out. The real world—the adult world—is far more cunning than you imagine.*

Krishia resolved to confront reality and act immediately on the information in Darshia's letter. She drank some coffee and issued several commands to her forces. Then she steeled herself and sent for Sha Aznable.

She knew she could still use him for her own ends. After all, he had sworn allegiance to her. If he pulled out his pistol and shot her on the spot, that would be her destiny, but he would be destroyed with her, which was an almost romantic notion. If, on the other hand, nothing happened, she was also prepared. She had always believed New Types were like double-edged swords and had to be handled with extreme caution. In wartime they could be used as weapons; in peacetime they could be made into heroes or scapegoats, depending on the need. When the war was over, she planned to see how the general public felt about New Types and champion the popular mood. Sha Aznable would be an important asset for her then. But for now, as long as the war continued, she would let him be the hero. She would let him develop, and the stronger he became, the greater his destructive power would become. He would be her own personal weapon.

Sha, meanwhile, had not been oblivious to his position. He knew Krishia was a schemer and he knew why she had taken him under her wing. To protect himself, he had deliberately cultivated a mysterious air. She had often said, "Simply possessing paranormal abilities is unlikely to affect a person's basic personality. The persona and the paranormal potential are separate." And as far as he was concerned, he wanted her to continue thinking that way. It was safer for him.

Margaret Ring Blair had no idea of the level of deception in which Krishia and Sha were engaged. As one of Krishia's lower-ranking "secretaries" she was privy to little important information and her actual work primarily consisted of receiving mail deliveries and ushering people in and out of Krishia's office. But after Claret Harmine had visited Krishia's office, even Margaret could tell that something big was happening. It was evident from the way the head secretary rushed into the office and the way Sha Aznable briskly walked right by her, ignoring her presence. He was radiating nervous energy.

"I'll finish refitting my unit in an hour, Excellency." Sha Aznable carefully announced. "Of course, we'd ideally like to have two Elmeths at our disposal." He knew it was out of the question. He had mentioned the Elmeths half in jest, hoping to defuse the strange tension he felt in Krishia.

"Don't ask for the moon, Commander," she admonished him, interpreting him literally. "We do, however, have a Braw Bro available, a suit developed at the same time as the Elmeth. It's still in the prototype stage, but would you like to try one out? As far as I know, there are two in the assembly hangar here on *Abowaku*."

She turned on her intercom and casually ordered her secretary to arrange a visit to the hangar for Sha. He detected both nervousness and condescension in her manner; she was acting overly flippant about the whole matter. He knew something was wrong. And then he heard her words.

"By the way, dear Caspar ..."

Sha understood immediately.

He had long dreaded the day when his cover would be blown. But meeting Sharia Bull had changed him, and what once had seemed terrifying was now merely an irritation and a disappointment, for if he had been a true New Type, he ruefully realized, he would have been able to anticipate it. But he had not. He had had no idea that Krishia knew. So much, he thought, for his own New Type potential!

The disappointment was tempered by the fact that he had never totally convinced himself that he *had* New Type potential or completely believed the prevailing view in the Archduchy military that New Types were ordinary people who suddenly manifested paranormal abilities. To him, true New Types were the people his father, Zeon Zum Daikun, had prophesied would appear, ordinary people with an uncommonly developed sense of intuition and a unique sense of humanity. People who, in adapting to a new concept of time and space in an extraterrestrial environment, would be transformed and would develop a new communion with others. People who would, in effect, learn to transcend traditional concepts of time and space in order to survive. Recently, several of the people he had met seemed to confirm his ideas.

Lala Sun, Kusko AI, and others had been investigated thoroughly by the Flanagan Agency for New Type potential, and they did not support Krishia Zavi's theory that possessing New Type ability did not affect one's basic persona. They had been evolving, and it had been changing them. And if this experience could ever be shared by all of humanity, then, as his father had predicted, mankind itself could truly undergo a transformation.

It was too bad that the unusual abilities of New Types had first manifested themselves in combat situations, for New Types were now becoming disposable tools of the military—they were used, and then they died. Sha knew that was one reason Sharia Bull had broached the idea of enlisting the Federation Gundam pilot as an ally; he had wanted to put a stop to it. It was a brilliant idea and required a leap in imagination so vast that it was reassuring. Perhaps New Types already *were* attempting to transcend the old thinking that had dragged the world into war. Perhaps, subconsciously, he had really infiltrated the Zeon Archduchy years ago, not just in a petty act of revenge for his father's death but as part of a larger, subconscious movement to reform the entire world. It was a notion that made him less fearful of Krishia. But in that context his failure to predict her suddenly seeing through his disguise earlier was all the more disappointing, for again, it meant he was not a true New Type.

"So tell me, Commander," Krishia asked, "was the mask just an attempt to cloak your

identity?"

"It was, Excellency," he replied with a touch of embarrassment. "It seems silly even to me now, but I intend to keep wearing it. People started calling me the Red Comet sometime back, and it's become something of a trademark."

"And are all your endeavors really part of an attempt to rebuild the Daikun faction on Zeon?"

"That's why I infiltrated the Archduchy in the first place when I was fifteen, and that's what I believed until recently."

"I must say, I'm impressed by your courage and tenacity. And frankly, I don't care what your goals were when you were fifteen or even what they were when you first joined my command. I'm only worried about the Sha Aznable I see standing before me now. And related to that I have a favor to ask. Take off that silly mask and show me what you really look like. I want to see what kind of man little Caspar grew up to be."

As Krishia watched, Sha removed his mask. The scar on his forehead wasn't very pleasant to look at, but his face still had the refined look that she remembered. She smiled, but then her expression turned serious.

Sha had no idea what she was thinking and was frustrated with himself because of it. He was an ordinary human and responded as one. "I'm prepared for punishment, Your Excellency. You may do with me as you please."

To his surprise, she laughed. "I admire your gallantry, Sha, but it's not necessary," she said. "Don't you remember what I said? I need you and your unit. That's why I called you here. After we escape from *Abowaku* you can tell me all you want about your feud with my family. But right now I'm inclined to believe your goal is not just vengeance."

"Thank you, Excellency. I'm relieved to hear you say that. I am, after all, the son of Zeon Zum Daikun. I have no idea what to tell you in this situation. I don't know why, but my hands are shaking." He was half pretending. He wanted to wait to see how Krishia reacted before deciding what to do next. Acting slightly emotional would give him a screen behind which to plan his next moves.

"My brother Gren doesn't trust me, Commander," Krishia said. "Nor do I trust him. Frankly, I'd feel a lot more comfortable facing a frontal attack from General Revil than a showdown with Gren, but it seems inevitable. I'm planning to leave *Abowaku* and head immediately for the Archduchy."

"Excellency, are you sure?"

"Yes, and I need your help. I need you to guard my ship."

"I understand. As I said, my unit needs to prepare before we can leave. When do you plan to depart?"

"Probably in five or six hours. I've got to get out of here before Revil hits us, and I'm not going alone. I'm going to take some of my forces with me."

"But Excellency ..."

If Krishia was seriously thinking of staging a revolt against her brother, it would be far easier said than done. The central colony of the Zeon Archduchy, Zum City, had a defensive perimeter around it. And Sha knew the Archduchy was capable of using the System project laser cannon for more than one blast. If Krishia succeeded in escaping from *Abowaku*, the authorities in Zum City would know about it almost instantly, and it was just possible, he surmised, that they might even make her a direct target of the cannon.

At last he thought he understood why she was acting in such haste: She was probably included in the target Gren had selected. There was no other way to explain her decision to abandon *Abowaku*. From his skirmishes with most Federation Forces he had always felt that the Zeon Archduchy had a seventy percent chance of winning; now, with the System project its victory seemed almost guaranteed.

"It's the System project, isn't it Excellency?" Sha asked. "Forgive me for saying so, but don't you think you're rushing your decision?"

"You don't know what you're talking about. Can you imagine being hit by a laser beam six kilometers in diameter?"

"I can imagine, but if the tide of war clearly shifts in our favor, I can't believe the Supreme

Commander would act so irrationally."

"You're naive! Put your Caspar Daikun identity back on for a second and remember the way your own life has been consumed by the desire for revenge. Then remember what kind of man Gren is."

"A painful point well taken. But don't you think you're acting a little irrationally yourself?"

"What are you suggesting? Are you trying to tell me that I should let Gren get away with this? Let him live?"

"No. There's no chance of *us* winning if we confuse *Abowaku* and the Archduchy. I think we should try to escape from *Abowaku* just as Revil hits the fortress. It might be difficult, but at least that way we won't have to worry about the guns of *Abowaku* being turned on us—they'll be preoccupied with Revil. We should probably take the forces at your disposal, diffuse them in space, and then proceed on a course that lets us converge on the Archduchy. We'll need all your forces, I suppose."

"It's a long shot, Commander. I'm attempting something fraught with danger, and that's why I'm telling you the facts and asking for your help. I want your unit to be in the vanguard."

"I'm flattered, Excellency, and I know I've no choice in the matter, anyway. I'll cast my lot with you. But let's wait a little, at least until Revil closes in, before we stage our 'strategic retreat' so to speak. We don't want it to look like another *Granada*, when you pulled out too soon."

"How dare you mention Granada! Leave the planning to me. Just busy yourself readying your unit and the new Braw Bros. I may even put an entire regular division under your command. We need as many ships and machines as possible."

"Thanks, Excellency, but as I stated once before, my unit, the 300th Autonomous, is supposed to be a strictly New Type unit. As the Federation's White Base-class ship has so clearly demonstrated, in this new type of combat numbers are not important."

"Understood. I'll leave it up to you, then."

Sha saluted, and then Krishia added, "Perhaps you pity me because of my current situation. But despite what's transpired between us today, I'd still like to consider you my ally, at least for the time being."

Sha said nothing at first. Krishia was a politician who helped prop up the Zavi family, and she was far too sharp and clever to pity very much. But he answered straight from the heart. "I don't pity you. Nor will I belittle you. Everyone is dealt a different hand in life. My own life has been filled with contradictions, too."

"Caspar Daikun, if it came down to a choice of being shot by Gren Zavi or you, I'd choose you. I can't guarantee your future, and I expect you can't guarantee mine, either. Correct?"

"Correct, Excellency." He saluted lightly and straightened his cape. Their conversation was over. At some point he might have to kill Krishia Zavi. Or she might kill him. They would proceed with their own individual destinies. It would be an interesting game. A game, he realized, that he would have to get better at if he wanted to take power someday.

* * *

After leaving Krishia's office, Sha stopped by Margaret Ring Blair's desk. She looked up at him with fear in her eyes. "Things are taking a turn for the worse," he said. "But no matter what happens, I want you to stay alive. I want you to bear my child someday."

It was an impulsive, radical statement, out of character for Sha, but Margaret accepted it and smiled. She was afraid for their future, but there was a limit to how much she could worry. Somehow, in Sha, she was certain that there was a future.

Lt. Lambda Ral stared at the image on his vid-phone screen. On the other end of the connection the camera panned back and forth sixty degrees, showing him Claret Harmine's entire living room. Normally vid-phones never displayed images unless the other party answered the phone, but because of Lambda Ral's Secret Service connections and the fact that Claret's apartment was essentially in his name, it had not been all that difficult for him to activate the camera remotely.

Claret's living room looked the way it always did when she wasn't around, but two scarves had been tossed carelessly on the sofa. And that was unlike her. And on a rack underneath the

TV monitor he could also see a handbag with a handkerchief poking awkwardly out of it. Again, it was not like her. It was the third time he had checked her apartment in the last ten hours.

Maybe she did it, he thought, feeling relieved.

After informing the Supreme Commander of Sha Aznable's real identity, Lambda Ral's Secret Service unit had been ordered to inspect all ships leaving the Archduchy. The order had come so unexpectedly that some of his men had questioned the motive behind it, but they were in the Secret Service, and always obeyed their orders. He, however, still wanted to know what was going on. He knew that many Zeon military units in the *Mahar* colony area had suddenly been prohibited from leaving the Archduchy, which meant it had something to do with the System project. He also remembered something Gren had said at their last meeting that had puzzled him: *"I've been thinking about settling matters once and for all. Don't worry about what happened with Caspar Daikun."*

At first Lambda had thought that Gren was simply planning to assassinate Sha Aznable, and he had been prepared to carry out such an order if necessary. But with the emergency order to inspect all ships leaving the Archduchy, there was suddenly far more going on than apparent on the surface. Gren's overblown ego was clearly acting up again.

Lambda thought of Claret Harmine. She was a fine woman from a good Archduchy family and loved him deeply, but she had been passed along to him from Gren, and he had never been completely able to shake off a sense of humiliation. She seemed to know how he felt, perhaps because she, too, had been humiliated by Gren. In fact, it would not have surprised him if she harbored a desire for revenge of her own. Ironically, their bond was strengthened by their relationship to Gren.

To find out what was really going on, two nights earlier Lambda had decided to contact an old comrade of his who worked as an S.S. unit leader in the *Mahar* area; to his surprise, he was easily able to obtain the information he needed. The man in charge of the *Mahar* project, Admiral Chapman Jirom, trusted the Secret Service unit attached to him, and in a moment of candor he apparently had let his guard down with them, telling them of the plan to change the *Mahar* axis so it could directly attack *Abowaku*, and boasting of a plan to get rid of Krishia Zavi.

The friend with whom Lambda had spoken, moreover, had been equally candid. "Whatever you do, Lambda," he had said, "don't mention any of this to anyone on *Abowaku* before we put our plan into action. We serve the Supreme Commander, so frankly I couldn't care less about squabbles in the Zavi family. But this'll make Archduke Degin Zavi powerless and make it easy to get rid of Prime Minister Darshia Baharo. Then Zeon will be ours. Things are starting to look good for you and me, Lambda."

Lambda, going along with the mood, had smiled, saying, "Right. Maybe we'll both get to visit Earth someday, after all."

Now, Lambda thought, perhaps the Fates were presenting him with an opportunity. It was almost as if Claret had come to him as part of a larger design, had understood what he was thinking, and had put his thoughts into action. The only proof he had was the fact that Claret was not in her living room. But he wanted to believe it.

Neither Claret nor Krishia are stupid, he thought. He took a sip of coffee. Then he glanced at the schedule of ships leaving port that day, made sure none were leaving Zum City for *Abowaku*, and stood up. One of his subordinates entered his office.

"Sir, we heard a rumor that Claret Harmine was spotted on a ship that left last night. Is it true, sir?"

"*Claret?*" he said, feigning surprise. "Surely there must be some mistake."

"Well, sir, apparently someone who looks *exactly* like her boarded the ship, posing as one of Her Excellency Krishia's personal staff."

"What? Why in the world would Claret do that? She said she was going to Island Park for three days. What's going on? Why are you idiots telling me this now? Can't you get your reports to me earlier? If only you'd told me!"

"Sorry, sir. We had three ships leave at the same time last night. And besides, we were told anyone with a pass from Her Excellency Krishia should be allowed to leave, so we didn't feel the matter needed to be reported."

"And who was watching the ships?" Lambda asked.

"Ensign Tom Nishimura, sir."

"Hmph. Just the sort of thing that damn fool would do. Well, what the hell. When Claret comes back, I'll have a few words with her."

"Yessir!"

Lambda Ral knew that Claret could not have gone by herself to Krishia Zavi unless she had also had contact with Darshia Baharo. Furthermore, if she had posed as one of Krishia's household members, it meant she was not operating alone but with the backing of a powerful organization. The main thing he worried about now was her safety—whether she would be able to escape from *Abowaku* before being ensnared in Supreme Commander Gren Zavi's plot.

Several hours before the *Pegasus II* left the Corregidor shoal zone, General Revil visited on a launch from his flagship, the *Drog*. With his normally calm face flushed with excitement, he spoke to the core crew in the briefing room.

"What you have accomplished," he said, "is next to miraculous. In one battle the *Pegasus II* and its three Mobile Suits have done what normally requires a force twenty times your size. Frankly, I'm absolutely astonished."

For the *Pegasus* crew, those were powerful words.

After all, they were spoken by the man who, after being captured during the Battle of Ruum, had managed to escape from the Zeon Archduchy, the man who had given the provocative, now famous speech *Zeon Is Exhausted* and provided the rallying cry for the Federation in its darkest hour. Some people called Revil a brilliant strategist. Others, behind his back, called him an agitator. Given Revil's tactical talents, the Federation might have better employed him as a strategist away from the front, but he had never been fully trusted in the higher levels of the Federation government, and he had therefore always been assigned to the front. Ironically, he probably preferred it. To the crew of the *Pegasus*, General Revil was a hero.

"I'm convinced you are true New Types," he told them. "And when this mission's finally over, I'll see that you're all advanced two ranks. But right now promotions aren't enough. I want you to fight for something even larger, something the Federation can't possibly reward with a mere promotion. We're embarking on the real Cembalo campaign now, and its success or failure hinges on your performance. This may sound strange, but I've realized that it's in the best interest of the entire world that you folks—even more than the Federation itself—succeed. I don't wish to indulge in pie-in-the-sky dreaming in the midst of a war, but I came to visit the *Pegasus II* today because I believe in you, because you have made me believe mankind may be capable of fundamental change. History may show that might makes right in war, but I believe the real victors in this conflict will not be the strongest but those with the most just cause. It must be true. I came here today to ask your opinion, to see if you agreed with my ideas. Well? What do you—as New Types—think? "

Amuro suddenly felt awkward and embarrassed. He and the other *Pegasus II* crew members were all in their late teens or early twenties—Lt. (jg) Sleggar Row was the oldest—and they had always been in awe of Revil. Now they felt like children suddenly asked advice by their grandfather. Brite, realizing their discomfort, stood up and answered first.

"It may be true, sir," he said, "that we have achieved unprecedented results in a short time. But if I understand your use of the word 'New Type' to be similar to that advocated by Zeon Zum Daikun—in other words, to represent a new step in the evolution of mankind—then I must disappoint you. We're just ordinary people, sir, and not really qualified to answer your question. But I think we'd all agree that the pilot of the Gundam Mobile Suit—Junior Grade Lieutenant Amuro Rey—has accomplished the most in combat, and if any change is occurring

in us, it appears to be the most advanced in him. May I suggest we ignore rank here, sir, and ask him to answer your question first, and to speak his mind frankly?"

Amuro flushed when he heard Brite's words. He knew Revil's comments about promotions had been more a gesture than anything else. He had been promoted before to junior grade lieutenant, and the Federation military organization was so short of people and so in danger of collapse that everyone knew ranks meant little anymore, anyway. But to be addressed in such respectful terms by Brite made him feel as though he had finally crossed the threshold into adulthood. It was the doubts about his own ability that made him feel embarrassed.

Revil shifted his gaze to Amuro and nodded approvingly, as did several of his aides. "I've heard a lot about you, young man," he began, "and I'd love to know how you managed to pull off such a feat out there. But first, what do you think of what I said?"

Amuro stood up, shifted awkwardly, then straightened and tried to meet Revil's gaze directly. It was not easy speaking in front of the brass. But then he felt the stares of his comrades and turned around. Saila Mas was looking at him with a warm, encouraging expression. He felt inspired and turned to face General Revil again.

"Thanks for the compliments," he began. "To start with, sir, even I'm not sure what's going on, but you did say you thought the victors in this war would be those with the most just cause, and to be blunt, I have a problem with that. In all the war stories I was raised on, the authors extolled the merits of a just cause, but they already knew the outcome of the conflict. They started with the conclusion and adapted the record to fit it."

"A point well taken," Revil quickly replied with a chuckle. Everyone in the room smiled.

"Yessir," Amuro answered. "I've already discussed my theories on tactics many times with those in this room, so I'm going to spare them the repetition, but let me speak frankly about three things I've experienced, things I haven't told even my closest friends, things that might help you understand what's going on." He then proceeded to tell the story of his contact with Lala Sun on the *Texas* colony and with Sha Aznable and Kusko AI in the Corregidor shoal zone.

"Both Lala Sun and Kusko AI were operating a rounded, flame-shaped type of Mobile Armor called an Elmeth," he said, "machines specifically designed for New Types, with some sort of thought-activated control system that can amplify consciousness, even project it at another human. But when I encountered Lala Sun, the pilot of the first one, I had absolutely no knowledge of the system, and I was able to communicate with her *without it*."

"Sha Aznable's another case in point. I ran into him around the same time I contacted Lala Sun and sensed him as an interruption, a static-like sound in the midst of my communication with her. But later, during the skirmish in Corregidor, I was actually able to 'talk' with him. His communication to me was simple, like a threat to kill me, but it was as clear as if he had spoken out loud. There was no mistaking it. He was reacting spontaneously to the thoughts I was emitting."

"And then, finally, during the battle in Corregidor, nearly all the crew on the *Pegasus II* bridge were able to detect the presence of Kusko AI. We were all operating on the same wavelength. If there's anything else to add, it's—"

"Dozzle's unit," Kai interjected.

"Right. I almost forgot. When we ran into Dozzle's fleet, we were able to destroy his new model machine because our awareness had been amplified after encountering Kusko AI in Corregidor. And after Dozzle we were able to intercept and destroy other, smaller prey because we could *feel* the waves of fear and aggression emanating from them. Let me describe it."

Amuro continued talking for over thirty minutes, sharing his experiences and opinions in detail with everyone present for the first time.

Sleggar Row, as if representing the others, sighed hard and long and said, "Wow. The part about contacting Kusko AI and the heartbeat, the 'London Bridge' tune . . . it's pretty incredible."

Revil and his officers were too amazed to comment at first, so Mirai Yashima spoke up. "Of those of us on the bridge, sir, Petty Officer First Class Saila Mas seems to have become the most sensitive. Saila, why don't you tell them what you've experienced."

"Me?" Saila looked up on hearing her name and hesitated. She glanced at Revil as if asking for permission to speak.

One of Revil's aides quickly bent over and whispered in the general's ear. "Let's hear her out, sir. She's the petty officer that saved the *Pegasus* crew on *Texas*. I'm damned curious about what she has to say, sir."

"Curious?" Saila echoed, overhearing.

"That's right. We did a background check on you," the officer announced.

"Oh, I see," she said softly, suddenly realizing that her secret was out. Steeling herself, she continued. "Then let me preface what I'm going to tell you. I joined this ship as a civilian, but I'm proud of the fact that I'm pulling my weight around here."

Revil gently interrupted. "We're aware of that, *Artesia Som Daikun*. And let me add, it pleases me to be able to address you by your true name."

Saila's crewmates were the most shocked. Except for Amuro, despite living and working with her day in and day out, they had never realized her true identity.

"*Daikun*? The same Daikun as in Zeon Zum Daikun? You've gotta be kidding!"

Saila turned around and saw Kai with a look of disbelief on his face. She smiled at him.

"Silence!" Brite commanded. He nodded at Saila, encouraging her to continue.

As Amuro watched, Saila straightened and thanked the general for his kindness. He felt proud of her, so proud that he wanted to proclaim to all present that *she was his woman!* But then he realized with embarrassment that their level of involvement gave him no right to such a claim. It was still mostly physical.

"I am the child of Zeon Zum Daikun, sir," Saila continued, "but my father was not a New Type. He only proposed and advocated the New Type concept. And like him, unless something indicates otherwise, I think I'm an ordinary person, too. I think the same thing's true of Amuro Rey. What he's accomplished is a fact, but we still don't know what it means in the larger scheme of things. We're not in a position to control the abilities emerging in ourselves. There's just one thing I'd like to say, sir. Personally, if you really believe we're emerging New Types and you really believe New Types are going to help transform mankind, then I think you should stop using us as some sort of secret weapon, stop using us to wage war."

Revil replied slowly, as if mulling over her words. "Let me congratulate you on your bluntness, Miss Artesia Daikun," he said. "But from what I've heard here today, it would seem that if someone like young Amuro Rey here can actually see into another's past and future, it would certainly indicate a dramatically raised consciousness. And if, as we also assume, he's just an ordinary human, that would indicate *anyone's* capable of the same thing. Unfortunately, I'm not smart enough to be able to predict how this ability would affect people or the world. Perhaps our junior grade lieutenant could again tell us what he thinks."

Amuro noted that Revil had finally relaxed in front of everyone. His eyes had a new youthfulness to them, and his gaze was more clear and direct. If all leaders were like Revil, he surmised, mankind might not have made so many colossal blunders throughout history.

"Sometimes I feel terrible," he began, "because I can't control what's happening to me. But there's something even more important than control. As my abilities increase, I wish I could also become a better person, but it's not happening. And that frightens me. For example, we exist in a military organization, with all its constraints, hierarchies, and limited perspectives; I'd like to be able to transcend that as an individual, but I don't think I ever can. We live in a real world dominated by political organizations, governments, and the military, and as long as these exist, there will always be conflict. Even if Zeon Zum Daikun's theory is true, I don't think man will ever evolve to the point where he no longer needs them. Maybe a special group of New Types, living in some sort of hermetically sealed environment, could. But we don't live in an isolated world. We live in a real world where we'll always have to interact with a variety of people. To transcend this would require a superhuman effort. And we'd probably still be used as weapons. To be perfectly honest, it's depressing. I wish we had more power. I wish we had more support. If I were a true New Type, I'd love to attempt a total psychic breakthrough, to achieve total harmony with others—if universal harmony with all mankind, regardless of background or station in life, were really possible, I'd feel ecstatic—

but right now I'm having enough trouble just harmonizing with myself. One reason I want to stay alive is that I want to see what's possible. In fact, I'm willing to do almost anything to survive. But that in itself is probably an 'old type' concept. It's frustrating."

General Revil nodded in understanding, but the officer who had whispered in his ear earlier answered in his stead. "Don't worry, lad. A lot of us, myself included, would give their right arm to experience what you have, even if it lasted for an instant, even if it was totally accidental. To be able to literally fuse your mind with that of another human is an incredible experience and one you should treasure."

"No!" Amuro responded vigorously. "You miss the point."

"What?" His attempt at empathy rejected, the officer was suddenly angered.

"As long as the experience is random and accidental," Amuro continued, "then the New Type concept isn't real. It's only a dream. And dreaming's not going to end the war or bring about some idealized transformation of mankind. As long as the experience is random, the people with real power in this world are going to ridicule us and classify us as paranormal freaks. They'll use us to justify their own dogmas and prejudices, just like the Jaburo bureaucrats on Earth used the entire Earth Federation Space Forces as a big shield to hide behind."

To Amuro's surprise, General Revil seemed to agree. "An astute observation, Mister Amuro Rey," he said. "I understand your feelings. The New Type concept is truly a double-edged sword with positive and negative potential. But having said that, I'm going to give all of you an order based on my own 'old type' logic. The 127th Autonomous, centered around the *Pegasus II*, is to continue proceeding in the vanguard of the attack on *Abowaku*. I'll have three squads accompany you, but I'm not sure how much protection they can provide. As the conflict escalates, I want you all to begin evaluating the situation autonomously and to feel free to take independent action. I want victories! But remember, I also want you all to return alive. That's all I have to say."

And with that General Revil stood up and left.

A bluish-white rocket engine flare streaked through the blackness as the *Pegasus II* continued at full speed toward *Abowaku*. After they cleared the Corregidor shoal zone, the path to *Abowaku* was still by no means unobstructed. Giant boulders and fragments of old colonies—debris from the destruction of war—remained. But this time the ship tried to use the obstacles as cover, zigzagging forward from one to the other after identifying them with laser sensors.

At the helm of the ship, Mirai Yashima understood why her skipper had decided to employ such an unorthodox tactic and marveled at the way human psychology worked. The debris couldn't afford complete protection, and there was even a possibility of enemy Zaks lurking in ambush, but nonetheless the crew clung to the meager security it afforded.

When she looked out at space, at first nothing would seem to be moving. Then she would suddenly spot a huge rock or a fragment of an old colony bearing down on her, and it would fill her entire field of vision. She would quickly check the laser-sensor monitor built into the wall, get a reading on the size of the obstacle, and then, while coming so close that she could see the details on its surface, start to maneuver around it and head for the next one.

It was a frightening responsibility. The *Pegasus II* possessed an automatic avoidance system, but it was often necessary to override it manually, and that decision and job was left entirely to her. Aggravating the problem, the debris was all backlit, and in the vacuum of space it was hard to deduce size visually. On Earth, the atmosphere tended to blur shapes in the distance but it also created a sense of distance. Without atmosphere, there was almost no way to get a true perspective. Laser sensors gave readings of size and distance, but in combat zones with a high concentration of Minovski particles, they were often inaccurate.

* * *

The entire crew of the *Pegasus II* was dressed for combat. All officers wore pistols strapped on top of their Normal Suits, and life-support kits. None of them knew when, if ever, they would be able to take the uncomfortable suits off again.

Mirai felt a chill. It started around her waist, crawled up her spine, passed her neck, and

made her scalp tingle. She felt strangely out of place and wondered what in the world she was doing piloting the ship through such an absurd situation. *Too bad I can't quit*, she thought. *I'd feel a lot safer farther back*. She did not mean to the rear of the unit. She meant someplace far, far removed from the world of combat. She wasn't even sure if such a place existed anymore.

She had left her home in Earth's Far East at the age of ten with her father. He was a second-generation politician from a family famous throughout the Federation, but he was also a self-righteous idealist who had nothing but loathing for the Federation. Unable to stand the machinations that were part of normal government in the Federation, he had volunteered for life as a colonist and left with her to live in space on Side 2.

Just before war broke out between the Zeon Archduchy and the Earth Federation, she had returned to her birthplace on Earth for a visit. But then war had erupted, and her entire family had been destroyed along with most of Side 2. In reaction, Mirai had volunteered for service and been assigned to the Earth Federation Space Forces. Because of her name and connections she could have easily asked for a post in the rear, away from the action, but she had refused. She had known an Earthbound assignment would have been against her father's wishes, and she had loved him, as idealistic as he was. Besides, her brother and sister had also died in space. She was in no frame of mind to be left behind on Earth, even if it were safer.

Mirai's situation was far from unique on the *Pegasus II*. Almost all the crew, including those who had joined the military before the war had erupted, had a strong bond to space. They came from colonies that had been targeted by the Zeon Archduchy forces, and most had lost relatives. Hardly anyone had come from Side 6 or, like Amuro, from the uncompleted Side 7, both of which were relatively unscathed. Nearly a third of the crew had volunteered for service. Most, like many of the officers and enlisted men throughout the Earth Federation Space Forces, had every reason to hate the enemy. And this set them apart from the politicians and bureaucrats on Earth, even from the General Staff sheltered in its underground complex in Jaburo, South America.

The gap in consciousness between those on Earth and those on the front lines in space was probably inevitable, but it didn't seem right to Mirai. She had inherited her father's idealistic streak and abhorred the current makeup of the Earth Federation establishment. She knew the fear she felt standing on the bridge of the *Pegasus* was something the officials sheltered underground in Jaburo would never understand. The vastness of space created an enormous potential for error and mistake. And if it over-amplified the fundamental misunderstandings that normally occurred between men, it might fundamentally, permanently, tear the human race apart. Perhaps, she thought, that was why humanity so yearned for the transformation that the New Type concept symbolized.

She stood steady at the helm, mustering every ounce of strength in her arms to counter the fear that surged through her body. She was thankful for the weightlessness because it made it easier to stand; in fact, it made it just as easy as sitting or lying down. All she had to do was turn the electromagnets on her boots on maximum to hold her in position on the floor.

Suddenly, an enormous fragment of a space colony wall—perhaps one-third of the original structure—soared into view, and in her earphones she heard her skipper yell, "*Mirai!*" For a second she wondered if she had been dreaming. The port side of the ship shuddered as the *Pegasus* heaved up and over the colony fragment, just barely clearing it. Brite's voice echoed again: "*Don't think about it, Mirai! Just look straight ahead and steer! Ignore the laser-sensors—turn the damn things off! Put your mind on automatic!*"

Everyone on the bridge, she knew, was getting nervous. Then she heard Ensign Mark Kran's angry, reprimanding voice cut in on top of the skipper's. "*We've broken through the second combat line! Mobile Suits launch in five minutes!*"

"All right, all right!" an irritated Brite said. "So I was a little excited. You can turn the sensors back on."

Through her helmet sun visor, Mirai could see Brite, nervously fidgeting in the captain's seat in his Normal Suit. She glanced at him and laughed.

"Skipper," she said.

"What?"

"It'll work out. Have faith."

"Have faith? You were shaking back there like a leaf yourself."

"I was. I admit it. But the *Pegasus* will make it, sir."

"This one of your New Type premonitions?"

"Interpret it any way you want," Mirai answered. Then she turned to Saila. "You agree with me, don't you?"

Saila swallowed hard and replied, "Yes, but we might have to make some sacrifices."

Something about her response was unsettling to Brite. "You all right, Saila?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," she answered. "I'm just a little scared, too, that's all."

Mirai knew it was more than that.

"Hey, what's going on?" Brite said, pushing the issue. "Mirai just said we ought to have faith. I believe what Amuro said to General Revil earlier. But if we don't get through the jam we're in now and work to end this war fast, what he said will never come true. If Gren Zavi wins, forget about the whole New Type concept as Zeon Zum Daikun expressed it."

"But skipper," Mirai cautioned. "You can say the same thing if the Federation wins. The Federation's not all that different in its attitude to New Types."

"But if the Federation wins, we'll at least have some more time to think about what to do next. Not so if Gren Zavi does," Brite retorted.

It was an idea Mirai found hard to disagree with.

CHAPTER 21

TEST FIRING

Only three Federation warships of the White Base-class had been built: the *Pegasus*—destroyed in the conflagration on *Texas*—the *Thoroughbred*, and the *Pegasus II*. Because their solar panels, special hangars, and protruding bridge gave them a winged equine profile, the Zeon military code named them Horse. They were the only ships in either the Federation or Archduchy forces specifically designed for Mobile Suits.

The Gundam G3 and the two Gun Cannons, C108 and C109, stood on the *Pegasus II* foredecks, beam rifles in their hands, like pilots on ancient sailing ships, but in this case the real pilots—Amuro Rey, Kai Shiden, and Hayato Kobayashi—were inside the giant Suits and not on the lookout for reefs. The *Pegasus II* had just come in effective range of missiles and mega-particle beam cannons from *Abowaku*.

As Amuro watched, flashes appeared in the sky where the space fortress was located and then instantly forked into multiple streaks. The pattern was repeated, each time from a different spot, and each time the streaks seemed synchronized. Missile barrages were coming at them from at least fifteen different sites on the giant umbrella-shaped fortress and its periphery, creating a deadly crossfire.

Because homing missiles were impractical in regions with high Minovski saturation, it was common to launch large numbers of conventional missiles in a hit-or-miss approach, but Amuro was certain he was witnessing a record for the war. Thousands, not hundreds, were streaking toward them. While adjusting the sights of the beam rifle in the Gundam's left hand, he drew the hyperbazooka on its hip with the right hand. Then he kicked off the deck. On his rearview monitor, he saw the two Gun Cannons with their twin shoulder guns launch after him from the ship's starboard deck. Both Kai and Hayato had developed more and more confidence in their support role and their basic combat skills, and as soon as they assumed their positions on either side of him, they all plunged ahead in formation into the fire-streaked heavens.

Kai and Hayato were not particularly worried about the incoming missiles hitting them. The missiles were unintelligent, randomly aimed, and flying in a straight line, so there was no need to try to intuit or predict complex course changes; they just had to avoid them in time, and that was not too difficult. They enjoyed a 280-degree field of vision, and ever since the last battle, their emerging New Type skills had allowed them to work in an increasingly coordinated fashion. As they advanced, they occasionally picked off missiles on a course that appeared to threaten the *Pegasus II*. And every time the mother ship safely made it through the ball of light from the explosions, they cheered inside their cockpits.

"Hey, Mister Hayato! It's working!"

"Not bad, not bad! At this rate we'll land on the core of Abowaku and eliminate its commander in no time! Whaddya say, pardner?"

"Better happen soon. The longer this continues, the worse the odds are for us. My nerves and body aren't gonna hold out forever. Let's go, Hayato! Let's go!"

They were both excited and primed for action, but they made certain they stayed close to the Gundam.

It was easier for Amuro to sight the line of approach of the missiles and evade them visually, so he was able to concentrate most of his mind on the panorama unfolding before them. He knew he needed to locate a dominating "presence" in the *Abowaku* region similar to what he had sensed before in his encounter with Dozzle Zavi's unit, in the Corregidor shoal zone. Then he had felt a strange, oppressive sensation. He had pursued it, and it had turned out to be psychic waves emanating from Dozzle himself. Now, if he could just detect the same thing again, he could move in, destroy the source, and in the process help fatally weaken

Abowaku. Unfortunately, such manifestations of energy were apparently not always well defined, for although he could detect a diffused, seething mental energy emanating in swirls from the fortress itself, he could not isolate a single, dominating force.

Perhaps I'm still too far away. There had to be some other reason, he suspected, why the force was not as strong or defined as when he had encountered Dozzle Zavi.

Then, in the vast area around *Abowaku*, he abruptly sensed a second attacking force, and his eyes widened. He knew they still hadn't cleared *Abowaku's* primary missile defense, and sure enough, there were suddenly more satellite missiles being lobbed at them. The crude projectiles were camouflaged black to avoid detection and could attain a speed equivalent to that of modern missiles with head diameters ranging from ten to two hundred meters. At least a third of the Federation armada behind him was directly exposed, and in his rear-view monitor he soon saw explosions flowering like fireworks in the vast area behind him.

"We're coming to get you bastards!" he yelled at the enemy before him. It felt good to yell something. He thought about the destruction occurring behind him among his own forces but restrained his impulse to shoot as many of the attacking missiles as possible. He had to save his ammunition for what he expected would soon be a New Type showdown with Sha Aznable.

Then, in the midst of evading a barrage of missiles, he suddenly thought, *Uh, oh.* Behind one huge chunk of asteroid he saw a brief glint of sunlight on a metal surface and realized he was staring at an entire formation of Gattle fighter-bombers with camouflaged fuselages, approaching under cover. Behind them, in a textbook pattern, was a formation of Jiko attack ships. And following the Jikos was the main force of Gow bombers, reinforcing the defensive wall of Zeon Mobile Suits and the cross fire from the *Abowaku* fortress itself.

General Revil knew the Federation armada would never take *Abowaku* unless it could find or create a weak link in the fortress's defenses. There were therefore three options: to try a feint maneuver and cause the enemy to over-concentrate its strength in one area and thus weaken its defenses in another, to stage a broad frontal assault and attempt to find a weak spot while doing so, or to focus all strength on one area and bore a hole right through the defenses.

He knew the third option would yield the heaviest losses, but he had chosen it because he believed it had the highest likelihood of success. The vanguard of the armada would first assault the "stem" section of the umbrella-shaped fortress where the defensive cross fire was at its weakest, and the *Pegasus II*, as one of the point ships, would be given maximum flexibility; as the attack proceeded, if an opportunity to make a breakthrough presented itself, it would be allowed to make autonomous decisions and act on them independently.

It was a gamble, but he knew what he was doing. After having heard Amuro, Kai, Hayato, and the rest of the *Pegasus II* crew give their accounts of sensing Dozzle Zavi in the midst of battle, he was convinced his plan would work. Even if the enemy were able to muster its own New Type unit in defense of *Abowaku*, in the end he was certain the same New Type unit would help lead the Federation fleet to the core of the fortress.

Amuro had been fully briefed on the plan. Taking care not to let anyone pick him off along the way, he kept his senses focused on the area the enemy fortress occupied and tried to identify the nucleus of its defenses. He switched his main monitor to high-power telescopic mode for a few seconds, and in the distance he could easily see the fortress's silhouette; from his perspective, he was looking "up" at the umbrella portion of its superstructure. He could almost smell the stench of battle—the stench of impending death.

Supreme Commander Gren Zavi knew his face was intimidating even on good days, but judging from Cecilia Eilene's reaction, he must have just scowled particularly hard. Even she, his personal secretary, a strong woman who knew his innermost secrets and his most private predilections, was terrified. He stopped reading the letter he had just received and glanced at her trembling form.

Cecilia was one of the few women in the world he totally trusted. He had a legal wife, but

he considered her beneath him intellectually, and treated her more like a domestic, never appearing with her in public. Cecilia was only one of many women he had consorted with in the past, but she had proved the most outstanding. Of lower-class background, she had developed a strong independent streak at an early age, studying to become a professional secretary while still a teenager. He had first been attracted to her shapely figure, but he had soon grown to appreciate her ability to understand people and her intuitive skepticism of their true motivations, both traits he valued highly. After she had worked in his office for over two years, he had made her his personal secretary.

Cecilia was so accurate in her evaluations of people that he sometimes wondered if she might not be one of the New Types his sister Krishnia often referred to. She had begun to function more like a counselor adviser, than a secretary, and he in turn had begun to trust in her more and more. He loved her for her ability. Cecilia, for that matter, seemed to like his personality and style, and her affection for him, he liked to think, was also aided by the fact that he had managed to alleviate a long-standing sexual frustration of hers. She always tried hard to understand his emotional makeup and ways of thinking and rationalized whatever he did by borrowing from his system of logic. Several days earlier she had learned of his plot and seemed to have approved.

"Hmph," Gren grumbled. "Imagine these nitpicking numbskull clerks writing code numbers on letters and worrying about format at a time like this. Makes my blood boil. I just want the facts reported. Especially for something like this."

Cecilia smiled. It was the last thing she had expected Gren to say, but she knew it was his attempt to make her feel relaxed. He, for his part, knew her smile had another meaning: He wasn't supposed to worry about her. He grinned.

"Did my expression really look *that* bad?"

"Worse."

"Hmph," he grumbled. "Well, I never thought things would proceed exactly as planned." He again scanned the letter that had been delivered to him. It was from Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman, the commanding officer on *Abowaku*. In the upper left-hand corner was the source of his displeasure: the code name for his plan was displayed in elegant capital letters, followed by the communication number. It therefore made a relatively short message—that he wanted as few people as possible to notice—far too conspicuous.

The message itself was clear and concise and merely stated that the Earth Federation Forces had recommenced their attack and gave the time. But this information was critical. Earlier, the Federation armada had bypassed *Abowaku* and appeared headed in the direction of *Solomon*. When one unit had reached the Corregidor shoal zone between *Abowaku* and *Solomon*, Gren had staked his hopes on his brother Dozzle. But then Dozzle's attack had collapsed, far too easily.

Gren's confidence had been shaken to the core by Dozzle's defeat. What had happened? What had caused it? Even if Dozzle's unit had been surrounded and attacked by the entire Federation armada, he should have been able to hold out half a day before being annihilated. That he could at least have understood. At the beginning of the battle, Dozzle was supposed to have smashed into the wing of the Federation armada headed for *Abowaku* and routed it. Then the Federation armada would have been at a severe disadvantage; it could have been bombarded broadside from *Abowaku*, and special *Abowaku* units could have been sent out in hot pursuit. In space warfare, an attack from the rear during retreat was to be avoided at all costs; in theory, it could be repulsed with twice the firepower of the pursuers, especially now that ECM (Electronic Counter Measure) tactics were so refined. Dozzle's forces could have been expected to encounter heavy resistance, but at a minimum they should have been able to throw the enemy armada into absolute chaos. And that had not happened.

Dozzle was defeated too easily. And Krishnia's forces don't seem to have helped him. Gren's doubts began to gnaw in his mind, making him wonder if his secret plot was in danger of unraveling. Surely, he thought, the Federation Forces must also have incurred heavy losses. After all, hadn't that been why they had suddenly moved away from the space fortress and retreated to the Corregidor shoal zone in the first place?

"I hope Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman can hold up. Think I'm expecting too much?" Gren stared at Cecilia's ample bosom as he spoke, but his mind was focused on something else. It was a habit of his. As he watched, her chest suddenly heaved and then shook softly. Wondering what had happened, he suddenly looked up at her soft, full lips.

"I . . . I'd say so," she said. She was trembling, and Gren knew it was not an act.

Normally Cecilia enjoyed watching Gren plot and manipulate his subordinates to achieve a desired goal. It seemed like a thrilling game, and after the humiliations of her own life, she even derived a perverse sense of pleasure from it. But this time he was going too far. Using the System plan to annihilate both his own sister Krishia and Randolph Weigelman was too inhuman, even for her. And the loss, she feared, would be too great, even to Zeon.

"I'm not going to be angry with you, Cecilia," Gren said. "I understand your fears. But I know what I'm doing. Everything, including acting as a behind-the-scenes dictator here on Zeon, is merely a means to an end in a long historical process. You know, my father often accuses me of being a poor clone of Adolf Hitler, but it's not true. I know what I'm doing. Most people are by nature stupid and weak. They need to fall as far as they can before they can be saved. If Zeon Zum Daikun's prophecy of a new human enlightenment is more than a dream, then I'm going to be the one to make it possible. I swing the ax. Those with true New Type potential will avoid it. Those without it, won't. It's that simple."

Gren finished talking, stood up, and walked around his desk to Cecilia.

"I think you're going a little too far this time, sir." She had finally dared to say it. Gren's use of the System represented far too big an ax for any single individual to swing.

Gren was stung by her remark. "You're stepping out of line, Cecilia," he said. She suddenly looked humiliated.

"Sorry, sir," she replied with a pained expression. "Please, forgive me."

Then he leaned over her and with his lips began gently caressing the nape of her neck.

Cecilia felt a sudden chill. A chill of fear. She knew Gren was irritated. She always prided herself on the fact that she never put undue pressure on him and that she served him well. She knew he kept only capable people around him, and she was always prepared for the moment when he would no longer need her. She knew what had happened in the past to women who knew too much and of whom he had then tired. They wound up ruined or dead. To avoid that fate she had tried extra hard to develop her skills and make herself indispensable, both as a woman and as his executive secretary. She was, in a sense, constantly engaged in a subtle competition with him, a competition that, since her life was at stake, always had an element of danger in it. And in a perverse psychosexual way, she always enjoyed that. She felt his lips trace the nape of her neck and imagined what life would be like without him. She would lose her biggest competitor, her most worthy competitor. But she knew right now he was just trying to butter her up. She pulled away.

"Did, did I do something wrong?" he asked.

Cecilia could hardly believe what she had heard. For a second the Supreme Commander of the Zeon Archduchy had almost sounded contrite. She quickly recovered and smiled at him.

"You're being sweeter than usual. I just wish you'd act naturally."

A frown suddenly creased Gren's brow. "What are you getting at?" he said, suddenly upset.

"Well . . . maybe you shouldn't be in such haste with the project," she said. Her heart was pounding, and she practically bit her lip when she spoke.

"Are you trying to provoke me, Cecilia? Don't you understand? If I can just void the Treaty of the Antarctic, a lot of problems will be solved. If the System just works as it's supposed to, then we can nuke the Federation's Jaburo headquarters. After that, it'll be all over. The war'll end in a week."

Cecilia understood the logic of what Gren was trying to do. Within a month after the Zeon Archduchy had begun its war with the Federation, both the Archduchy and the Federation had lost nearly half their entire populations. It had been a terrifying loss of not only lives but human resources, for losing such a huge number of people in such a short time nearly destroyed most vital social organizations. Civilization had tottered on the brink of total

collapse, but then, in a testimony to mankind's resilience, most organizations had been recreated on a new, scaled-down size.

The Earth Federation had initially lost far more people than the Zeon Archduchy had, but the Federation had managed to recover faster. It possessed far more people and resources to begin with, and it also possessed a far more flexible political system. But because the human losses had been so horrendous, after the Battle of Ruum both the Archduchy and the Federation had agreed to sign the Treaty of the Antarctic, a far-reaching agreement that stipulated the way prisoners were to be treated and—in a move that had broad implications for the rest of the conflict—prohibited all use of poison gas and nuclear weapons as well as attempts to totally destroy each other's colonies. The treaty even confirmed possible procedures for terminating the war, but that was as far as the talks had gotten. After all the killing, the two adversaries were simply incapable of resolving their differences over a negotiating table; their views of each other were poisoned by distrust, and in a world where ideals and realities coexisted, the realities won out. The whole negotiating process was, as Gren Zavi often claimed, a classic example of human stupidity. The paradox of history, he liked to say, was that in nations of laws, even bad laws had to be obeyed, but the laws themselves were made to be broken. Nonetheless, men still legislated, generated endless fancy legal documents, and promulgated worthless treaties.

"In the twentieth century of the old calendar system," Gren continued, "the Earth's total population was around four and a half billion. Do you know what that means, Cecilia?"

"Well, I suppose you're trying to suggest that even after losing half our population, we still have more than they did then, right?"

"Right. There are more people alive now than there ever were at the end of the twentieth century, when modern science and technology made their most dramatic progress. So any talk about *too* many people having been killed thus far in the war is utter nonsense. The bureaucrats on Earth running the Federation's stupid system aren't helping prepare us for a New Type age, they're just getting in the way. They're useless. And so's the Treaty of the Antarctic. If all it takes to destroy the Federation's Jaburo complex is a couple of nuclear warheads, I say they ought to be used. Someone has to do it."

"You're quite right, as usual, sir."

"Once I've accomplished my goals, I intend to retire. I'm just thinking of the interests of the survivors of this conflict." Gren put his arms around her waist as if measuring her size. "I'm not just doing this for power and glory, you know," he said softly.

Cecilia noted Gren's expression. He appeared utterly sincere.

Then he whispered, "Get me Admiral Chapman Jirom."

"Well? Think this thing's okay, Lieutenant?" Commander Sha Aznable looked over the new model of Mobile Armor, the Braw Bro, and wondered if Sharia Bull would be able to pilot it. It was utterly unlike the machines they had worked with before. It was huge and carried two pairs of twin mega-particle cannons, not in the main fuselage but as independent units remotely controlled by wire from the cockpit. Normally it took four gunners inside the cockpit to operate the units, but the machine also had a prototype version of the Elmeth's psychom interface. In fact, the scientists from the Flanagan Agency had left the Braw Bro on *Abowaku* only because the Elmeth had shown so much more potential. Unlike the Elmeth, the Braw Bro could not amplify and project human brain waves through open space, but it could transmit them to the cannon units via wire. One advanced pilot, hooked up to the interface, could thus control all four cannon in a two-and-a-half-kilometer radius and use them to attack a bewildered enemy.

"I don't foresee any problem, Commander," Sharia said, grinning and looking a little embarrassed as he stroked a two-day growth of beard. "The psychom on this thing is one of the first ones ever made, but it's easy to operate. I can even do it all by myself."

"Leroy!" Sha ordered young Junior Grade Lieutenant Leroy Gilliam behind him. "Bring this man a razor, will you?" Then he turned back to Sharia and asked, "Why don't you just take another Rik Dom?"

"Because I want to stay alive," Sharia replied. "The Braw Bro fuselage separates into left and right modules, which allows the cockpit to function as an escape capsule. It'll be easier for me to get out of in a jam."

"You're joking, I assume."

"Think so?" Sharia asked as Leroy handed him a razor. "I want to contact the Gundam as early as possible. The Braw Bro uses a pseudo-psychom interface but it actually *does* emit a small amount of brain waves, and I think it'll help."

"Hmm. Well, I'm not in a position to question your judgment in this matter, Lieutenant, so I'll just have to take your word for it."

Sha knew full well that Sharia had been sent to his unit by Gren Zavi to spy on him and that Sharia was still superficially carrying out his duties for the Supreme Commander. But he also knew Sharia was now on his side. Both men believed in the New Type vision and would do whatever they could to make it come true. Both men had also come to realize the need to stop the insane war going on around them. But to do that they would first have to escape from *Abowaku*, and there was not a minute to lose.

The Federation Gundam MS was becoming too powerful for them, and after leaving *Abowaku* they were determined to avoid engaging it in direct combat. They had agreed earlier that if, as they suspected, they were unable to destroy it quickly, they should try to enlist its pilot in their cause. In their next encounter they would make the decision. Sharia Bull, at great personal risk, had volunteered to try to contact the Gundam.

"I just wish I could say this plan'd work with more certainty," Sharia said, sighing.

"The most difficult thing," Sha added, "is to get close enough to communicate with Amuro Rey, the pilot. Think he'll let us?"

Leroy Gilliam interjected. "I'll try to help make it possible," he said. "Can I also assume it's okay to destroy him if I have to?"

Leroy sounded too eager. He had what Sha and Sharia recognized as youthful overconfidence.

"If you can get a bead on him, good," Sha said, "but make sure you aim for his backpack." Then, looking up at the newly delivered Zaks cramped together in the narrow hatchway of the hangar, he added, "At least we'll have some company out there."

"Yessir!" Leroy answered with a snappy salute. Then he kicked off the deck and floated up to the Rik Dom hatch, climbed in, and began strapping himself in the cockpit.

Sha turned to Sharia Bull. Since the two of them were finally alone, he told him what he had learned from Krishia of Gren's plot.

"Holy cow, sir," Sharia said after hearing Sha's description. "What will these politicians think of next?"

"I don't know, but Gren's gone too far this time. He's an intellectual anachronism."

"It's not a new problem, sir. He's just following his own flawed ideology."

"Think so?"

"I know so. He's an idealist in a twisted way and thinks he's laying the foundation for a new age. The unfortunate thing is that he believes it can only be accomplished by power, by dominating all mankind. What he doesn't realize is that there's another way. He's just stuck in an old mode of thinking. He's part of an old problem. Two thousand years of human history prove it."

"Why are there people like him?"

"Because individual humans are too isolated, too busy thinking about themselves to see the big picture. It's their karma."

"Same with us, right?"

"Right. It's a big problem. But I think we're on the right track. If I really believed something I was doing would help create a better world for future generations, frankly, I'd be ready to die for it. Wouldn't you?"

"Whoa, Lieutenant! Hold on a second! Don't be in such a hurry to vaporize yourself. Think of the people you'd leave behind."

"No parents, Commander. No wife. No girlfriend. No children. I don't have much keeping

me here. But I need something to believe in, and right now I'm ready to follow you. The most important thing for us now is to time our escape right so we aren't annihilated by Gren. And we need to contact the Gundam before it's too late and either destroy it or enlist it as an ally."

"There you go. We've got to watch out for the Gundam. The thing's turned into an over-efficient killing machine. We've both got to stay alive."

"Hmph. Amuro Rey's the pilot, right? I think you once called him 'single-minded' or 'straightforward,' right? Frankly, sir, I'm a little envious of him."

"Sometimes it's not a good idea to be too single-minded, Lieutenant."

"No, sir, I agree," Sharia said. "We're too complicated ourselves, Commander Sha ... er ... or should I say Caspar Daikun?"

The men shook hands and climbed into the cockpits of their respective machines. Thirty minutes later the 300th Autonomous, Sha's New Type unit composed of one Braw Bro, four Rik Doms, and five Zaks, launched from the stem of *Abowaku* and soared toward the combat zone.

A New Type unit, Sha thought as his Rik Dom led the way. It sounds nice, but who knows what it really means? There's no precedent for this.

From that point on he had no time for philosophizing. The entire area in front of him was laced with stabbing beams of light, and he had to concentrate with his whole being simply to stay alive. He even forgot about Margaret Ring Blair. He was not piloting a Zak anymore, but he was still the Red Comet.

* * *

Along with the senior members of Krishia Zavi's staff, Margaret Ring Blair boarded the *Swamel*. She knew a military showdown was approaching, for the crew shoved them into the ship's armory like cattle, shouting something about defending *Abowaku* to the death. It did not make sense to her. If they were going out to defend the space fortress, she did not understand why so many of the officials associated with Krishia were also being taken. As she watched, the last senior secretary entered, accompanied by Claret Harmine.

One of the ship's younger officers addressed them. "We may see action any minute now, so until ordered otherwise, you must all remain in this room. There are Normal Suits in the locker over in the corner. I advise checking them right now." With that he left, closing the hatch behind him. Margaret made her way across the room past her colleagues, to Claret.

"Hi," she said. "Tell me if it's my imagination, but things seem to have changed awfully fast around here ever since you walked into Her Excellency's office. What's going on?"

Claret pulled back with a shocked look. "How should I know?" she said. "And why don't you mind your own business anyway ..."

Despite the rude rebuff, Margaret stared at Claret's profile and could not help admiring the beautifully shaped bridge of her nose.

On the bridge of the *Swamel*, Krishia Zavi issued the order to leave port. She had been assigned the task of defending the S field around the stem section of the *Abowaku* fortress and had boarded the *Swamel* with every appearance of personally supervising the defense from the front. Technically, since she had informed neither Gren nor the fortress commander, Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman, she was still supposed to be in the S sector command center, but none of the men who served her objected. They were relieved to see her with them. They much preferred to have her risk her life with them than to have her yelling out orders from the safety of the rear. None, needless to say, were aware that she had really boarded the ship in a desperate attempt to avoid being vaporized in Gren Zavi's diabolical plot.

Krishia turned to the communications officer on the *Swamel* bridge and sternly ordered, "The Vice Admiral's in the N sector command center, but I want you to make absolutely sure all communications between me and him are routed through the S sector command center." Then she tried to send a message to Randolph inquiring about the position of *Mahar*. After several abortive attempts, she finally received a reply.

"Ten minutes from now we'll receive supporting fire from *Mahar*, Excellency," Randolph said, unaware of what was really being planned, "with the first blast at thirty percent of

potential output. The second will occur twenty minutes after the first."

"The first one comes ten minutes from now?" Krishia asked.

"We expect the Federation attackers will be routed after the first blast. The Mahar cylinder will be on the Geldorf axis."

From his comments, Krishia deduced that the first blast was for calibration purposes only. And that meant that the second was intended for her.

"If the second blast thirty minutes from now doesn't attain the target output and doesn't do the job, Excellency, the Supreme Commander has promised to send us reinforcements. An entire fleet of ships is apparently launching right now."

"Ha!" Krishia retorted. "I hope they have a lot of firepower. Surely you don't really think he's going to send us help that arrives two or three hours late and then expect us to thank him, do you?"

She asked the young vice admiral to continue sending her information on *Mahar* and then unilaterally signed off. *The fool*, she thought. *He doesn't even know what Gren has in store for him!* Randolph Weigelman was a somewhat naive officer, and she knew there was no way in the world he could be acting. She ordered her communications officer to keep the laser channel with the *S* sector command center open.

Then, with several supporting ships following in its wake, the *Swamel* pulled away from the *Abowaku* port.

Amuro had finally located what he was looking for. In the area in front of him, from slightly to his right, he felt a weak force flowing out toward him. Something was approaching at high speed. *I hope I'm not emitting the same sort of energy*, he thought. If he were, he wished he could somehow turn it off, for he knew anyone else in the area with New Type potential—someone, for example, like Sha Aznable—would easily be able to detect him.

He knew from books that some legendary samurai warriors had been capable of detecting another's presence and, conversely, of stilling their own minds in order to mask their own presence. But he lived in the real world, where things were more complicated, where scientists had never even defined human consciousness. It was ridiculous to assume that psychic vibrations, or even the complex "presence" of New Types, could be intentionally controlled or suppressed. He did not want to believe, for example, that Dozzle Zavi had a special ability to generate the eerie, specter-like aura he had detected oozing from his machine. If that was what a New Type represented, he did not want to have anything to do with it. New Types who emitted frenzied, crazed auras were freaks.

To be a true New Type, he realized, meant far more than merely possessing a simple ability, a talent that others could exploit. It meant being an integral part of humanity. New Types were above all human, and humans were living beings. They were all inseparable.

He began to wonder. When an individual's consciousness was raised and expanded, could it exist independently from the physical form? Would the physical body then be necessary? If the ability to generate an independent, free-floating consciousness was a survival advantage in the harsh environment of space, if only the spirit, consciousness, or thought energy could transcend time and space, who would need a physical form? Was the physical body merely a means of generating an independent consciousness? It might take enormous effort and training, but he wanted to believe he could somehow control the development of his own consciousness. He had long ago realized that having a special gift did not guarantee a superior or moral character, although people tended to excuse nearly every action of someone they deemed gifted. In his own case, his much-discussed New Type potential was escalating, becoming increasingly independent, assertive, and even dangerous. His insights and his sense of prescience could help him win battles, and help him survive. But it was taking him in a totally different direction from the profound shared empathy and spiritual communion that both Lala Sun and Kusko Al had taught him were possible.

The more he thought about it, the more confusing it all seemed. Saila Mas appeared to have some traits similar to his. But was he really interacting with her the way he should? Wasn't he just playing the typical male? Did the two of them really wish to have a relationship that went beyond the physical? Were they not simply two healthy young people of the

opposite sex, caught up in the time compression that occurs in war, seeking temporary distraction and solace?

Ultimately, Amuro knew that he was only a military pilot and that there was a limit to what he could do. It made him feel impotent and trapped. Philosophize as he might, he had to fight to survive. His only reward was survival. Someone else, he knew, would reap the rewards of his victories. Someone like the Earth Federation leaders, secure in the safety of their underground headquarters in Jaburo.

Amuro's thoughts transpired in seconds, but their intensity fueled a new anger in his body that threatened to explode. He cursed, and then suddenly an enemy Zak came at him from his upper right.

"Whoa!" he yelled. He fired, and a single blast from his beam rifle destroyed the enemy machine. At the same instant he spotted over a dozen Jiko attack ships plunging forth in tight formation from behind the shelter of another satellite missile. He fired two blasts from his hyperbazooka and hit the two lead ships on either side; miraculously, the ensuing explosions took out several other ships in the formation. The other Jikos slipped away to the rear, and he knew he wouldn't have to worry about them anymore. They were moving into a zone where battles were raging, but their likelihood of survival there was far greater than it would be against the Gundam. "See you later," he yelled after them.

The satellite missiles from *Abowaku* were now providing both interference and cover for all combatants in the area. Several Zaks approached from behind one, but Amuro drove them toward Kai and Hayato. At the same time, he was careful to keep his attention focused on the "presence" approaching from his right. But then a *Musai*-class ship on his left suddenly turned toward him and fired a volley of beam blasts at him with astonishing accuracy. He was moving through space at maximum combat speed, and because of the magnetic coating on the Gundam's mechanical system, he had over twice the agility of a Zak. Nonetheless, the beams kept getting closer and closer. It was extremely difficult to knock out a ship with a single shot unless it turned its prow directly toward him, so he aimed his rifle at its main engine. With all the blasts from its cannons, the ship was enveloped in light and hard to see clearly. But he knew what he had to do and fired.

With a *WHOMP* the *Musai* exploded like a giant incendiary flare. The light spread throughout the combat zone, illuminating the nearby enemy Suits and smaller ships. And in the few seconds before the glow faded, Kai and Hayato were able to pinpoint most of the Suits and destroy them.

In a superbly coordinated performance, the Gundam and the two Gun Cannons had virtually eliminated any effective resistance in their immediate area.

On Krishia Zavi's warship, the *Swamel*, the communications officer received a transmission from the Archduchy: "*System now in operation! Thirty seconds till firing. Line of elevation, ZZ-32XX22, Geldorf axis!*"

The operator on the *Swamel* bridge yelled, "*Abowaku*, field NE! 323,664! Distance, fifty kilometers!"

"Think we can clear the area in time?" Krishia asked. From the perspective of the *Swamel's* bridge, *Abowaku* was fifty kilometers starboard to the stern.

The captain of the *Swamel* looked up anxiously at Krishia. "All ships in the area have received the transmission," he said, "but there's such a high concentration of Minovski particles in the area that radio is largely unintelligible. I don't know how many of the laser communications have gotten through."

Krishia was nervous but convinced that Gren would not use the first blast on her. When the war was over, if he was impeached and investigated because of the System project, he would need some sort of justification for what he was doing. He would need to establish that he had intended to use the laser cannon to destroy the Federation fleets and support *Abowaku*. The first blast would serve as his alibi.

In the Operations room of the Archduchy Unified Command General Headquarters in Zum

City, Gren Zavi sat down in the spacious leather reclining chair reserved for the commanding officer. It was his job to push the button to activate what had now been dubbed the Solar Ray laser cannon. And he took his job seriously. It was, in a sense, the final weapon.

"Output twenty-eight percent. Approaching thirty-five percent. Start countdown."

"Ten, nine, eight..."

A giant display in the center of the room showed a full view of the *Mahar* colony. Over a dozen monitors to the right showed the operations room of the battleship *Guild*, from which the entire *Mahar* cylinder was controlled. On one of the screens the strained face of Admiral Chapman Jirom appeared, looking in Gren's direction. Gren acknowledged him with a nod while noting what a cowardly expression he wore. He had clearly overestimated the man's mettle and would have to reconsider whatever assignments he entrusted to him in the future.

"Zero!" the operator yelled, a little late. Gren pushed the special ignition button in front of him.

WHOOSH.

Gren reflexively shielded his eyes with his hands and yelled, "This is what we get at thirty-five percent? Is the colony cylinder going to hold up?" Despite an automatic exposure control filter, the main display had turned sheer white, and as he stared at it, his first concern was that the cannon might not last long enough to be used in the next step of his plan. Then, as the screen gradually returned to a more normal exposure, the men in the operations room saw the unimaginable. One end of an entire sealed-cylinder colony had opened and spit a laser beam six kilometers in diameter into space, creating residual flashes and sparks that illuminated the entire area. The beam was at less than half the output for which the system was designed. But never before in history, Gren suspected, had man generated one so powerful.

It took only a fraction of a second for the Solar Ray beam to reach the Earth Federation armada, but Amuro Rey detected it before it struck. The force that had been bearing directly down on him earlier was suddenly overwhelmed by an immense pressure from his right. He turned his head and in the same instant saw a beam of light split the heavens. Immediately, he knew something horrible had happened. In space, even in heavily contaminated areas, laser beams were usually invisible unless they reflected off debris and dust. But he had seen the beam.

Immediately, enormous balls of light began to mushroom behind him as Federation ships in the beam's path exploded. First he counted twelve flashes, then more and more . . . eighteen, twenty, twenty-three . . . Could twenty-three ships really have been destroyed? He was unable to confirm their size, but judging by the magnitude of the explosions, he knew most were at least cruiser-class.

Then, as the light slowly dissipated, he sensed another, different force pushing at him from behind. It had the same oppressive quality he had experienced once before in his encounter with Dozzle Zavi, but it was a compound, overlapping, merging cluster of forces. It was like an enormous howl from thousands of souls on the cusp of death that welled outward, disturbing the basic elements of the universe.

He gasped in awe. He felt he was directly witnessing a physical manifestation of pure hate so intense that it could shake the heavens. He began to tremble, and then, to his astonishment, he felt, or heard, an enormous reverberation. It was a force that was not physically supposed to exist. It came out of nothing, and it resonated through a vacuum. It was like a roar of a giant tremor. Even the Gundam fuselage seemed to shake.

Where is it?! Where is it? He opened his mouth to scream and, the moment he did so, lost sight of the presence he had locked on to earlier. But he was still unable to lose the sensation that had built up in both his ears and his cerebrum. It permeated every pore in his body and threatened to tear him apart. In a futile attempt to ignore it, all he could do was scream over and over again. *"Where is it? Where is it?!"*

Over his headphones he heard Hayato calling, *"Amuro! Amuro! What happened?"* but he could not answer. Kai followed immediately, barely audible with all the static in the area, yelling, *"Hayato! Can you read me? This is Kai! Where's Amuro!? I... I can't see him!"* Both men were disturbed and were experiencing the same reaction he was, but their voices helped

him get a grip on himself.

He had to notify them of his position. The three of them needed to stay together, stay in tune with each other, if only to help detect approaching threats. He knew turning on his 360-degree FOF—Friend or Foe—laser ID sensors in a combat zone could cost him his life. Hoping the enemy was not watching, he hit the switch for a second.

It worked. Both Kai and Hayato were now seasoned combat veterans, and the instant they detected his FOF signal, they moved to assume their normal formation on either side of him. With the shorter distance separating them, radio communications suddenly became dramatically clearer.

"The flashes came from the area where the main Federation Force's supposed to be!" Hayato yelled. *"What the hell happened?"*

"I think it was some sort of laser attack," Amuro said. "I'm not sure, but it seemed like it came from the direction of the Archduchy! I could almost see it!" He was only guessing. He had no idea what had really happened. But the sensation that had made his flesh crawl a moment earlier was slowly starting to dissipate.

"Amuro!" Kai yelled. *"It felt like a cold blast right through my body! What was it?"*

"How the hell should I know?" Amuro retorted. "Concentrate on what the enemy's doing now, not on what happened! They're starting to swarm around here!"

He was not kidding. Suddenly, more and more rocket flares were visible, indicating more ships and Suits launching into the darkness out of *Abowaku*. And judging by their coordinated movements, none of the Zeon pilots seemed affected by the incredible force Amuro and his comrades had just experienced.

Kai was frantic. *"Dammit! What the hell's going on?"*

"Maybe you felt it 'cuz you're a New Type, Kai,"

Amuro said, sardonically. "But don't let it go to your head!"

"Amuro! I'm serious!" Kai was shocked by his comrade's tone, but he intuitively knew what he meant. And he also suspected that Amuro, in his ability to sense what was really happening, was evolving far beyond either himself or Hayato. *"I wish I'd seen the look on your face when you said that,"* he added, trying to put up a good front.

"I'm not joking, Kai," Amuro added. "Once you let your abilities go to your head, it's like filtering reality—and the filter gets in the way. For most people it's better to not be aware of the kind of force we just felt." His tone was half-scolding now, but then he suddenly interrupted his speech and turned the Gundam's head to the side. A formation of Gattle fighter-bombers was bearing down on them. "Here they come!" he yelled as he aligned the sights on his beam rifle.

"Sir! Vice Admiral Karel's entire fleet has been wiped out," a staff officer announced to an ashen-faced General Revil, seated at his desk in the rear of the *Drog's* joint operations center. "We suspect a sneak attack with some sort of giant laser weapon, sir. Over forty craft suddenly vanished. We've contacted only two surviving *Coral*-class ships, and they're linking up with us now. We're still conducting an investigation, but there appears to be a strong possibility that the attack originated from the Zeon Archduchy itself."

"Check what's happening with the *Mahar* colony immediately!" Revil ordered. His white-gloved hands kept trembling even though he had clasped them together. He moved them out of sight under his desk and tried desperately to maintain an aura of control.

My God! he thought, staring at the top of his desk.

What if we lose the war? I suppose Gren would spare the average citizen. And if he got rid of the Jaburo bureaucrats, it'd be no big loss, I suppose. But what if all mankind had to grovel before the maniac for eternity?

Then the same officer spoke again, and Revil heard the words. "But there's some good news, sir. I'm pleased to report that some of our units, centered around the 127th Autonomous, have reached the first combat line around *Abowaku*."

Revil finally raised his face up and tried to sweep his earlier defeatist notions out of his mind. *As long as those kids are still fighting,* he thought, *I've got to be here for them.* He stood

up and, on a holographic operations map indicated the course they should take with a light pen.

"Our surviving fleets," he announced, after regaining his composure, "will try to breach *Abowaku* defenses after the 127th has created an opening for us. We can assume the Archduchy has finally fired the secret weapon we've been hearing rumors of—what they code named the System. It must require enormous power, so I can't imagine they'll fire it again right away, especially if we use *Abowaku* as a shield. I want an all-out attack on the fortress immediately!"

Revil knew that if, as he suspected, Zeon had actually activated a colony-scale laser cannon, it would be futile to try to flee. They would probably be destroyed by another blast even before any Zeon pursuers caught up with them. On the other hand, although the cannon was powerful, it was indiscriminate. During the last blast, several Zeon ships in the wrong area at the wrong time had certainly been vaporized. It would therefore be impractical for the Zeon military to target an area where too many of its own craft were currently engaged with the enemy. The risk of destroying its own ships would be too great.

Why, Revil wondered, hadn't Zeon fired its cannon *before* the Federation Forces reached the *Abowaku* area? It was a mystery to him, and the only explanation he could think of was that the device had malfunctioned. *That's what always happens with new technology*, he thought. *Preparations probably took longer than planned.*

The odds in the battle had clearly shifted in Zeon's favor. And now, because of the laser cannon, there could be no retreat. There was only one thing to do, he concluded, and that was to stake everything on a final assault on *Abowaku* and hope to occupy it. The prospects for success were bleak, but there was one ray of hope, and that was the 127th. It had advanced faster and farther than he had thought possible.

It's time, he thought. *It's time to stake everything on the Pegasus II and its young crew.*

Lt. Sharia Bull had known the laser cannon was about to fire. But when Vice Admiral Karel's fleet was vaporized, he had nonetheless experienced a sensation as terrifying as that felt by Amuro Rey.

His Braw Bro had far more powerful engines than either a Rik Dom or a Zak, so when he detected the presence of the Gundam and two other enemy Suits in the combat zone, he quickly moved out in front of Sha Aznable.

Sha made no attempt to stop him. He knew Sharia was not hurrying simply because he wanted to get to engage the enemy. He knew Sharia was operating on another level and following something that he—Sha— could not detect. He also knew instinctively that the time had come for him to support Sharia in combat, rather than the other way around. It was time to follow the Braw Bro. He felt connected to Sharia by a thread of consciousness that enabled them to work together as a team. He felt joined by a conviction, a belief in a common goal. They were headed toward a dark force that even he could somehow sense.

Just when Sharia sensed a faint presence ahead of him, and wondered if it might be the young Gundam pilot, the *Mahar* laser cannon fired.

From Sharia's perspective, hell suddenly broke loose. A curdling mass of blackness roared toward him, and he felt his Braw Bro shudder. As with the Federation pilots in the area, there might have been no physical movement of his machine, but the sensation was real. Instinctively, he initiated an evasive maneuver, but the force was greater than anything he had ever experienced before. It swept through his entire being, from his brain to his tailbone, rushing like a wall of black static and threatening to rip his vital organs out of his body. He could scarcely believe he was still alive, for the sensation of living, of awareness of the external world, rode precariously atop a thin layer of skin, which in turn rode atop his flesh and bones, and they were shaking uncontrollably. He burst into sweat, and pools formed around his feet inside his Normal Suit. His psyche rocked with waves of rage and grief.

I hope I come out of this intact, he thought vaguely, as he stared transfixed at the exploding Federation fleet in the darkness. *If I don't start moving, the Gundam'll destroy me. I've got to move! But if I die now, the terror will vanish, and what's wrong with that? That might be*

better! Then there emerged a more sobering thought, that death might not be an escape. If there was an afterlife and his soul survived, it would be permanently scarred. His thoughts were an internal scream of despair and an attempt to dispel his growing fear.

The next instant he returned to his senses and became acutely aware of the sweat-caked underwear clinging to his skin. He did a quick 360-degree scan of the area his Braw Bro was drifting in and decided he was in no immediate danger of being sniped at by the Gundam. But he knew he had to hurry before another blast came from the laser cannon. He had some business to take care of, and its importance transcended everything else. It was not yet time to die.

He checked the area once more and then heard, amid the static generated by Minovski interference, a near scream from his commander.

"Sharia Bull! Hurry!" Sha Aznable yelled from his Rik Dom.

Sharia knew then that Sha, too, had experienced it.

"All crew concentrate on assigned tasks! No wavering now! The enemy's in front of us! Not behind!" Brite, standing erect on the bridge of the *Pegasus II*, scolded Mirai and Saila on either side of him, and when he did so his mike—still switched to shipwide—picked up and broadcast his words throughout the craft.

Immediately following the laser cannon attack, several of the crew had experienced the same force as Amuro, Sharia, and others. Some had been literally thrown out of their seats. Saila Mas had clung to her communications panel for dear life, trembling in sheer terror. Mirai Yashima had managed to hold the ship's helm steady but had nearly vomited on it. Others, such as ship's operators Mark Kran and Oscar Dublin and Brite himself, had felt the force but had not been affected so directly.

Mirai, with spittle flying, yelled back at her skipper.

"That felt like a wind from hell, but it's not the sort of presence a true New Type would generate!" Behind her Normal Suit visor she looked deathly pale, with her eyes starting to roll upward. She looked half-crazed.

"Some didn't feel a thing," Brite shouted, swallowing hard. "They're the ones in real danger now! We don't have a moment to lose. Just keep your eyes on the area we're heading into."

"Oh, my God," Mirai groaned. Brite had been right. A formation of six Gattle fighter-bombers had already slipped through their starboard defenses. She spun the helm, and the ship heaved to port. She knew intuitively that fear was her worst enemy, that it could kill her, and she desperately tried to separate her paranoia from reality. She wished she could wipe off the spittle spattered on her face, but to do so she would have had to remove her helmet. Then she heard a *whomp!*

The officer of the deck screamed on a central monitor. *"We've taken a hit in sector 362! Wait! It looks like a Gattle fighter-bomber crashed into us!"* Following his words, a computer graphics simulation of the damage appeared on screen.

"On the double!" Brite yelled, sounding slightly hysterical. "I want wall film applied immediately! Saila! Double-check the lines to all antiair observation posts!" He knew he had to calm down. His psyche had been rattled by the force earlier, perhaps not as much as Saila and Mirai, but it had nonetheless slammed into his mind and rocked him. He knew the most important thing now was to help the core crew regain their senses and that the best way to do that was to bark orders at them.

"Yessir!" Saila shakily answered in response to his order. Her pupils were still dilated and trembling. She had suddenly become incontinent.

"Sha's on his way!" Brite shouted. "Think of something we can do!" His words seemed to have an effect.

"Yessir!" she replied. "Checking antiair observation posts." She turned to her communications console, suddenly looking very frail.

"Mark!" Brite yelled out to the ship's operator. "Find out what happened behind us! Immediately!"

"Yessir!" Mark replied. "Working on that right now! I know it sounds incredible, but it looks like Vice Admiral Karel's fleet was hit by some sort of laser blast!"

"Saila!" Brite barked. "Open a radio channel for me!"

"Yessir! Channel open!" She switched an all-range radio channel over to the receiver on the captain's seat and out of the corner of her eye saw Brite fiddle with some controls on the front of his Normal Suit. Then she turned to Mirai and asked, "Can you feel it? Is it Sha?"

Looking doll-like in her Normal Suit, Mirai replied, "No . . . not yet."

Saila leaned over and stared out the bridge window at the panorama of open space. In the center, beam blasts from the *Pegasus II*'s main cannons were pulsing toward *Abowaku*, and on either side, beams and regular fire from other ships and the fortress crisscrossed through the blackness, punctuated by explosions. And in the midst of this visual chaos, she sensed an enormous upheaval of the human psyche. Instinctively she knew: *Someone else, not just the men and women of the Karel fleet, will die! Someone else!* But much to her chagrin, she had no idea who it would be.

CHAPTER 22

ABOWAKU

The southern sector of the Earth Federation Forces' frontline space base, *Luna II*, was used to house refugees, almost all of whom had been mobilized to work in support of the military. Fra Bow, Amuro Rey's childhood sweetheart from Side 7, was degreasing the critical parts of over a dozen ele-cars when she suddenly felt a chill surge through her body. It was so strong, and her limbs shook so hard, that she nearly lost her grip on the equipment she was operating.

For a second she wondered if she had contracted a particularly virulent form of the flu, but she quickly decided otherwise; it was too intense. With lips trembling, she turned to Ryum, her aging co-worker on the line, and asked, "Er . . . excuse me, but would you mind taking over for me for a minute?" Ryum took one look, instantly knew something was wrong, and told her to go lie down.

The dozen meters or so from the degreasing machinery to the employee rec room seemed to take forever. Fra's heart began to pound, and she gasped loudly, gulping in the dusty factory air, which only aggravated her burning throat. As if in a dream, she heard someone behind her yell, "*She needs a doctor!*" and only faintly realized it was Ryum. She reached the rec room door, groped for it, opened it, and staggered over to the vid-phone in the corner. *I've got to talk to someone*, she thought as she collapsed on the sofa beside the vid-phone, receiver in hand, shivering and feeling weaker and weaker. "Kats!" she groaned, calling out the name of the eldest of the three young war orphans she cared for.

Later, she would hardly remember if she had even made the call or not, for both her mind and her body seemed to have been temporarily paralyzed. But she did hear the voice of a child with a healthy pair of lungs, calling out to her, saying, "*Hey, Fra! What's going on? Fra! Fra? What happened?*" After what seemed an eternity she mustered up enough strength to respond.

"Kats," she whispered. "I need you to come here. Just be with me for a minute . . . I'm in the factory rec room area . . . Kats . . ."

Out of the vid-phone speaker she faintly heard the young boy's voice calling once more, saying, "*Fra? What's wrong? Fra? I can't see your face ...*" And then, as he apparently turned to his day-care worker, "*Teacher! Something's wrong with my mom!*"

Amuro . . . Amuro, Fra thought, *Why aren't you here with me?* She wondered if she would ever be able to understand everything he and his crewmates were going through. And then she drifted into unconsciousness. *Amuro . . . I'm wearing some lipstick today. For you, Amuro, for you. I've been trying it for you. Funny, huh?* She felt indescribably lonely. And suddenly she desperately missed the warm touch of her young charges with their soft, smooth, alive skin.

* * *

Abowaku. *Eleven o'clock. Down twenty-three degrees. Relative speed, zero.* Amuro knew they were getting close.

"Damn!" he spat, as he pulled the trigger of his hyperbazooka one more time. In a fraction of a second a shell tore into yet another Zak's armor and ripped it apart in the nick of time. The combat was so close in now that he had to disengage immediately or risk being caught in the ensuing blast.

What?!

Suddenly, he heard a high-pitched sound, as if something were calling him. He looked up over his right shoulder and to his astonishment beheld the fiercest looking model of mobile armor he had ever encountered. And he was alone. Kai and Hayato were deployed off to his right and left, but at that very moment their thoughts were not linked, and he knew it would be several seconds before they realized what had happened.

Seen from the front, at a distance of three hundred meters, the Braw Bro had one twin mega-particle cannon atop its fuselage and three underneath. But that, he quickly surmised, was probably deceiving; it might have even more. The machine looked as if it had been there

all along just waiting for him to turn around and notice.

Why didn't I sense it come up on me? he wondered. There was no time to hesitate. He yanked his right-hand lever and put the verniers in the Gundam's legs on maximum thrust. He had to get out of the enemy machine's line of fire as soon as possible. On his monitors he saw the Braw Bro fuselage shudder and take off in pursuit of him. Then he suddenly heard it.

< *AMURO!* >

He had his Normal Suit headphones set to combat range, but with the Minovski interference he could usually hear only static. The voice he heard was clear as a bell and not coming across on radio. And neither Kai nor Hayato appeared to have noticed it. Then he heard it again:

< *Answer if you are Amuro Rey!*>

Sharia Bull detected shock from Amuro and immediately realized he had made a mistake. He had approached the Federation pilot too abruptly in a combat zone where MS pilots had to expect to be attacked from any direction at any time. But it was too late to turn back now. He projected his thoughts toward Amuro in a torrent.

< Fighting here is pointless. We must leave here immediately. We have other work to do. We need your help. We want to enlist your New Type talents in our cause.>

Almost immediately he picked up a sharp, reflexive response, but he overinterpreted its true meaning and mistakenly assumed it was because Amuro was far more advanced as a New Type than either Sha Aznable or Kusko Al. He forgot that people were made up of both a rational and an emotive component, that Amuro might not be in a position to ponder his meaning and might sense only angry garbled thoughts. He simply knew that there was no time to spare; the laser cannon might fire again in ten minutes and take everything in its path with it.

He tried again. <We are both MS pilots, but this war will not be settled by us killing each other! We must bring it to a resolution, and we need your skills to do it. Commander Sha Aznable and I are about to leave this combat area in an attempt to overthrow the Zavi family. We need your help. If we can destroy Gren Zavi, we can end the entire war. All other problems we can deal with later. Amuro Rey! You and your comrades are like us. Follow us out of this area toward the Zeon Archduchy. Follow us before we're all destroyed by the System and the Solar Ray cannon! >

Had Sharia's thoughts arrived as concrete, audible speech, Amuro would no doubt have understood and responded as Sharia hoped. Saila, after all, had told him her brother could be trusted. He and other members of the *Pegasus II* had even discussed something similar to Sharia's proposal among themselves. And General Revil, albeit in a rather oblique way, had given him and the others virtual carte blanche to conduct the war as they saw fit. But to Amuro, Sharia's thoughts were merely alien. Sharia's words were based on Sharia's own logic, which was in turn based on Sharia's personal reality, and when they were compressed into a torrent of pure thought instead of speech, the logical integrity of the statements was lost. To digest another individual's unique reality took time. To convert understanding into action took even more time. To expect it to happen in seconds was akin to expecting the impossible.

The problem was compounded by two factors. First, thousands of Amuro's Earth Federation comrades had just been incinerated by the Zeon Archduchy's attack, and their souls remained unavenged. The emotive component of his personality was thus nearly frozen with terror, blocking and warping his logical thought processes. Second, Amuro was infinitely more advanced than Sharia, and during his encounters with New Types such as Lala Sun and Kusko Al, a discrete part of his mind had been activated, making him hypersensitive. The intense, urgent tone of Sharia's delivery felt like a violent assault on his psyche. The more urgently Sharia tried to communicate, the more he was overwhelmed, the more it felt like mental rape.

Why did Sharia attempt such an untested form of communication? He excelled at intuition and insight and, with Sha Aznable, had occasionally succeeded in communicating his

thoughts. But above all, he was desperate. <I know you're a Federation New Type. We need your help! > he projected again.

Amuro cursed in rage and with computer-like reflexes turned his hyperbazooka toward the Braw Bro and fired twice. With the aid of the new magnetic coating on the Gundam's moving parts, he was able to move faster than ever before, firing again before confirming how his first shot had performed. But somehow the Braw Bro managed to evade his attacks. It slowly dawned on him that his opponent also possessed an extraordinary ability.

The next instant he was caught off guard when a volley of mega-particle beam blasts stabbed forth at him from a point several hundred meters away from the Braw Bro. He fired the jets in the Gundam's backpack and feet and spun his MS to the left. *He hasn't perfected his aim yet*, he thought. *He's still wavering. But where will he fire from next? Could there be another machine around here?*

He intuitively sensed that the mega-particle blasts had been fired by the same person whose thoughts had assaulted him earlier. But because he did not know the mechanism that the Braw Bro employed, he had to assume the possibility of another machine. And then it dawned on him: It was like the Elmeth, with remote units it could control. The only problem was that he could not detect the crisscrossing brain waves that normally would accompany such a system.

What's going on? he wondered.

* * *

The Braw Bro initiated a zigzag evasive action, with Sharia Bull still emitting powerful thought waves in Amuro's direction, trying to establish contact.

< I am Sharia Bull. An ally of Commander Sha Aznable. You must help us. We must not fight each other! >

To protect himself, Sharia kept firing restraining blasts in the gray-colored Suit's direction, but it kept tearing toward him, weaving in and out in an utterly random pattern. And from the powerful psychic waves being discharged, he knew the elusive young pilot inside was highly disturbed. What he did not know was that his thoughts registered on Amuro merely as angry screams and amplified his growing outrage, or that Amuro was desperately trying to understand the mechanism of his Braw Bro from its silhouette.

<Why? Why are you so angry? Calm yourself and listen to me! >

Then Sharia fired two more restraining blasts from the mega-particle guns on his remote right unit and accidentally revealed his secret.

Amuro finally realized why the beams were coming at him from different directions. The machine in front of him was connected by wire to remote auxiliary cannon units. The units, separated from the main fuselage by several hundred meters, were independently aimed but were not emitting psychic energy on their own, as with the Elmeth-Bits system. That was why the psychic force directed at him was focused and was coming only from the main machine. And that was why, he also realized, the system was so dangerous. Unlike the Elmeth-Bits system, these remote units could approach and attack him unnoticed. Amazingly, whoever was piloting the machine was trying to contact him, Amuro, at the same time he was operating the units.

Amuro lashed out at his enemy with a mental scream. < Don't let it go to your head, New Type! >

Sharia was stunned. Had he had too much faith, he wondered, in his ability to communicate with the Gundam? Had he made a colossal mistake? The young enemy New Type was far more sensitive and emotional than he had ever imagined. Bitter and angry at himself, he began to edge away in his Braw Bro. And then it happened.

Hayato noticed the Braw Bro and took off after it in his Gun Cannon in hot pursuit, firing his beam rifle. "Where'd that thing come from?" he yelled. "I never saw anything like it!"

Kai also spotted the new enemy, but he had to take care of an attacking Zak first. He knew his buddy probably couldn't hear him, but he yelled, "Watch out, Hayato! It's a new model of

Mobile Armor!"

Hayato closed in on the Braw Bro, carefully aiming his Suit's twin 28-centimeter shoulder cannons. The Braw Bro appeared to see him and began sighting its four cannons. Then Hayato fired, and the incredible happened. The blast from his guns met head on with a beam from one of the Braw Bro's remote mega-particle cannons, and a huge ball of light erupted between the two machines and swirled into space.

Stunned, Hayato put his Gun Cannon into retreat, but the flames from the exploding unit overtook him, scorching his Suit and blowing it backwards.

Amuro also took evasive action, but knew he had to stay in range of the Braw Bro. Somehow he had to find a weak point in the enemy system. He wanted desperately to warn Kai, Hayato, and his crewmates on the *Pegasus II* about what was really going on. He knew his radio transmitter would not work, but somehow, he thought, if his comrades had New Type potential, they just might understand him. He screamed.

"Watch out! There's a New Type out here!"

Instead of peaceful psychic communion and universal awareness, Amuro's New Type reality had become one of confusion and contradiction, of space combat fatigue. His scream was one of terror. Had he been a soldier in another age, fighting in the trenches on Earth, he might have had a few seconds to ponder the significance of Sharia Bull's actions. And then things might have taken a different course. But he was surrounded by 360 degrees of wide-open space.

"The Red Comet's out there!"

Saila's clear, urgent voice echoed in the headphones of Lt. (jg) Sleggar Row's Normal Suit. But try as hard as he might, he could not see anything in front of him other than the lines of fire he was directing toward *Abowaku*. Nonetheless he yelled at his men manning the laser sensors. "Keep your eyes open!" he barked. "If you see anything moving superfast out there, it's the Red Comet!"

Sometimes Sleggar had to slap his men. Sometimes he even kicked them. But he always made sure the ship's guns kept firing. The monitors above the scopes had a supertelescopic mode to monitor hits scored on the enemy, and although the images were of fuzzy resolution, he knew the guns were reaching their target; what he could not tell was whether they were inflicting any significant damage. The more he thought about it, the more Saila's ability mystified him. He still could not see a trace of the Red Comet.

On the *Pegasus*, Sleggar usually played the obnoxious boor, but he prided himself on his common sense. After the meeting with General Revil, when Saila had revealed her connection to the Daikun family, he had been careful not to broadcast her secret to the rest of the crew. He would have liked to, of course. He did not feel comfortable with the idea of someone with her background not being under surveillance. But he knew that his suspicions also stemmed from a perverse curiosity. Deep down inside, he *believed* she could be trusted.

By nature, Sleggar always empathized with the misfits in any group. No matter what Saila had done in the past, no matter how diffidently she occasionally acted toward him, he knew she could handle just about any situation. If not, she never would have hooked up with someone still as wet behind the ears as Amuro Rey. She was an adult and knew what she was doing. If they got through this battle without being betrayed by her, he fantasized, he might steal her from Amuro and bed her down himself. In a rare moment of serious reflection, he decided she would be worth it. *But if you turn out to be a traitor, Saila, he thought with a chuckle, I'll strip you naked and feed you to the cold black vacuum of space.*

Then, suddenly, Sleggar felt a strange sensation pierce his forehead. *Sha?* He quickly scanned the heavens once more with his scope monitors. Something was still reverberating in his mind, leaving an almost visible trail behind it.

Is this it? he wondered. *Is this what Mirai and Saila have been talking about? The "presence" or "force" they mentioned?* To his astonishment, there, in an area where nothing had been visible before, he saw something flash with a reddish hue.

If he could have, he would have fired the *Pegasus's* main cannons at it, but he knew the light was coming from a combat zone where their own Suits were involved in a *melée* with

the enemy. He felt helpless.

"What's going on with the Gundam?" Brite yelled in Saila's direction.

She was dressed in her Normal Suit, monitoring the communications console, and from her position could not easily tell what was worrying her skipper. "No change, sir," she said. "At least it seems that way." She was carrying out her assigned task to the letter, her voice clear and steady, without betraying the slightest hint of her own feelings.

"Operators!" Brite barked. "What's happening?"

"Both C108 and C109 appear to be doing fine, sir," Ensign Oscar Dublin replied, checking the left and right displays he always monitored from his perch.

Then a near scream suddenly came from Mirai Yashima, startling everyone on the bridge. "Red Comet!" she yelled, staring out the window. "Closing in on us!"

Ensign Mark Kran, the other ship's operator, answered right after her. "Portside! Two Suits! Eleven o'clock, two minutes! Up twenty-seven degrees!"

For a moment the *Pegasus* crew feared their ship was finally about to fall prey to the Red Comet, but Mirai had overreacted. The two Suits approaching were Rik Doms belonging to Lt. (jg) Leroy Gilliam and a fellow pilot.

After weaving through the *Pegasus's* defensive fire, Leroy finally got his first close look at the ship's unique shape. He could understand why Zeon pilots called it a Horse, but it was far more elegant than he had imagined. Compared to the videos that Zeon scouts had brought back in the past, the real ship looked delicate, almost fantastic.

He was an artist by training, and the *Pegasus* aroused mixed feelings in him. He was envious of its beauty and felt enormous respect for the Earth Federation for having adopted such an incongruous design for its New Type unit. Suddenly, the enemy seemed far more creative to him than the Zeon Archduchy. *How can we possibly win against the Federation?* he wondered as he fired a blast from his beam bazooka and immediately initiated evasive maneuvers.

Damn! His blast seemed to have had no effect. The ship was still steady on course. Perhaps he had aimed at the wrong spot. His job was to gain time so Sha Aznable and Sharia Bull could approach the Gundam, and he had interpreted his orders to mean that he should avoid hitting the ship's bridge. The crew of the Horse, after all, might be the very New Types they would want to enlist in their cause. There was no concrete evidence to support this theory, but he wanted to believe it. The ship's defensive fire was so intense, he could not get any closer.

"Jeez! What am I gonna do?" Leroy cried inside his Suit. "If the Commander doesn't decide what *he's* gonna do soon, I'm going to be fried!"

Tailing the Braw Bro in his Rik Dom, Sha Aznable realized his plans were starting to unravel. He began to worry that he had put too much faith in Sharia. The initial contact with the Gundam had not gone well, and Amuro Rey's reaction had been far too intense. Sha had not been prepared for that. He had been stunned himself by the Solar Ray attack, in much the same way Amuro Rey must have been. He, too, had trembled in fear. But he had thought that the attack would have made enlisting the Federation New Types in their cause easier rather than more difficult.

The combat zone where the Braw Bro and the Gun-dam now faced off was interlaced with bands of fire and waves of psychic confusion. *What the hell's going on?* Sha thought with irritation. He jammed his Rik Dom's power levers for maximum thrust, and the flares from the rocket engines in its skirted base suddenly widened dramatically, sending him accelerating toward the Gun-dam so fast that for a moment the four Zaks following him imagined he might enter a sci-fi warp speed. They did not try to keep up but instead deployed themselves in the battle zone to keep hostile Suits and ships from entering the area.

The *Swamel* and three consorts waited on standby alert a dozen kilometers out from

Abowaku. From Krishhia Zavi's perspective on the bridge of the *Swamel*, it looked as if the Earth Federation Forces were going to make a suicidal attack on the space fortress. Warships under Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman's command, she therefore assumed, would converge above the first combat line in the S field, which meant that her unit would be assigned the top of a cone-shaped defensive perimeter.

"Now's our chance," she muttered to herself. "But where's that damned Sha Aznable? It's been over five minutes since the first Solar Ray attack."

A communications officer handed her an envelope and announced, "We've received a communication from the S field command center, Excellency. It's been forwarded from Randolph Weigelman. He's requesting acknowledgment."

Krishhia read the message. She knew the Vice Admiral was still unaware that she had left her command post and boarded the *Swamel*. She turned to her ship's captain and ordered, "Send a squad of five Zaks out in front of the *Swamel*. This ship is to be part of the final defense line and is supposed to move forward another ten kilometers. That's an order from the command center, understand? Take us forward slowly. As slowly as possible!"

She sent a reply to Randolph indicating she understood his communication but sent it via the S field command post to make sure he would think she was still there. Then she performed an urgent check on the progress of the 300th, Sha Aznable's unit. *I wish I knew what my damn brother's plotting now*, she thought. She still had no concrete proof Gren was planning to hit *Abowaku* next time.

Then a young lieutenant from General Staff brought her news of Federation losses. "We have almost certain reports that two Earth Federation divisions were annihilated in the earlier attack, Excellency."

"And what about our losses?"

"Two battleships, seven heavy cruisers, six light cruisers, and an unknown number of other ships missing, Excellency."

If the reports were true, Krishhia knew Revil had lost nearly one-third of his entire armada. But in spite of that, his forces were pursuing their attack with equal if not greater ferocity. With their rear escape route cut off and fearful of being broadsided by another blast, they were probably desperate, and hoping to occupy and use *Abowaku* itself as cover.

"And General Revil?" she asked. "Was he eliminated?"

"We have no confirmation of that yet."

"Any evidence of long-range nuclear weapons being used by the Federation?"

"Not yet, Excellency. We consider it highly unlikely that Revil himself would violate the Treaty of the Antarctic."

Something about the soft tone of the young man's voice angered Krishhia. "We're at war, Lieutenant," she reprimanded him. "We're not playing games. Never assume *anyone* will follow *any* rules!"

"Yes, Excellency," the officer replied, his face reddening. "We simply have no indication any missiles have been intercepted in the mine fields protecting the fatherland." It was a feeble attempt at self-justification.

"And have you personally verified this?" Krishhia yelled. "If not, get out!" Some of the officers from General Staff seemed to have no idea how much Minovski particles, which absorbed radar and radio waves, could distort all information. It was depressing to think how many men like him there were around her.

"Well?" she demanded of the ship's starboard operator. "Any contact with Sha yet?"

"N-not yet, Excellency," came a nervous reply. He was having a hard time. The area in front of field E was now bathed in dazzling light from a full moon and the explosions of combat, which made using a telescopic lens to search for the enemy extremely difficult. This was one time Krishhia wished for a layer of air, which, by blurring far-off objects, would at least provide a better sense of distance.

Things are going too well for Gren, she thought. Because General Revil's attack was advancing too fast, Gren could use the second Solar Ray blast to "aid" *Abowaku*. If it so much as creased the space fortress, there would be huge Archduchy losses and Krishhia and her forces would probably be destroyed, but Gren could claim it had been necessary to "save" the

fortress. Revil was handing Gren a golden opportunity to execute his diabolical plot without having to incur an iota of guilt.

"Damn you, Revil!" Krishia cursed under her breath. "Disperse your forces, or you're digging your own grave, and mine, too!" She turned to the ship's operator again, shook her fist, and screamed, "Where's Commander Sha?"

"Wide-range attack," described the Braw Bro when it deployed its four wire-guided cannon units the maximum distance and then struck the enemy. Lt. Sharia Bull had already lost one of the lower cannon to the Gundam, but he still had three left. Only a few seconds earlier he had appealed to Amuro to flee the area and help him in the campaign to destroy Gren. But now his mind was filled with murderous thoughts. Instead of restraining blasts, he was desperately trying to destroy the enemy Suit.

Ironically, Sharia's change of mind helped shock Amuro out of his confusion and helped him suddenly concentrate on the reality of combat. He saw an apparition-like cloud ooze out of the enemy machine, just as he had from Dozzle Zavi's Vig Zam. It was not as dark, but he knew it was a manifestation of the pilot's combative mind-set.

"You bastard!" he screamed inside his cockpit. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Trying to kill me with black magic?" In spite of the deliberate randomness of the enemy machine's movements, he had already deduced a pattern in them and realized how the wide-range attack system worked.

Sharia Bull was momentarily distracted. Two enemy Suits—Gun Cannons—suddenly assumed positions above and below the Gundam. Then one swept up at him from below with its shoulder guns blazing, while the other attacked from above. Had the three enemy pilots been of ordinary ability, he could have destroyed them easily with his remaining independent wire-guided cannons. But these were New types.

Amuro's nervous system went into action. And because he was a New Type, he was capable of moving with blinding speed. Taking immediate advantage of the confusion he sensed in the Zeon pilot, he instantly drew a bead with his beam rifle and fired. A narrow beam of light zapped out of the rifle barrel and seared a gaping hole in the enemy machine's cockpit.

In the instant before he was vaporized by the full force of billions of searing megaparticles, Sharia Bull's last thought was pure shock, and a belief that he had been shot by a mentally deranged New Type. Then the Braw Bro's main engines blew, and the entire machine flowered into a ball of light.

Kai screamed, "*Sha!*" but neither his words nor the thought behind them reached Amuro.

The instant Amuro's shot hit the Braw Bro, his nervous system virtually shut down. In the frenzy of combat, his hypersensitive nervous system had temporarily overloaded, blocking his comprehension of Sharia's thoughts. But now, in a delayed reaction, he had finally realized what Sharia had been trying to do and had been seized with profound self-loathing. True, he had been stunned by the Solar Ray attack just before encountering the Braw Bro, but he had been grossly mistaken in thinking Sharia's attempt at communication was an attack, and in then destroying him.

My God! What have I done?

Memories of Lala Sun and Kusko Al immediately returned. Perhaps it had all been an illusion, a hallucination, but he truly believed they had shown him a vision beyond time, encompassing both the past and the future. If he were truly worthy of them, and if he understood what their lives had meant, then he surely should have been able to understand what Sharia Bull, risking his very life and soul, had tried to convey to him in their brief encounter. It seemed he had learned nothing.

Slowly, the significance of what had happened began to sink home. *And he said we had to*

get out of here. Amuro sank into a deep, paralyzing despair. The Gun-dam continued traveling on inertia in a straight line through space.

Sha Aznable was stunned. "*Damn it, Sharia!*" he screamed in grief. "*It was too soon!*" The unthinkable had happened, and Sharia had been destroyed because of his haste. But was their plan destroyed, too? Could they still not ensnare the Gundam's pilot? The enemy Mobile Suit looked as though it had been mortally damaged in the showdown with the Braw Bro. It was drifting seemingly frozen, and the pilot, from all appearances, was unconscious. For a second Sha was torn by confusion. Should he abandon his idea and merely follow Krishna out of the area? If they left such a powerful Suit alone, he worried, it would surely come after them and destroy them.

In the seconds while Sha wavered, he gave his enemies an opening. With a *wham*, a shell from a red Gun Cannon exploded next to his Rik Dom. Then another. And another. His Suit shuddered and miraculously survived, yet he felt a sound like that of a howl of wind go through his mind and knew it was not a hallucination; he knew it came from the Gun Cannon pilot. He maneuvered his Suit to cross in front of the enemy, and then spotted yet another Gun Cannon closing in on him with breathtaking speed. Instinctively, he knew its rifle was sighted directly on his chest. In a flash he twisted away, turned back, aimed his beam bazooka, and fired before the Gun Cannon pilot could adjust.

Sha's bazooka belched fire. A light suddenly illuminated Hayato Kobayashi's Gun Cannon. It turned white hot, melted, and dissolved in a ball of light that spread out in the black sky in huge rings.

Amuro Rey suddenly woke from his semiconscious state. A terrible scream pierced his mind, and he instantly knew it was Hayato's death cry. He gritted his teeth and felt his friend's death as if it were his own. But the shock focused his mind again on the battlefield before him. As the light from Hayato's exploding Gun Cannon swirled into the vacuum of space, expanding farther and farther, he knew what he had to do.

He screamed in rage, stomped on the accelerator pedals, jammed the left and right control levers forward, and leapt over the explosion. In his earphones he could hear Kai weeping. When he checked, he realized the surviving Gun Cannon was only fifty meters away, below and to his left, but positioned so that the light would blind him to an enemy approach.

"Kai!" Amuro yelled. "The Red Comet's on the other side of the explosion! But he's not the enemy! He's on our side! We've got to help him!"

"*What?*" Kai screamed. "*But he just killed Hayato!*"

Ignoring Kai, Amuro turned his Gundam around toward the *Pegasus II* in the distance and plunged toward it. He activated his front laser-sensors and temporarily locked his course. He knew if the Gundam wavered at all they would never be able to read the message he was about to send.

"G3 to *Pegasus III*!. This is the Gundam! The Red Comet is trying to enlist our help! This area has been targeted for the next laser attack by Gren Zavi! Leave here immediately. Follow Sha Aznable!" And then it happened.

After evading the Gun Cannon's explosion, Sha again sighted the Gundam and by its movement realized the pilot had suddenly revived. But so did two other Rik Doms in his unit. Lt. (jg) Leroy Gilliam and his partner, in charge of maintaining diversionary fire against the *Pegasus*, had spotted the Gundam's laser-sensor signals and targeted their source. As Sha watched in horror, they fired their beam bazookas and scored direct hits on the Gundam.

"*Leroy!*" Sha screamed.

The Gundam fuselage straightened and then, like hundreds of other Suits and ships he had seen before, exploded in a ball of light. But at the same moment, an enormous dark cloud permeated his mind. "The Gun-dam finally realized what we're trying to do, Leroy!" he screamed, but Leroy, of course, never heard him. Sha was left to curse his own carelessness. He had put too much faith in Sharia Bull's ability and too much trust in the young Leroy. He was supposed to be a commander, a leader of men, and now he felt like an utter idiot. His

curses echoed in his cockpit as he fell into a paroxysm of self-loathing.

Suddenly, in the midst of Sha's mental chaos and confusion, an alien thought appeared.
Amuro?!

It lasted only a second, but he instinctively knew it had come from the Gundam pilot. And in the same instant, another awareness welled up in him, churning through old memories, echoing over and over again deep in his soul.

Lala?

Incredibly, he felt as though he had entered another dimension of communication. He could "hear" her.

<Commander, I'm so happy to be with you again. I'm grateful to Amuro Rey, because this never would have been possible without him. But most of all, I'm grateful to you. You made the connection, you helped me realize my true potential, to realize how far human awareness can expand. >

Then Sha "heard" the Gundam pilot again.

<I know I was naive, Sha. Sha Aznable. Or should I say Caspar Daikun? I'm the one who hung around your sister. The one who killed Lala Sun and Kusko AI. The one who was unable to figure out what you were trying to do and screwed up your plans as a result. What can I say? I'm sorry. >

Next Sha felt the presence of someone else and, to his astonishment, realized it was Kusko AI. Somehow, Amuro Rey, Lala Sun, and Kusko AI were all alive, and distinct entities in his consciousness. Their presence assaulted his brain like a giant flare.

< You were always acute, Commander, because you always tried so hard. You tried so hard to be in control, to be mature, to be a schemer. Compared to you, Amuro was too well behaved. Oh, he was *too* good. Ha ha ha. >

Sha's experience was real, unique, and transcendent. But as he knew, it was not a result of his own expanded consciousness. Rather, it resulted from the intensity of the psychic waves that Amuro Rey himself had emitted. Amuro's stored psychic potential had literally exploded.

In the midst of this shower of psychic waves, Sha was still able to question his own actions objectively. He was enraged by his own weakness and his failure to have helped Lala, Kusko, or Amuro. To his shock, Amuro's consciousness continued communicating, with Lala Sun and Kusko AI interjecting comments.

<Ah, I can see why you'd feel that way, Sha. After all, at one point you wanted to kill me even if it meant betraying your own sister. Frankly, I was always frustrated myself. I felt like I was light-years away from Lala Sun or Kusko AI in terms of my development. And I killed them both. >

<They called him wet behind the ears, Commander. >

< That's right, Commander. He was just a kid. I should teach him the words to "London Bridge." >

<So anyway, Sha Aznable. My advice to you is to work for a world where people don't die pathetic deaths like I did. For starters, for the sake of all mankind, someone has to get rid of Gren Zavi. I know you can do it. If anyone can, you can. >

Sha was overwhelmed. "Amuro Rey! You're already dead!" he exclaimed. "What gives you the right to say anything? If you're so enlightened, why were you so afraid of what Sharia was trying to tell you? Why'd you let yourself be killed by someone as green as Leroy?" Then, in a moment of pure perversity, he yelled, "You may be in some sort of spiritual Nirvana, Amuro Rey, but now you'll never get either Lala Sun or Kusko AI!" It was his ultimate insult, and he regretted it the moment he said it. Amuro never had time to answer, for his consciousness had already diffused into the cosmos.

Lt. (jg) Leroy Gilliam was also contacted.

Psychic waves flowed into his cerebrum, mixed with fleeting, undefined images of two women. The thoughts never formed a solid, logical continuum. As with Amuro when he had

first encountered Lala Sun, Leroy Gilliam's mind was overwhelmed by the utter newness of the experience.

"Is this the Gundam pilot?" he said out loud, sensing Amuro's presence.

< Laugh if you want, Lieutenant. It is. Don't ever forget, you're like me. You're young. And you make mistakes. But there's no room for error in this game. So be careful. Sometimes, even when the combat's intense, you have to be aware of what's going on outside yourself. Don't be rash. Don't be too self-absorbed. Don't make the same mistakes I made. >

For some reason, Leroy was later left with a single, burning impression that he knew had come directly from Amuro. Later, after everything blurred, he would think, *Sha's a New Type*.

As Kai Shiden watched, Amuro's Suit was enveloped in an explosion even bigger than the one that had swallowed Hayato. He raged and wept. But the same psychic resonance that had affected both Sha Aznable and Leroy Gilliam seeped into his consciousness, too. And it left an even more clearly defined impression. In his mind, Amuro spoke clearly.

< Hayato was killed, but now you've got to help Sha Aznable, Kai. You've got to look beyond the immediate tragedy or everyone will die. Gren Zavi's the real enemy! Then, after Gren, Jaburo! >

"Damn you, Amuro!" Kai sobbed bitterly. "Why'd you go off and get killed? And leave us? 'Cuz you didn't have an amulet, that's why. Why should I listen to you now?" He knew he could not possibly carry out Amuro's wishes alone. He continued raging, but he knew that the things Amuro and the other MS pilots had speculated about were more than a dream. They were gradually coming true. The world they knew *was* changing. Amuro's exploding consciousness had affected everyone in the immediate area with New Type potential, subtly creating a common thread of awareness even among sworn enemies. Intuitively, Kai knew that he was now linked by a new consciousness with Sha. The universe, which for the last few seconds seemed to have frozen, was about to change. With bloodshot eyes, he scanned the space in front of him.

In the *Pegasus II*'s main gun turret, Lt. (jg) Sleggar Row suddenly tapped the headset built into his Normal Suit helmet. A voice, or a thought, had suddenly slipped into his consciousness.

<The Red Comet is different from the others, Sleggar! You have to follow him now! If you stay here, you're all finished. You must escape from this area. Turn your guns on the true enemy. >

Sleggar turned around and exclaimed to his men, "Somebody say this area's dangerous?" When no one replied, he checked the space in front of the ship and to his astonishment saw a huge ring of light spreading through the blackness. Immediately, he knew. It was Amuro.

So that, a speechless Sleggar realized, *was a true New Type*.

* * *

Mirai Yashima was manning the helm as usual when she heard the voice.

< Mirai! Sha Aznable's not who you think he is. He's got a plan to end the war. Mirai! Follow him out of this area immediately. Understand? Gren Zavi's next laser attack is intended to take the entire *Abowaku* space fortress with it. You must escape. Go with Sha, Mirai. He's right. Concentrate on destroying Gren Zavi. Then Jaburo. That will end the war. New Types have to work together! >

"Amuro!" Mirai screamed. "Amuro!"

"Was that Amuro?" Brite said, staring in shock at the light in the sky.

As if in answer, Saila reported over the communications system in a muffled voice, "It was a direct hit." Amuro's consciousness had already pierced her mind like a storm, and to her embarrassment, she had again lost control of her bladder.

<Have more confidence in yourself, Saila. You always pretend to be strong, but you still depend psychologically on your brother. That's not the real you, Saila. You've made it this far on your own. Without Caspar. Caspar is now Sha. You're Saila. You're an adult. You even

initiated me into adulthood, Saila. >

Saila detected sadness in his message. She felt her body and mind relax. If only it were possible to erase the pain the physical body remembered.

< Saila! I don't want to die alone. I want you! If only I could feel your warmth again. If only you could love me again. Forever. I wish I could take you with me ... I don't want to go alone. I don't want to die alone. Saila! Saila! Saila . . . >

Not all of Amuro's last thoughts were dedicated to Saila. There was one other person he had to communicate with, and she knew it and tried to accept it.

<It's . . . it's not like you think, Saila. >

Fra Bow lay semiconscious in a ten-bed ward of the *Luna II* military hospital. The night lamp beside her illuminated her trembling form, curled up under her blankets. Suddenly she saw Amuro, standing next to her.

<Fra. Did the fever go away?>

<Yes, Amuro, it did. You look so tired. What happened? What are you doing here? The war's not over yet, is it?>

<No, Fra. I'm here to tell you I won't be able to see you again. >

<Why? Why now? I thought you'd forgotten about me, Amuro. >

<I never forgot you, Fra. Really. I never did. >

When Fra raised her head from her bed and looked at Amuro, his pilot suit seemed to be glowing gently. He looked almost translucent but real.

<How are the kids? It's awful quiet around here without them. >

< Forget about them, Amuro, they're fine. You don't have much time, right? You're going away forever, and we'll never meet again, right? Just tell me about yourself. >

< There's nothing to say, really. I just came 'cause I wanted to see you. I was worried. And I hoped you were all right. I'm glad your fever finally went down. >

< Amuro. >

Fra held out both arms as if to welcome Amuro, and he bent over and hugged her. She could feel his weight and his warmth throughout her body. It was the first time, she realized, she had ever embraced him like this. Amuro was with her! Amuro was in her heart!

<I'll never let you go, Amuro. Never! You're mine, Amuro! >

And then she heard words that wrenched her soul:

<I'm sorry, Fra. But I'm already dead. >

<No! No! You can't be! > Fra nearly screamed. Her arms, clinging to thin air, suddenly collapsed on her chest. < Please, Amuro. Don't go! What'll I do? Please don't go! >

Fra was communicating with neither thoughts nor words. Amuro's last message swept over her numbed psyche. < Don't worry, Fra. You'll be all right. Those little kids'll keep you busy. They're a gift from God. >

Fra Bow finally lost control. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she burst into sobs.

There were other things Amuro tried to convey. He tried to explain the first leap in consciousness he had experienced in his encounter with Lala Sun. He tried to demonstrate how one individual's consciousness could fuse with that of another, how in the process his consciousness had nearly exploded. His message did not register on everyone, for his thousands of thoughts transpired in an instant, and to separate them into discrete ideas required the ability to interpret vast quantities of information simultaneously—in short, the ability of a potential New Type. Without that ability, Amuro's explosion of ideas was merely perceived as thought garbled beyond recognition, like the farewell cry of the thousands of individuals incinerated by the earlier Solar Ray attack, whose collective thoughts had been felt as a solid wave of terror.

But there *were* potential New Types in the area. And they picked up the information relevant to them and sensed the living consciousness of Lala Sun and Kusko AI that existed in Amuro's mind.

On the *Pegasus II*, Brite Noa switched the bridge phone to shipwide and commanded, "We

shall henceforth evacuate the area and proceed directly to the heartland of the Zeon Archduchy. All forces are ordered to be on the alert for attacks from *Abowaku* but to refrain from firing on the red-skirted MS and the Zaks accompanying us. Full speed ahead!"

Mirai, hands on the helm, energetically replied "Yes-sir!" in acknowledgment. She now trusted her skipper implicitly; he had made precisely the same decision she would have made.

"Saila!" Brite ordered. "Open a communications channel for Sha Aznable. And let General Revil know immediately why we have to leave the area. He has us under observation from the main armada."

"Yessir," Saila replied, her still trembling hands resting on the switches of the communications console in front of her.

"Hurry!" Brite barked. "We don't have a minute to lose!"

Sha Aznable, out in space in his Rik Dom, lined up his laser-sensor sights on the *Pegasus II* while Leroy and his other men covered for him. When the laser was correctly calibrated, a voice issued from his headphones saying, "*Commander Sha Aznable. This is the Pegasus II. We have decided to leave the area with you. We await your instructions.*" The voice was official-sounding, but he immediately knew it was his sister, Artesia. After a second of stunned silence, he replied with the information she wanted, telling her the best course to take to avoid the next Solar Ray attack. Then he added, "But don't expect all your ships to be able to make it. The Solar Ray is capable of strafing us along the way."

"*We read you, Commander.*" Saila answered.

"And I request that the *Pegasus* follow the *Swamel*."

"*Request is understood,*" Saila replied firmly.

When Sha heard how clear and strong his sister's voice was, he felt somehow reassured. They had been separated for years, but he knew she had developed the strength of character to survive.

Then Sha notified the *Swamel* that he was leaving the combat area and joining it.

In the midst of a raging Armageddon-sized space battle, a warning from a single ship stood a high probability of being overlooked, especially when both radio and laser transmissions were highly unreliable and there was no guarantee of the integrity of the information.

On General Revil's flagship, the *Drog*, a strange, confusing message from the *Pegasus II* was received. It eluded Revil's comprehension, for he lacked enough knowledge to put it into its proper context.

"It says here, sir, 'LEAVE AREA' But I'm not sure what that means, sir. What do you think?"

"I don't know, either," Revil answered. "It's possible they're leaving in order to avoid another attack from the Archduchy's laser cannon, but it's hard to see how retreating or changing course would help us at this point. We have to move to a point where *Abowaku* will provide some cover for us in case another laser attack comes. It's just that we don't know when it will come."

"I don't see how they could try and fire so close to *Abowaku*, sir," said one of his aides. "It'd be a real mess. They'd never dare."

Revil laughed at his staff officer. "You're being too optimistic," he said. "Don't forget there's a man sitting in an easy chair in a room in Zeon with his finger on the button. And all he has to do is move that finger a centimeter, and *wham*, the laser cannon goes off. It'll go off even if he sneezes. And besides, in a life-and-death struggle, he's not going to worry if things get a little messy. If I was in Gren Zavi's position and I thought I had a chance of annihilating most of the Federation Force, heck, I'd push the button even if it would generate a few casualties on my own side. Gren can always shed a tear and mourn the Zeon losses later. He can always claim they were for a greater cause—for total victory."

"I, I see your point, sir."

The specter of death hung over the entire area around *Abowaku*. The *Pegasus II* slipped by the space fortress and began following the *Swamel*. Between Krishia's fleet and the *Pegasus*

He were Sha Aznable and the seven Mobile Suits under his command. The pilots were all silent. All were beginning to understand the true significance of their mission. One, Leroy Gilliam, opened the visor of his pilot suit and wiped tears from his eyes. And he uttered the same words Amuro Rey had uttered before him.

"My God. What have I done?"

CHAPTER 23

ZUM CITY

Zum City derived its name from the late Zeon Zum Daikun's middle name and served as the Zeon Archduchy's capital, its military, political, and administrative center. The port sector of the giant sealed-cylinder colony held the Secret Service branch offices, whose personnel worked hand in hand with the customs and immigration authorities.

Looking out a giant window in his office, Lt. Lambda Ral could clearly see *Mahar* 180 kilometers in the distance. The work shifts on the immigration check were not scheduled to change yet, but he had put a stop to inspections of embarking passengers two hours earlier. He and the dozen men in his command all knew *Mahar* was about to fire, and they watched and waited with bated breath.

"It's time . . ."

Before Lambda Ral finished his sentence, an enormous flare of light burst out of the end of the distant cylinder. The entire colony, six kilometers wide and thirty kilometers long, had been turned into a giant laser cannon, but the flare had come from the residual matter in the cylinder that had incinerated on ignition; the actual laser beam itself was invisible. Nonetheless, despite a five-layer window with built-in filters, Lambda and his men were overwhelmed by the intensity of light.

One of the younger men exclaimed nervously, "If that thing were aimed at the moon, it'd blow it out of the sky!"

"And that's not even at full power," another marveled.

"The Federation attack on *Abowaku's* proceeding too fast," Lambda calmly said. "That's why they had to use it." Then the vid-phone next to him rang, and he grabbed the receiver.

"This is the Communications division of the 58th Battalion on the System project. Admiral Chapman Jirom has a message for you and your men in the S.S. The second blast will take place twenty minutes from now. Until it is over you are ordered to stop any and all ships leaving Zum City."

"Instructions understood," Lambda replied.

The men around him who overheard the interchange suddenly began whispering among themselves.

"That was a test. They say the next blast's for real."

"That means the war's over, right? Twenty minutes from now."

Lambda pressed a button to lower the shutters on the outside wall of windows, turned around, and strolled over to pick up a coffee tube from a machine in the corner of the room. *So this is what the Supreme Commander meant by "settling this thing once and for all,"* he thought. He could understand Gren's mind-set, but at the same time he worried about Claret. He knew the first blast had missed her, but there was a strong possibility the second would not. The real question was how Krishia would interpret and react to whatever information Claret had brought her. *Her life's hanging in the balance,* he concluded, *unless she can get away from the front lines or unless Revil changes his strategy.*

Lambda rarely thought about the fact that Gren Zavi might be suspicious of Claret's activities. He knew it was possible but never lost any sleep over it. And as for himself, ultimately, his integrity and fatalistic attitude formed a veil that even Gren's secretary, Cecilia Eilene, was unable to see through. He was the type of man who served his master loyally no matter what. And it was not a charade. He simply had no idea that the little seed he had planted in Claret's mind might eventually cause Gren's death. Claret Harmine was already working on another, more independent level.

As voices echoed through the Zum City Unified Command Operations room during the technical check, Gren Zavi found he enjoyed watching the tension building on the faces of those around him. Pictures from observation satellites already indicated the test blast had achieved everything he had hoped for. The *Mahar* colony cylinder, in its new role as a laser

oscillator, had performed exactly as designed. Only half the energy supplied by the solar batteries installed in the area around the colony had been used. It would not even be necessary to wait another twenty minutes for the next blast.

Suddenly, a terminal in front of Gren indicated a problem, and several technicians dashed up and gathered before it. "What's this?" he demanded. "Two faulty microcircuits?"

He knew any equipment put in place so rapidly was likely to develop some problems. They were also in an area that was not entirely devoid of Minovski particles, and there was bound to be some interference. But at least the effectiveness of the System had been proved.

The Federation armada was part of Earth's last-ditch effort and if the armada could be annihilated, it would inevitably mean the defeat of the Earth Federation. And if in the process of ending the war, he could also eliminate his sister on *Abowaku*, it would be like bagging two birds with one stone.

Captain Hasebe of the Engineers Corps was standing in front of him with his back turned.

"Well, Captain?" Gren casually asked.

Hasebe spun around and said in a strained voice, "We can do the job at seventy-eight percent of power, Excellency. But the surviving Federation Forces seem to be regrouping slowly, sir. I think it's still too early to fire again."

Gren turned to a General Staff officer standing behind him to his left. "Do you agree?" he asked.

"Yes," the officer replied. "The forces under Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman's command, and also those of Her Excellency Krishnia Zavi, are gradually closing in on the enemy, sir. If we fired the cannon now, the losses to our own forces would be enormous. I suggest that using it right now is out of the question. But I think we might win anyway."

"Don't ever use the word 'might' in front of me, Officer," Gren suddenly threatened.

"Yessir! Beg your pardon, Excellency!" the man nervously apologized.

"You don't think we should just sit back and watch, do you?"

"No, *sir*! Not at all, *sir*!"

"Good," Gren replied calmly. He had just decided to wait another two or three minutes before making his final decision, when one of his aides in the room announced, "Admiral Chapman Jiom's on the hot line, sir."

Hopefully, Gren thought, Chapman was not going to create a problem. The man was starting to grate on his nerves. The console in front of him was reserved for the commanding officer of the operations center, and it had a special box built into it with a secure communications line for confidential conversations. He lifted the lid on the box and took out a bright red receiver, whereupon an image appeared on the display directly above it, showing Chapman standing at attention holding a similar receiver.

"In ten minutes we'll be ready for the second blast, Excellency. We await your decision on timing and the, er, final target." Chapman's voice was low and restrained, as if he were afraid someone would overhear him. Gren wished he were more forthright.

"I've decided to wait a few minutes and see how things develop, Chapman. But there'll be no change in the final target. As soon as we fire up the laser cannon, we'll also start strafing on the Zig line as planned."

"Yes, *sir*!" Chapman answered, saluting.

"We'll say it was an accident. Understand, Chapman? An accident. I'll let you know as soon as I decide."

Gren was trying to be easy on the man but wondered if it was a mistake. Perhaps he should have been more firm. Nothing was going to affect the situation very much at this point. As long as it appeared Revil was going to reach *Abowaku*, then the space fortress would be included in the attack. Even if the Federation armada had been dealt a nearly fatal blow with the first blast and Revil's forces had dispersed or retreated, he would still have planned to carry out the strafing operation. It just would have been a little harder to come up with a plausible excuse to justify it. But now Revil, in his desperation, was making it easier for him.

"Revil's an awfully determined bastard, that's all I can say," he mused aloud.

"It's quite possible, Excellency," an aide replied, "that he was killed in the first firing. It certainly would make sense to assume so."

"What makes you say that?" Gren suddenly demanded. "Any normal fleet admiral would have turned tail and run right after being fired upon by a laser cannon of that magnitude. The Federation armada's plowing ahead precisely *because* Revil's still in command. He's probably trying to reach *Abowaku* to use it as a shield. Don't forget, sometimes in war a bullheaded approach is the key to victory."

"Using *Abowaku* as a shield?" The aide, along with the other staff members in the operations room, had never thought of that possibility. Suddenly he felt new respect for his leader.

But the feeling was not mutual. Gren loathed signs of weakness among his men. He looked up at the giant overhead operations display on which they relied so heavily. It was not radar-based and was only a computer simulation generated from unreliable laser-sensor readings. *Hmph*, he thought. *And they believe in this junk.*

An official-sounding voice echoed from the operations room's speakers: "*Five minutes left until the second firing. Countdown now commencing.*"

"Good," Gren grunted, reaching again for the hot line receiver to contact Chapman and inform him of his decision. Then he heard a shout behind him and turned around.

"The Federation Forces have *what*?" an excited officer was exclaiming.

"What's going on?" Gren demanded.

"There seems to have been a change, Excellency."

"Are you sure?"

"We're double-checking right now, sir."

There had been no change in the operations display. It took time for information from laser-sensors to be analyzed and extrapolated, and physical interference from Minovski particles blocked and distorted much of the data that did arrive.

"Countdown stopped. Countdown on hold. Ignition on standby."

Gren put the hot line receiver back in its box and closed the lid. Then he spun his chair around to better see what was going on in the center of the operations room. On a special holoscope monitor that generated a 3D image with coordinate lines for reference, computer data from a dozen regular terminals throughout the room was being collected and displayed. As he watched, scores of red and green lights, used to differentiate friendly from enemy craft, began to wink on and off.

"It does appear, Excellency," one of the staff officers announced, "that the Federation Forces are detouring to get around to the other side of *Abowaku*. There's an eighty-two percent probability they're using it as a shield."

It was a mystery to Gren how anyone in his right mind could put so much faith in numerical projections. Those who trusted that sophisticated form of speculation, he concluded, were idiots. They lacked, he reminded himself, the very quality he so prided himself on—an acute sensitivity to the complexity of the issues at hand. And that thought helped him make his decision.

"Order all *Abowaku* ships to leave the area above the Geldorf line," he announced. "Restart the Solar Ray countdown. Now!"

Everything was going according to plan. His mind began to turn to ways of wrapping up business after the war was finally concluded. *If I threatened to decelerate Luna II and make it crash on their heads*, he thought, *the idiots underground in Jaburo would probably give up. But maybe that won't even be necessary.*

Gren grabbed the hot line receiver once more, and Chapman's image immediately appeared on the dedicated monitor.

"Chapman here, sir."

"Good, Chapman. We'll proceed as planned." Then, in a low voice, he confirmed the true target. "I want you to strafe from Geldorf all the way to the Zig line of fire. As planned. Repeat. As planned."

On the monitor screen, Chapman's eyes appeared to be closed. "Yessir," he replied softly.

Gren slammed the receiver down and immediately grabbed another. "Give me Lieutenant Lambda Ral of the S.S. immediately," he barked to the communications officer.

"Lieutenant Lambda Ral appearing on screen, sir," the officer announced.

Gren waited a second and then spoke. "Lieutenant. This is your Supreme Commander. I want you to be ready to leave immediately for *Mahar*. Wait in the port area until I give you your next orders."

"Yes, sir!"

Lambda's eager response made Gren feel mild disgust. The man was destined to spend the rest of his life in a pathetic attempt to make amends for the fact that his father, Zinba Ral, had fled the Archduchy with the children of Zeon Zum Daikun.

From the moment the Solar Ray system had reached maximum power for the second blast, the staff officers in the operations room had held their breath in anticipation. They knew the Federation fleet was being targeted, but none of them knew what Gren had just secretly ordered Chapman to do.

"Thirty seconds remaining! Twenty-seven . . . Twenty-five . . . Twenty-three."

To Gren's surprise, the final countdown was performed with the computer-simulated voice of an attractive young woman. Someone—probably Chapman—had apparently decided a female voice would register better on his ears. It was a nice touch, but it irritated him. It made him think that his men were trying too hard to please him, perhaps out of fear. He shut his eyes and contemplated a more serious matter.

"Don't worry, Krishia, he thought. When the Solar Ray cannon hits Abowaku, you won't feel a thing. Even if you're in the most sheltered, protected part of the fortress, the whole process will only take a few seconds. Then you'll rest in peace. The real problem will be what to do with our father, the archduke."

The countdown continued: *"three, two, one ..."* Filters were activated on all monitors in the room linked to *Mahar*. And then the laser cannon fired with a *FWOOSH*. It was clearly a more powerful blast than the first one. A colossal flare of light suddenly appeared around the opening as an invisible laser beam again split the heavens.

The same instant, Chapman, in the *Mahar* control center on the *Guild*, turned the switch to ignite fifty-eight thruster rockets on the "top" side of the colony cylinder.

"Fire jets ninety-eight to one hundred and fifty-six!"

"Number ninety-eight has fired!"

"One hundred through one hundred and ten have fired! One hundred and ten through twenty have fired!"

* * *

In Zum City, in the background on his secure hot line monitor, Gren could hear the personnel in charge of adjusting the *Mahar* firing angle relay their commands throughout the center, linking up the system. Chapman, after his orders had been conveyed, looked ashen. Only a few men in his command were capable of understanding the basic operation of the laser cannon and its retargeting mechanism, and most had no time to question what they were doing. Those who had doubts probably were too tense to vocalize them or so stunned by the magnitude of the giant flare of light that they never even noticed the correction in the firing angle.

The staff in the operations room of the Unified Command at Zum City were the first to detect it, and the cry went up, *"Change in angle! Mahar now switching to Zig line of fire!"*

In the operations room of the *Guild*, the officer in charge of trajectory was the first to protest to Admiral Chapman Jiom. "Firing any jets over number one hundred and forty, sir, will make us deviate from the Geldorf line. We've got to stop immediately!"

"What?" Chapman screamed. "Who gave you permission to fire over one-hundred and forty? You say they've already fired? Stop the procedure instantly! Use reverse thrust and return the cylinder at once to position on the Geldorf line."

It was a masterpiece of acting. In reality it was too late to execute his request, for over ten seconds had already elapsed since he had hit the switch. The giant colony's inertia was far too great to stop suddenly.

The hot line phone in front of Chapman rang.

"Chapman! This is Gren! What's going on? Mahar's angle of fire is skewed! Are you trying to fry Abowaku?"

"We're working on the problem, Excellency! The laser oscillation has ceased. But. . . but . . ." Chapman answered with as loud and panicked a voice as Gren. In reality, he was overjoyed. The deception had worked. He and Gren Zavi were carrying out a little charade that no one else was privy to. He congratulated himself. *The Supreme Commander and I are co-conspirators.*

Gren ordered the hot line phone with Chapman disconnected. He knew the giant laser beam should have incinerated most of the Earth Federation Forces and melted the stem of *Abowaku*. As far as he was concerned, the operation was over. He next contacted Lt. Lambda Ral, about to leave the Zum City port for the *Mahar* area.

"Lambda, this is Gren. I want you to proceed directly to the *Guild*. Someone changed the laser cannon's angle of fire. I want you to find out who's responsible and arrest them. If anyone resists, execute them on the spot. That's an order."

"Sir?"

On the monitor, Lt. Lambda Ral appeared confused, as did the other officers in the operations room who overheard.

"Someone shifted the *Mahar* cylinder so its line of fire included the S sector of *Abowaku*. I'm worried about my sister Krishia. If anything has happened to her, I'm holding Admiral Chapman Jirom personally accountable, even if it was an accident. I want you to deal with him. Do you understand me, Lambda?"

"Yes . . . yes, yessir! Supreme Commander, sir."

Without bothering to watch Lambda salute, Gren turned to his aides and ordered, "I want a survey done on the level of damage to *Abowaku* right away, and the results conveyed to Lieutenant Lambda Ral." He was secretly thrilled. Here he was, impersonating himself in an elaborate charade and doing such an excellent job. "I also want to know how extensive the Federation losses are," he added with just the right tone. "We can't be too careful."

Then Gren sat back in the upholstered chair provided him and thought, *Now I'll just wait and see how well my plan really worked.* For some reason, he suddenly began thinking of Cecilia and her curvaceous form.

Several minutes before the *Mahar* laser cannon fired its second blast, chaos erupted in the operations room on the Federation armada's flagship *Drog*. The *Pegasus II* had paved the way for the Federation vanguard by weakening the bottom of *Abowaku's* defense perimeter, and with a little more effort the lead ships might have been able to smash through and land on the stem of the fortress itself. But now something bizarre was happening. Scouts had detected odd movements in the Archduchy defenders, seemingly unrelated to the Federation attack. And the cryptic communication received from *Pegasus II* was even more puzzling. The graying fleet admirals and staff officers around General Revil argued bitterly over its meaning and whether it meant they should change their strategy.

"The word from the *Pegasus II* is that Gren Zavi's planning to eliminate a few of his own forces, too!"

"That's preposterous! I want to know where that information comes from. I don't care how fanatical Gren Zavi is, I simply refuse to believe he'd destroy his own crack units."

"Is this some sort of New Type intuition? Or are we dealing with fortune-tellers? How can we possibly act on unconfirmed information and give up all we've gained?"

The staff officers debated furiously, knowing the success of the entire campaign depended on their correct interpretation of the situation. They tried to be as rational and objective as possible, but lacking concrete information, they were ultimately reduced to speculating. And since they were staring directly into the maw of death, every minute spent on discussion was a minute squandered.

General Revil finally stood up and raised his hands to silence his agitated officers.

"Gentlemen," he announced. "I've given all your opinions careful consideration. Debates have their time and place, but we've wasted precious minutes, and now we need a decision."

A hush fell over the room, and the men turned toward him.

"I've decided we should immediately abandon our position and proceed in the direction the *Pegasus II* has indicated. Each fleet will continue to fire at the enemy but reverse course and disperse. After we have avoided the next laser cannon blast, we can immediately regroup again. This order is effective immediately, and I want it transmitted to all units. On the double!"

"Sir," the communications officer asked, "is radio transmission acceptable?"

"Anything!" Revil barked angrily. "Just get the message out. Immediately!" He waited until the man made his way through the cluster of staff officers into the communications console and then ordered the *Drog* captain, "Put *Abowaku* between us and the sun and immediately reverse course."

* * *

The *Drog* bridge sprang to life, and the ship's prow started turning around, while the upper and lower deck twin mega-particle cannons maintained a constant barrage on the stem of *Abowaku*. The rest of the armada also began to react as soon as it received its new orders from the flagship. Three *Chibe*-class heavy cruisers came up on the *Drog's* port side, nearly grazing its prow, and joined in an intense barrage. Squadrons of Federation Flying Manta fighters plunged into melees with their Zeon Gattle counterparts in front of the ships. And when a nearby GM Suit was hit, fragments from the explosion rained on the *Drog's* bridge.

What Revil and his staff officers feared most appeared to be coming true. The armada was like a giant with legs of clay, trying to turn on a dime. Disarray was already appearing in the ranks. With its weaknesses exposed and nearly surrounded by the enemy, the armada was attempting a maneuver normally considered madness in space warfare.

With a worried look, Revil glanced at computer-simulated combat status displays on either side of him. "Well?" he asked the officer in charge. "Any sign of Zeon forces breaking through our lines?"

"No, sir. Their rear guard seems to have begun to disperse, sir. I don't know what it means, though."

Suddenly they were interrupted by the communications specialist. "Sir! We've intercepted a communication from Zeon. Apparently an order has gone out for all fleets above the Geldorf line to retreat."

"The Geldorf line? Can you tell what course they're on?"

"No, sir. Sorry, sir."

Revil was puzzled. Why was the Archduchy issuing an order to retreat? And why all fleets? There was no evidence they had done so earlier, before the first laser cannon blast had occurred. There was no way he could have known the order was merely Gren Zavi's sop to his own conscience, a too-late attempt to atone for his diabolical plot.

"It's odd," he muttered.

And then it happened. Thousands of flashes occurred to the rear of both forces, turning the area into chaos, and an enormous ring of light spread out toward the core of the Earth Federation armada.

The final image that registered on General Revil's retina was that of the stem portion of Zeon's *Abowaku* space fortress turning white hot and melting. Then his flesh and blood turned into dust and scattered into a jet-black cosmos.

In the command center atop the giant *Abowaku* fortress, Vice Admiral Randolph Weigelman's last words were a scream:

"My God! Have the men on *Mahar* lost their minds?"

Along with a third of his men, he had survived the initial attack, but after the fortress stem disintegrated, the entire superstructure began to shudder, sending him ricocheting between the floor and ceiling a dozen times, snapping his neck and killing him instantly. Others were

killed in the weightless conditions when ordinary machinery and equipment became deadly projectiles. Then *Abowaku* heaved mightily and exploded, spewing rock and metal fragments into space.

The Earth Federation space armada had been destroyed.

The Zeon Archduchy forces had been crippled, for Gren Zavi had sacrificed many of his best units and people and a strategically vital final defense outpost.

The war, to all appearances, had virtually ended. But reality was not so simple.

Unknown to Gren Zavi, his sister Krishia had survived the attack on *Abowaku* and was making a beeline for the Zeon Archduchy heartland in the *Swamel*, accompanied by two heavy and three light cruisers. At secondary combat distance she was also followed by the *Pegasus II* and a pair of Federation *Salamis*-class cruisers. The shortest route normally took less than two hours, and after seeing what the Solar Ray laser cannon had done to *Abowaku*, Krishia ordered her engineers to wring every ounce of speed possible out of her ship.

On the bridge, one of her aides announced, "There seems to be no doubt, Excellency, that the *S* sector of the fortress was targeted." Like the other officers, he was still incredulous. And, being well aware of his superior's tendency for blind rages, he trembled to think what she might attempt for revenge.

Krishia assembled her crew and addressed them. "I'm asking you to join me on a new and dangerous mission. This is not an order but a request. Those of you who disagree with what I am about to do are free to leave this ship. I will even provide one of the cruisers for your safe passage. You may surrender to the Federation or, when all is over, return to Zeon. All I ask is that you do not interfere with my plans."

The assembled officers and men waited nervously, wondering what she would say next.

"I've decided to use whatever force I have at my disposal to destroy the Supreme Commander of the Archduchy, Gren Zavi. For your information, Commander Sha Aznable has agreed to join me. I await your decision."

Krishia knew that few of her crew would oppose her.

She had, after all, just saved their lives; if not for her, they would have been roasted in the Solar Ray blast. And besides, she had the support of Sha Aznable and the 300th Autonomous. While small in number, they were reputed to be the Archduchy's most powerful unit of all.

After a few moments of deliberation, Captain Forsythe, representing all those assembled on the bridge, stepped up to Krishia. "Excellency," he said, "the vote is unanimous. Some of us have questions, but we've all decided to cast our lot with you."

"Good," she answered. "Just for your information, we also have the Federation Horse and two *Salamis* cruisers following us. They're on our side."

"On our side? You mean they'll help us?"

"That's correct, Forsythe."

Then one of the younger officers blurted out in disbelief: "But. . . but why?!"

"The Earth Federation Space Forces," Krishia explained, "have for all intents and purposes been destroyed. These surviving ships are virtual orphans in the area, and their only real chance for survival is to follow us to Zeon and surrender. When they realized the horror of what Gren Zavi has really done, they decided to join us and try to eliminate him."

"But Excellency," the officer continued, apoplectic in his questioning. "How can you be sure? We still don't know exactly what happened. The damage to *Abowaku* must have been the result of some sort of accident on *Mahar*. How can you unilaterally conclude we must eliminate the Supreme Commander?"

Krishia was suddenly seized by an impulse to scream at the man for his stupidity. "Because I know my own brother. Supreme Commander Gren Zavi deliberately targeted *Abowaku's S* sector in an attempt to kill me. That's why."

"The Supreme Commander tried to kill Your Excellency?" The young man was incredulous as a new reality sank in. He and the other officers in the room had long heard rumors of Zavi family intrigues, and now they at last knew.

"Tell me one other thing, though," he added. "How did the enemy ship—the Horse—know what was going on?"

"I don't know myself," Krishia replied, glancing at Captain Forsythe. "As you all know, Commander Sha Aznable's recent battle report was extremely vague."

She knew it was possible that Sha had been in secret communication with the Federation White Base-class ship all along, but she doubted it. If he had been passing highly detailed information about her plans, she was certain it would have fled the area or turned around and attacked her squadron. She suspected something far more subtle was going on, something beyond her immediate comprehension.

Her suspicions had been reinforced earlier when she had received verification of the Gundam Mobile Suit's destruction. Right around the same time as Sha Aznable's report had stated that it had occurred, she had mysteriously "heard" the words *<Destroy Gren>*. It was almost as if they had suddenly slipped into her mind. At first she had thought they were a figment of her imagination. But then she had remembered the few times she had heard Sha talk about his experiences in battle with New Types. She herself knew little about them and merely assumed they had a slightly more evolved consciousness. But if the pilot of the Gundam were a true New Type and she herself had some of the same potential, then, she realized, she actually might have received some message from him. It was a tiny revelation, but it had swayed her.

"I believe," she continued, "it has something to do with the fact that they're a New Type unit. I think they've joined us because they intuitively know Gren Zavi's an enemy, not just of the Federation, but of all mankind."

"Even after we just destroyed their Gundam MS?" Forsythe asked, still doubting.

"The Gundam pilot wasn't their only New Type," Krishia snapped, irritated. "As far as I can tell, New Types aren't supermen but ordinary people with a unique sensitivity or an expanded awareness. People capable of seeing the totality of things. I'm sure there's more than one New Type aboard that ship, and I'm sure that's why they've decided to join us."

"So now they're our comrades in arms?"

"Hmph. I don't like the sound of 'comrades,' frankly. Think of them as temporary allies. But enough talk. I want all crew members to stay at their posts but to try and rest. When we approach Zum City, we'll probably encounter resistance. We'll assume battle formation as soon as we reach the third combat line."

Krishia ended the session with a final exhortation to her troops, her shrill voice echoing throughout the bridge of the *Swamel*.

On the bridge of the *Pegasus II*, Brite Noa and the core crew members greeted an unusual visitor.

"We bear you no personal grudge, Commander Sha Aznable," Brite said. "If we'd stayed in the area, we would've all been vaporized." It irritated him that he couldn't see the man's eyes clearly behind his protective mask.

"I am relieved to hear that," Sha answered stiffly, "especially from the skipper of such a distinguished warship. It's a profound honor for me to be here, and as you know, it's not a mere accident. Frankly, without Amuro Rey, it never would have been possible. And without you and your crew, Amuro Rey would never have been able to develop his potential to the extent that he did."

Saila continued to man the bridge communications console, but she could see and hear everything going on. Only a few steps away from her, standing with impeccable bearing, was her brother—tall and magnificent, with a warm voice, resplendent in his red Zeon military uniform, with his protective mask and platinum-colored helmet. His personal charisma was already helping to put the *Pegasus* crew at ease. Yet as she watched him discuss strategies with her skipper, she knew he had changed. He was her brother Caspar Daikun, yet he was also Commander Sha Aznable of the Zeon Archduchy military, and the latter persona had by now nearly eclipsed the former. As much as she wanted to get up out of her seat and run to him, she could not. Her brother was a memory, a memory treasured by her own other persona,

Artesia Daikun, which was also fading within her. Amuro had been right. And his words now helped her stay in control, helped her prepare for the inevitable parting she knew she would again experience. *He killed the man I loved*, she thought. As she watched, Kai Shiden extended his hand in greeting to Sha.

"I'm the Gun Cannon pilot, Commander," Kai said, "and I'm sorry, but I'm not the forgiving type. Someday you may have to pay a price."

"I understand. But remember that the situation's changing and that there's a time and place for everything. Right now all I ask is that you don't shoot me in the back until we get through this mess."

Sleggar Row answered for Kai. "It's a deal, Commander. But after it's all over, we may demand, as they say, satisfaction."

"Fine," Sha replied with a smile at Sleggar, Kai, and Brite. "That'll give me something to look forward to. Here's hoping we all survive till then."

Then Mirai stepped forward. "If we're going to be allies," she said, "I've got one favor to ask. There's something that still makes me feel uncomfortable around you."

"Uncomfortable?"

"Yes. That weird mask. Why do you always wear it?"

"This thing?" Sha said, taken aback. "It's sort of a personal statement, you might say. A trademark." Then, without hesitating, he doffed his helmet, handed it to Sleggar, and casually removed the mask. "Sorry to keep wearing it," he said with a shy grin. "It's just hard to break an old habit."

Brite then extended his right hand and said, "Allies, Commander Sha Aznable. Allies."

Sha took his hand and in a soft voice answered, "I want to believe in the communication among people that Amuro believed in."

"Let's work toward it then, Commander."

Sha then spotted Saila and immediately walked over to her. He stopped in front of her and looked straight at her.

Saila stood up. Her brother's arms seemed to be inviting her, ever so subtly. A rush of childhood memories surged through her body, and she embraced him gently.

"Artesia," Sha said. "Can you forgive me?"

"Amuro was young, Caspar, and I loved him."

Sha bent down and looked at her closely, his chin brushing against her blond hair. "That's all I wanted to know," he said. "Because we may never meet again."

"I know," she replied, pulling away from him. She was not crying. She simply felt the Artesia persona within her becoming weaker and weaker. "Just try and stay out of trouble," she said.

Sha chuckled at her subtle humor. "You've grown into quite a woman, sister."

Saila smiled back at him and then noticed the rest of the crew members staring at them with an embarrassed look like spectators at an intimate interchange.

Sha turned and spoke to the assembled crew. "Petty Officer First Class Saila Mas," he said, "or Artesia Daikun, is my sister. She's my only sister, and she will always be my sister." He then bent over, kissed Saila on the cheek, and put his mask back on. And Caspar Lem Daikun once again disappeared behind it.

When Lt. Lambda Ral arrived on the battleship *Guild*, he was accompanied by thirty members of the Zeon Secret Service. He immediately confronted the military men in the operations command center of the System project.

"We have instructions to arrest all those responsible for skewing *Mahar's* angle of fire," he announced. "Everyone here is a suspect."

A chorus of voices rose in protest. "But. . . but we were just following orders!" "You can't arrest us for that!" "The Admiral specifically ordered that thruster jets up to number one hundred and fifty-six be fired!" "I heard him!"

Lambda walked over to Chapman Jirom. "Admiral," he said, "I'm Lieutenant Lambda Ral of the Zeon Archduchy's Secret Service. I regret to inform you that you're under arrest until

given further notice."

"You can't arrest me, Lieutenant," Chapman said, smiling thinly at the tall young man. "We're still carrying out our own investigation into the cause of the accident." He had been prepared for the fact that some eager beavers from the S.S. might arrive after the "accident," but he felt secure in his own position. After all, he thought, he was protected by none other than the Supreme Commander of the Archduchy, Gren Zavi.

Chapman was naive. An aging officer, he had in effect placed himself in a situation where he could be used, and disposed of, at whim. With no powerful connections outside his organizational relationship to Gren Zavi, he had no one to support him in case the relationship soured. Even Lambda Ral was better positioned than Chapman Jiom was.

"Ah, but as I understand it, sir," Lambda continued, "you are the one who issued the order to change the angle of fire. Am I not right?"

"You must be mad."

"Someone gave the order. Are you suggesting, sir, that it was not you but one of your trusted lieutenants?"

Lambda looked around the room at the assembled men. He knew that in command centers surveillance cameras normally recorded everything in triplicate, on videotapes and cards, and he ordered them played back. As he suspected, they contained useless noise. "Hmm," he said. "This appears to be the result of more than simple Minovski interference."

Chapman protested indignantly. "Listen, Lieutenant—Lambda Ral, isn't it?—what makes you think you have the authority to conduct an interrogation of us, anyway?"

"Admiral, sir. I have been directly ordered to do so by His Excellency, Supreme Commander Gren Zavi."

"You what?"

Instinctively, Chapman knew he was doomed. Lt. Lambda Ral had been sent to destroy him. "But, but I was issued the order from above," he sputtered. "My men here are my witnesses. How dare you accuse me!"

Chapman never saw what was coming. Lambda's left hand moved with blinding speed, drawing an old-fashioned automatic pistol from his hip and firing a bullet through the admiral's forehead, spattering his brains out the other side. Lambda slowly put the gun back in its holster. The mood in the command center turned to ice.

"The will of the Supreme Commander has been carried out," he announced to the stunned crowd. "For the time being the *Guild* will be under the direct command of the Secret Service. You shall all return to your current posts and await orders." Then he had one of his own men search the admiral's pockets for the key to unlock the hot line vid-phone.

After listening to Lambda Ral's report on the hot line, Gren Zavi said, "I'll send a special investigation team out immediately. As soon as they arrive, you can return to your regular duties." Then he hung up and reached for a cup of coffee sitting on a console in front of him. His scheme had worked beautifully. The "accident" had resulted in heavy losses of Zeon ships, but it was nothing compared to those of the Federation. Their entire armada appeared to have evaporated.

The operations room at Zum City Unified Command Headquarters was suddenly bustling with activity. Military men rushed to check the displays used to monitor each battle zone, and as it became apparent that the Archduchy had achieved a resounding victory everywhere, the atmosphere turned partylike. Special food and drinks were delivered to all present. Here and there, curls of smoke rose from officers who had decided to sit back and enjoy a cigarette. Others continued to relay orders to the field but did so in a relaxed, boisterous mood: "Hurry up and contact the remaining *Abowaku* forces." "Send scout ships out to monitor Federation supply lines." "Tell all fleets from *Solomon* to demand the surrender of any fleeing Federation ships."

Gren turned his back on the clamor. "Hmph," he grumbled. "I wonder what the Jaburo moles are going to say now?" Then he turned to the communications officer in the room and in a loud voice ordered, "I want a line to Jaburo kept open round the clock from now on!"

"Yessir," the man replied with a smile.

Then, as his staff officers cheered and saluted, Gren began striding toward the exit of the room. Because of the enthusiastic din, on his way out he missed hearing the shocked voice of another officer monitoring a communications line.

"What? You're from the *Swamel*, you say? You've captured three Federation ships? And you want to enter the Zum City port?"

The Zum City port was on the shady end of the mammoth colony cylinder; the sunny end was used primarily for agriculture and collecting solar energy for internal power requirements. The ships in Krishia Zavi's unit, deployed in a circle around the *Pegasus II* and its consorts, were immediately ordered to stop their engines and wait outside the port module, but they kept them idling and drifted under inertia toward the giant entrance hatches. A special patrol vessel came out to inspect the new arrivals.

On the *Swamel*, an intelligence officer turned to Krishia and reported. "There are seven heavy cruisers in the area, one of which is now in port. A squadron from *Mahar* will arrive soon."

After a moment's hesitation, Krishia decided to crush all resistance in Zum City immediately, before Gren could mobilize his forces and before other warships could arrive on the scene.

"We'll go with Plan One," she announced. "We'll force our way in." Then she turned and hurried from the bridge area to the *Swamel's* hangar, where a red Rik Dom waited for her, its cockpit hatch open. Slightly behind and to the left of the pilot seat, she had ordered an auxiliary seat installed. Sha would be the pilot, but despite the personal risk, she had demanded to accompany him. She was determined to exact revenge on Gren Zavi herself.

"Ready?" Sha asked after she boarded.

As was her custom before battle, Krishia unrolled the scarf-like collar around her neck and raised it up over her mouth. "Take it away, Commander," she said in a muffled but confident voice. "Don't worry about me."

Ah, but I do, Sha thought, knowing Krishia was too busy thinking about her brother to sense his true intent.

The other MS pilots, including Leroy Gilliam, had positioned their Suits on the upper deck of the *Swamel* and were waiting for Sha to launch. Then the hangar doors opened, and the red Rik Dom slipped into space, signaling the start of the entire operation.

"Think we can find him?" Krishia asked.

"Probably," Sha answered, turning his main engine on full thrust. In his rearview monitor he saw three other Rik Doms and three Zaks follow him off the *Swamel's* decks. And then from the *Pegasus II* he saw the flare of an engine streak out of a hatch into black space and knew it was Kai Shiden's Gun Cannon. The eight Suits immediately assumed a formation and plunged toward the Zum City port module. And following them, with flames belching from their main engines, came the newly allied force of eight Zeon and Federation ships.

The *Swamel* turned its main cannon on the port module and fired once. A white-hot light leapt from the barrel and directly hit the giant exterior hatch doors, piercing two layers. The doors suddenly swelled, flashed, and then blew up, spewing metal shrapnel toward the Suits and ships, but they continued charging ahead.

Kai kept his eyes on the red Rik Dom in front of him. He felt uneasy. He was the only one in the MS formation who knew nothing about Zum City. He just hoped Sha would lead them directly to Gren Zavi, wherever he was.

When the Suits arrived at the colony port, two layers of the hatch doors were still intact, so they fired bazooka shells and tried to blow the third wide open. The fourth door they would have to leave intact; destroying it would cause far too much damage to the inside of the Zum City colony. And while they were working on the hatch doors, the *Swamel* and the *Pegasus II* left the other ships to stand guard outside and entered the port area.

Zeon ships loyal to Gren Zavi in the Zum City area noticed something odd but did not immediately realize that a full-scale rebellion was under way because Krishia's forces constantly broadcast a cover message on all wavelengths:

This is Her Excellency Krishia Zavi's task force. This is not an insurrection but an authorized military action. Any resistance will be crushed. This is Her Excellency Krishia Zavi. . .

Kai was prepared to encounter several Zeon Suits on guard inside the port module, and sure enough, while his new comrades busied themselves demolishing the remaining hatch doors, he put two out of action. In the meantime, Sha's Rik Dom slipped through the hole in the third hatch door and reached the fourth and last. Guards on either side of the door began firing, but Sha apparently located the manual lever that opened it, for the top and bottom halves slowly began to recede into the walls. As soon as they had enough clearance, the team of eight Suits dashed into the open space of the Zum City colony, fighting a fierce gale from the escaping air. Behind them, when the doors opened fully, came the *Swamel* and the *Pegasus II*. As soon as it cleared, the *Swamel* immediately broadcast a warning to the port authorities and the Zeon Unified Command Center:

This is Her Excellency Krishia Zavi. You are ordered to close the fourth hatch immediately! We are henceforth occupying Zum City. We intend no harm to civilians. Any resistance will only cause needless suffering to the colony and its inhabitants. Cease all resistance!

The MS unit quickly re-formed and began descending from the port module toward the area where the government officials maintained their residences. Kai watched on his cockpit monitors as artificially generated clouds streamed by and then, to his astonishment, saw a vast green plain. He knew it was completely man-made, but it was the first Earth-like environment he had seen in months, and he could hardly contain his delight. People lived there. They led normal lives. He thought about something Sha had said to the effect that the more artificially generated an environment, the more people deluded themselves into a sense of omnipotence, but he decided it was not true. Even if surrounded by a synthetic world, people tended to live and abide by the basic laws of real nature. He was an example himself, he thought with a touch of pride. But it was an issue he decided to shelve until later. He had to concentrate on where he was going.

The inside walls of the colony—the ground—had gravity generated by centrifugal force, so the middle of the cylinder was in a virtually weightless state. That made it easy to fly even in a machine with a humanoid configuration, but he had to be careful not to use too much power. They were inside one of the largest colony cylinders in the solar system—thirty kilometers wide and one hundred and fifty kilometers long—but they still had limited room to maneuver.

It was six-thirty in the morning, colony time, and certainly the first time any of the colony residents had ever seen a formation of eight huge Mobile Suits roaring over their heads. Thousands of civilians, mobilized for the war, were on their way to work, and when they looked up, they must have thought it was either a victory flyby or a sign of something terrible about to happen.

"Anyone detect anything?" Sha said into his mike to the MS formation. His voice was a little impatient, but it went over the radio channel loud and clear. There was almost no Minovski interference.

"No! Not yet!" came a nervous reply from Leroy Gilliam.

Krishia, seated next to Sha, said, "He's got to be over at the Unified Command Headquarters," and checked the beam rifle by her side.

Then Kai Shiden's voice nearly jumped from Sha's cockpit speaker: "*Got it! It's right in front of us! I sense a presence!*"

"Good work, Gun Cannon! Lead the way!" Sha barked, and in response Kai's Suit immediately moved out in front of the formation, dropping faster and faster.

"He's a Federation pilot, isn't he?" Krishia said, stating the obvious.

"Kai Shiden. A junior grade lieutenant," Sha told her.

Following the formation of Suits, the *Swamel* and *Pegasus II* surged through the cloud cover, carefully maintaining a constant altitude. In the proscribed space of the colony cylinder, their incongruous appearance alone was enough to discourage resistance. The *Swamel* was jet-black with a beak-like prow and a round tank-like stern; the *Pegasus* was a brilliant white, almost delicate structure that true to its name resembled a horse. To the colonists, who had never seen Suits or ships inside their artificial environment, it must have seemed like apparitions from another world.

Gren Zavi slipped his hand inside Cecilia Eilene's blouse and fondled her ample left breast. But then she suddenly announced, "Sir, your sister Krishia's coming here." The teacup in his other hand began to shake, and he looked at her in shock.

"What?" he choked. "Did you say *Krishia*?"

"Yes, sir."

Gren's fingers went into a spasm and clutched at her breast, but she did not even flinch. She was terrified herself. She had awakened that morning and waited for Gren to return to his residence from the Unified Command Headquarters. As usual they would have a cup of their favorite tea together, and then, while Gren catnapped in his study, she would monitor any emergency messages from headquarters.

"I don't know why, sir," Cecilia said nervously, "but I suddenly sensed her voice and felt that she was here. Maybe I'm hallucinating or something." What she did not tell Gren was that she had actually heard a voice—a thought from Krishia, saying, *<I'm going to kill him. >*

Gren finally came to his senses. "Hah. Some hallucination. Even Krishia couldn't pull off a stunt like that." Then, noticing his hand still on Cecilia's breast, he squeezed it even harder.

"Please, sir," she said, finally wincing.

Then a communications monitor in the room flickered to life, and over an image of panicking staff officers at the Unified Command Headquarters, Gren heard an announcement: "*Sir! The Zum port area has just been bombarded by the Swamel. We appear to have an insurrection on our hands!*"

Cecilia had been right.

Gren commanded with his most authoritative voice into a microphone. "Keep updating me as more information comes in." Then, leaving the monitor on, he walked back over to Cecilia. She quickly stood up and draped his jacket over his shoulders. He reached out and gently touched her left nipple through her blouse. One of his great strengths was his ability to come to terms quickly with a new situation.

"Sorry, Cecilia," he said. Then he added, "I wonder what my horoscope would say now."

"I wish I knew," she replied sympathetically.

In the background, on the monitor, they could both hear an official-sounding voice continuing to relay information: "*The fourth hatch door in the port module has been breached. A squadron of Mobile Suits appears to have entered the colony. We need information on their number. Immediately!*"

Gren left his study and headed for the front door of his residence. *This just shows I made the right decision*, he thought. *Krishia couldn't be trusted. That's why I had to get rid of her.*

In front of the building, an ele-car limousine with a chauffeur and staff officer was waiting for him. He climbed in the back seat and barked, "Take me to the United Command Headquarters immediately!" Then he turned to the staff officer and asked, "What sort of defense have we set up?"

The officer, a receiver in hand, never took his eyes off a small monitor on the dashboard in front of him. "We've ordered our troops into action, sir," he replied.

"How many enemy Suits are there?"

"Looks like seven or eight, sir. The *Swamel* has already infiltrated into the colony ulterior, and we have reports it's accompanied by a Federation White Base-class ship. The one our men call the Horse."

"You mean the one that's supposed to carry their New Type unit?"

Then suddenly the staff officer exclaimed into his receiver, "What? You say the Red

Comet's with them?"

Instantly, Gren knew. Sha Aznable, Krishia, the Federation New Types. It could mean only one thing. Now that the Earth Federation Forces were on their last legs and the Archduchy had badly depleted its military strength, Krishia had decided to use every means at her disposal to eliminate him in a full-scale coup d'etat.

As his limousine sped down the highway at full speed, he thought, *Krishia, you're worse than I am.*

* * *

In the midst of chaos and confusion, Kai Shiden detected Gren's presence. Just as Amuro Rey had once detected Dozzle Zavi's aura, it appeared to Kai as a swirling black psychic mist.

"I see it," he exclaimed inside his cockpit. "I see it! Just like Amuro said!" He almost thought he heard a voice—Amuro's voice—reply calmly, congratulating him.

Below him he could see an unescorted limousine barreling down a six-lane highway, scattering civilian ele-cars on the way to work before it. He fired his retrorockets and put his Gun Cannon down on the road a hundred meters in front of the limousine, landing on the asphalt with a thud and creating huge cracks in the road. Then the seven other Suits of the combined MS unit landed around him. Together, they completely blocked the road.

Gren Zavi's driver screamed as he slammed on the brakes of the limousine. Gren craned his neck out the window, saw the Suits, and instantly realized he was surrounded. Then he heard the amplified voice of his sister Krishia emerge from a red Rik Dom to the left.

"Supreme Commander Gren Zavi. Get out of your ele-car!"

The Rik Dom held a beam bazooka in its right hand, and its sights were trained on his limousine. Directly in front of him was another red Suit of slightly different design.

"The, the Red Comet?" Gren whispered, shocked.

The humiliation of having eight Mobile Suits peering down at him was too much to bear. He knew there was no way to escape, but in a rage he opened the right-hand door of the limousine and stepped out. The Rik Dom's mono-eye glowered ominously down at him. The Suit directly in front, he suddenly realized, was a Federation Suit, proudly wearing its scratches and dents the way a seasoned warrior bore his scars.

On the main monitor of Kai's Gun Cannon, the Supreme Commander of the Zeon Archduchy looked like a dwarf. To Kai, somehow everything suddenly seemed anti-climactic, but, he reflected, that was probably the way things were supposed to be. Then the red Rik Dom next to him moved its left hand horizontally around to the cockpit hatch. The hatch opened, and Krishia Zavi stepped out onto the Suit's open palm, carrying a beam rifle. The hand gently lowered her to waist level so she could better confront Gren, but she was still nine meters off the ground.

Behind the curtain of Suits, ele-cars belonging to the Archduchy military and equipped with wire-guided missiles began to collect, but when they saw that their Supreme Commander was being held hostage at gunpoint, they were forced to simply watch, helpless. Seconds later, several hundred armed soldiers also arrived on the scene from the Unified Command Headquarters half a kilometer away, but they, too, became mere spectators at the standoff.

"Krishia!" Gren called out. "What are you trying to do?"

Krishia had her mask drawn up over her chin. "The same thing you tried to do to me, brother. You tried to kill me!" she answered.

"How do you know that?"

"Ever hear of Lieutenant Lambda Ral and Claret Harmine?" she said, training her gun on his private parts.

Gren sputtered in disbelief, but at the same moment Krishia fired. Gren caught the full blast of the beam, and his body disintegrated before he even had time to cry out.

"Well, that's that," Krishia said coolly.

Then Sha suddenly flicked the Rik Dom's left wrist, and Krishia flew through the air, her finger still on her beam-rifle trigger. *"Sha!"* she screamed as her body fell with a thud on the scorched asphalt beside Gren's limousine. A few fragments of Gren's seared flesh, scattered

high into the air, fell on top of her. Then it was all over.

Sha's red Rik Dom spun around and headed toward the Unified Command Headquarters, striding down the asphalt road past Kai's Gun Cannon. Kai stared at the back of the Rik Dom. Then he stared at Krishia. Her body lay motionless, trails of purple smoke rising in the air around her from where her beam rifle had scorched the pavement. *How easily people die*, he thought.

In the sky above, the *Pegasus II* and the *Swamel* approached with guns trained threateningly on the Unified Command Headquarters. Sha, in his Rik Dom, had arrived on the steps of the building and appeared to be delivering some sort of speech to the troops there, but Kai could not hear what he was saying.

Amuro, he thought. *This is the way it turned out.* Suddenly he realized that he hated Sha Aznable.

The surf frothed around Saila's bare feet. It was both white and transparent at the same time and felt warm. The southern European sun was getting stronger and soon would bring all the delights of summer. Her blond hair, wet from the tidal air, rustled against her shoulders.

On Zeon, Degin Zavi had been dethroned, the Archduchy had reverted to a republic with Prime Minister Darshia Baharo at its helm, and a peace treaty had been concluded with the Earth Federation government. The *Pegasus II* and its two consorts had been seized by Zeon forces, and nearly half the crews had voluntarily taken Zeon citizenship. Sha Aznable remained in the Zeon military as a captain, helping in its reconstruction, and he was joined by Brite Noa, Mirai Yashima, and several dozen other members of the *Pegasus II* crew. Kai Shiden was not among them; he stayed with the Earth Federation Forces.

Luna II was placed under the jurisdiction of the Zeon Republic, and Fra Bow and her three charges lived peacefully thereafter.

Only Saila Mas chose to return to Earth, to the place where she had once lived. When she left, Sha had said, "I'm staying here, but I'm not in it just for Zeon, Saila. It's a lot bigger than that. Amuro was ahead of his time. And my work isn't over yet."

On Earth Saila began living a normal, uneventful life. As far as she was concerned, her brother, Caspar Daikun, no longer existed. People in space continued to look down on those who chose to remain in the ravaged environment of Earth and derisively called them "moles," but she did not care. She finally felt rested, as if after a long fatigue.

It was early summer, the most peaceful and beautiful time in the Mediterranean.

< *Want to go swimming, Saila?* >

She slowly lowered her naked young body into the surf. A wave swelled over her, and she was surrounded by indigo blue. Amuro was gone, but he was with her. She began swimming with strong strokes, alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yoshiyuki Tomino is the creator of GUNDAM, beginning with the first animated television series in 1979 in Japan. Later, he authored numerous novels, using the characters he developed, as well as other film and television projects in the GUNDAM universe. He lives in Tokyo, Japan.

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Frederik L. Schodt is a writer, translator, and interpreter based in San Francisco. A long-time fan of Japanese fantasy, he also likes robots—both imaginary and real. Among the books he has authored are *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*, and *Inside the Robot Kingdom: Japan, Mechatronics, and the Coming Robotopia* (Kodansha International, 1983 and 1988, respectively).