

# Dai-2-Ji Super Robot Taisen Z Hakai-hen (Import) FAQ/Walkthrough

by MNeidengard

Updated to v1.0 on Jun 17, 2013

Super Robot Wars Z2 "Saisei-Hen"  
Walkthrough by Mark Neidengard  
working copy

This is a work-in-progress, and has not been edited for spelling, grammar etc. It is intended as one-and-a-half steps removed from a literal translation, and is offered to aid people's enjoyment of Banpresto's wonderful games. The final edited form will be posted to GameFaqs when ready.

-----

Those who have played Z2H will find nice carryover bonuses. Select Start and then "Start With Data Linking". Completing Z2H even once will give you 150PP, 5 kills and a pile of helpful gear. Completing the Z2H scenario chart is worth 100 PP and 5 kills more and additional gear -- this can be done after ONE Z2H run if you do the branches in parallel, or after THREE Z2H runs if you only follow one branch at a time. Every Z2H run through up to 10, including the first, is worth an additional 10 PP and 1 kill. In short, you will get somewhere between 160 and 350 PP, plus 6 to 20 kills, PLUS between 500k and 1500k money and assorted gear, for playing Z2H before Z2S.

-----

## PROLOGUE 1: Black Rebellion

Many worlds, many universes... The separate spacetimes known as "parallel worlds" were never to intersect. Or at least, until that day came.

The Great Spacetime Quake began in one of the worlds, spreading rapidly as the walls separating the dimensions collapsed. The result was the fusion of several of the worlds into a single, "Multi-Dimensional World". This new world was host to new encounters, which led in turn to new conflict. From this lingering chaos would be born a new world order.

As might be expected for a world with two moons and two Japanese island chains, the initial order proved untenably fragile. A new conflict, sparked by the Celestial Being's quest to end war by provoking military action, grew between the Space Colonies and the Earth, and in turn between the Earth's Three Great Nations. The chaos was further inflamed by Dr. Hell's bid at world domination and incursions by the Gishin, the Invaders, the Vajra, and the Beastmen.

To combat this, UN Security Council president Elgan Roddick organized a special force, drawing on collaborators from many walks of life. This force, including pan-dimensional visitors from the "ZEUTH" squadron, pressed their fight for peace against all obstacles, including the new nation "Imperium" and its ruler Gaiou.

Thanks to Zexis' exploits, Gaiou was defeated and the so-called Destruction Incident brought to a close. Perhaps chastened at last, mankind then began to unify under the standard of the Earth Federation.

However, this was merely the calm before the storm. The tenor of the Earth Federation's military and economic unification was determined by representatives of the world's existing countries. As such, the Three Great Nations' influence, and the lack thereof by the smaller countries and territories, and Space Colonies, remained unchanged.

Indeed, the resistance group known as the "Black Knights", situated in the Britannian territory called "Area Eleven", had been fighting for independence since before the Federation's founding. The conclusion to that fight is now at hand.

---

.... So, you've been waiting a long time for this game, right? After all that time and all that suspense, a slow start just won't do. Well, how's this for fast: we start off with V.V. filling Suzaku in on Zero's Geass powers, which he describes to Suzaku as being a means to "trample people's will underfoot". Why did Euphemia's personality change so abruptly, leading her to attempt to massacre the Elevens? And why did Suzaku, who's always tried to play by the rules, inexplicably disobey orders back on Shikinejima? V.V. tells Suzaku that he'll get his chance to confirm Zero's identity when the Black Knights attack this Britannian governmental facility -- which they will very soon. What will Suzaku do if Zero turns out to be "him"??

What indeed? It won't take long to find out, given the speed of Zero's plan to deal with the Tokyo Settlement. The Black Knights start by knocking out power to the area, creating what Zero hopes will be the opening they need to topple the Britannian forces, and especially their commander, Cornelia Li Britannia. Zero believes that taking Cornelia out will bring Schneizer, and that taking him out will force Charles himself to act. Federation or not, Zero knows that the former Britannian emperor's influence is undimmed. If he's going to seek out his mother's killer -- and see his father struck down for permitting the killing -- he's got to do it before the Federation's structure becomes too deeply entrenched. That's the only way he knows to craft a world where his sister Nanaly could live in peace. And at his side will be C.C., his partner in crime and the originator of his Geass.

Cornelia and her knights realize right away that Zero is somehow behind the power outage, and Cornelia declares that the Tokyo Settlement will never fall as long as she's still breathing. General Dalton will be protecting the administration building, leaving Cornelia's forces to attack the Black Knights' main force. Guilford wants to simply hold the fort until reinforcements arrive, but Cornelia figures that that would just give Zero time to work more devilry. She means to extract revenge for her sister's death, and she means to have it hard.

As Cornelia prepares for combat, Zero's gone to take over Ashford Academy for use as forward HQ. Toudou will be in command of the Black Knights till Zero is ready. As for the Ashford students, the world is seeming a very dangerous place at the moment. All the students have been evacuated to the student council's clubhouse, except for Rilina -- absent on a trip with her father to the Colonies -- and Lelouch. Shirley is haunted by distant doubts that Lelouch is none other than Zero, and Nina despises Zero (whoever he is) for his role in Euphemia's death.

Zero shows up in person in short order, flanked by someone the Student Council know well: Karen. She advises the Student Council to do as Zero says and not try anything foolish, and which basically sends Nina into full meltdown mode. Zero doesn't like frightening his sister, but occupying Ashford Academy is the only way to guarantee her safety as he goes to face Cornelia.

He means to leave Ougi in charge of things at the Academy, but Ougi seems to be elsewhere "questioning" a Britannian person of interest. Undaunted, Zero leads Karen off to battle.

Ougi's "person of interest" is "Chigusa", a name he gave to the Britannian soldier he found wounded after one of the Black Knights' previous battles. He initially took her in because of her murmuring about knowing Zero's identity, but has quickly found himself involved physically and emotionally with the amnesiac woman -- even intending to marry her if Euphemia's ill-fated Special Administrative Zone had worked.

[Interestingly enough, "Chigusa" is not just any Japanese name -- it's also the word for "bosom". Guess Ougi must have been inspired while treating her wounds...]

Ougi apologizes for concealing his connection to the Black Knights, and says that he's fighting for the greater good. If Japan can be liberated and integrated as a full member of the Federation, he can finally be with her in peace. Unfortunately, the woman has just recovered her memory [traumatically, if you've seen the TV show], and is none other than Britannian soldier Viletta Nu. The last thing she wants is to become like one of the Elevens, and repays what she calls "the humiliation" of Ougi's care with a bullet into his stomach. As he slumps to the floor, Viletta heads out to try to notify Cornelia of Zero's identity, which she knows to be Lelouch.

Zero joins his forces, and orders an all-out assault on the Britannian stronghold. He offers Cornelia fair treatment if she surrenders, and intimates that her ass is grass if she doesn't. Matters get messy when Suzaku and Jeremiah (a.k.a. "Orange") show up, forcing Zero to try to settle things with his old friend once and for all. There can be no turning back now.

Fending off Suzaku completes the first stage of Zero's plan -- though it's hard to feel all that elated with as much history as the two of them have. All the same, Lelouch tells C.C. that he's put such thoughts behind him now that he's become "Zero". Orange is a far easier target to deal with: reanimated by Britannian science as a loyal, if unhinged, lapdog.

Cornelia is the real challenge, refusing to go down without a serious fight. Zero however has an ace up his sleeve in the form of Dalton, who is still under the Geass Zero used in the aftermath of Euphemia's disastrous Special Administrative Zone event. His reward for faithful service is a facefull of Hadron Cannon fire, and Cornelia has no option left but fleeing. Zero leaves Toudou in charge and heads off after her, even as Britannian reinforcements near.

Zero easily catches up to the wounded Cornelia, meeting his sister face-to-face for the first time in many years. Lelouch and Nanaly were generally believed dead in the Far East Incident, but of course both of them are very much alive. Cornelia realizes right away that Lelouch's rebellion is for Nanaly's sake, and Lelouch tells her that he means to tear down the facade of peace that is the current Federation. She is hardly impressed with that as a reason for Zero killing Clovis and Euphy, but Lelouch is in no mood for backtalk.

He commands her with his Geass to answer questions about his mother Marianne's assassination. She was the one on guard duty the day Marianne was killed, but it wasn't Cornelia's doing. In fact, Cornelia had left her post outside the house at Marianne's request, which confuses Lelouch greatly. Marianne couldn't have actually expected an attack, or she would have arranged for he and Nanaly to escape. Instead, Nanaly became blind and lame, and Lelouch abdicated his right to the throne. What the hell did happen, and who was

behind it? Cornelia doesn't know, but says that Schneizer carried off Marianne's body at the emperor's insistence.

That would be a shocking enough revelation, but C.C. runs in just then with even more shocking news: Nanaly has just been kidnapped and carried off to Kaminejima. She knows all too well that Nanaly is Lelouch's reason for living, and Lelouch has no choice but to cut his inquisition short. He quickly confirms Nanaly's disappearance (and Ougi's shooting at the hands of parties unknown), and tells Toudou that he's in charge of the rest of the operation. Zero cuts off further communications and rushes off to Kaminejima, leaving the confused Black Knights in his wake.

Cornelia contacts Suzaku and tells him that she can remember only one thing from her exchange with Zero: that he's now headed to Kaminejima. Suzaku realizes from her short-term memory loss that she may have been affected by Zero's Geass, and rushes off after Zero to, as Cornelia puts it, clear Euphy's name. Britannian reinforcements start pouring in, and even the mighty Toudou is feeling lost without Zero's leadership. Karen then receives a call from the wounded Ougi, who tells her to follow and protect Zero as the one who's truly inherited her brother Naoto's dream.

C.C. leads Lelouch to a cave that he's seen before: a place where Schneizer was up to some strange science-like stuff. C.C. has felt some kind of anomaly here, and Lelouch demands to know if Nanaly's kidnapper has something to do with her and the Geass. She doesn't know, but tells him to go on ahead to save Nanaly while she stays and deals with their pursuers. He worries about her safety, but she reminds him that she's the one who can't be killed: left alone in time while those who hated her or showed her kindness have been washed away. Lelouch counters that she's not all alone: they are partners in crime after all. If she's the undying witch, it'll be his task to become the Devil for her. As Jeremiah shows up to cause more trouble, C.C. tells Lelouch to go and rise above his past, and above all the side-effects his actions have. She leaves him with a parting kiss, which is the good part.

The bad part is what lurks behind Lelouch as he nears the door to the heart of the ruins: Suzaku in full asshole mode. Tensions peak quickly as Suzaku shoots off Lelouch's mask, revealing Zero's true identity to him and to Karen, who's brought up the rear. The shock is enough to keep Karen from intervening as Lelouch (clutching a bomb set to detonate should his heart stop) and Suzaku point guns at each other and fire. Suzaku thinks he can be the one to protect Nanaly, insistent on completing Lelouch's eviction from the world and ensuring that Lelouch's desire for rebirth through destruction of the current order never come to pass.

---

The Black Knights were destroyed during this battle, which came to be known as the "Black Rebellion". It was reported afterward that the majority of their commanders were caught, and that their leader Zero was apprehended and executed. This was an immense blow to the morale of other resistance groups worldwide, and almost immediately anti-government movements everywhere fell silent. History texts would regard the Black Rebellion and execution of Zero as major steps along the road to the Federation's ascendancy.

## PROLOGUE 2: The Order to Annihilate the Gundams

At the same time as the Black Rebellion, the order was given to annihilate the "Gundams", symbols of anti-government resistance. The Celestial Beings, and the five Space Colony liberation Gundams, reverted to renegade status once

their special UN squadron was disbanded. The Federation Army pursued the Celestial Beings into space, bolstered by their Pseudo-Solar Reactor-powered MS GN-X units.

The CBs are definitely not on the winning side. Chris' love interest Richty is only still alive thanks to his half-mechanical body, a "present" from the blast that claimed the lives of his parents during the previous war. Even he isn't sure whether to call his condition "living" or not, but that's not important to him now. What is are the lives of Sumeragi, Lasse and Ian -- all of whom have managed to flee the Ptolemeios to safety. As he feels his systems starting to give out, Richty tells Chris that he's not going to make it, and she smiles sadly at the thought that such a fine man has been this close to her all along.

Richty slumps to the floor as Sumeragi radios in for a status report, and Chris asks to speak to her sister Felt. She tells Felt to live for both herself and for Lockon, and to change the world for all of them. The Ptolemy then explodes, and Sumeragi tries to have the remaining CBs evacuate. Setsuna however isn't prepared to flee. He means to face the world head-on, to the consternation of Sergei and the other Federation Forces (including a clearly conflicted Pieris). The CBs may be down, but they sure as hell aren't out yet...

Tielia apparently doesn't make it through the battle, sacrificing himself to take out Patrick. Something similar happens when Allelujah faces Pieris, aka Mary. Hallelujah takes control there, and detonates their Solar Reactor, damaging Pieris badly enough to force her to retreat. This will forcibly happen at the start of Turn 4 if you haven't taken out Pieris and/or Patrick by then. In any case, it looks like Setsuna is doomed to fall to the Federation reinforcements, "Gundam" or not.

---

AND, with the CBs out of commission, the wolves of Oz can now encircle the Colonial Gundams...

---

The Federation's resolve to take out the Gundams before its formal commencement betrays their fear of the Colonies -- this Earth Sphere-wide peace accord is in fact nothing but a facade. None of the Gundam pilots are in any mood to surrender to the forces of such a farcical government, and that can mean only one thing: wrecking Oz's shit but proper like.

Unlike the CBs, the Colonial Gundams are far more than a match for their tormentors. Who, it should be noted, don't seem to have their heart entirely in this battle. Noin for instance has noticed something strange about Lady Une lately, and Zechs actually tells the Colonial forces not to get themselves killed when he leaves the field.

It turns out that Lady Une's recent actions are indeed suspicious: she's been preparing to fire missiles at the colonies. She appears after the first Oz wave is defeated, informing the Gundams that their resistance is proof of the Colonies' bad faith. She demands that the pilots surrender their mecha at once if they want to stop the launch, and even Zechs is aghast as he hears her transmission.

He and Lady Une promptly start arguing about whether this action is in keeping with Treize's ideals, and Lady Une summarily orders the missiles fired. Just then, Doctor J forcibly interrupts their radio conference.

He tells Lady Une that he never expected her to be this stupid, and says that it is not the people of the colonies who are fighting Oz... it is him personally. He sniffs that Lady Une seemingly knows no other way to win than to choose such an inhuman tactic, and announces his surrender. Lady Une accepts this and demands the Gundams as well, but that Doctor J will not grant.

He repeats: surrender, but no relinquishing the Gundams. Hiiro, who knows Doctor J personally, knows what that means. He opens his cockpit, and calmly presses the button to self-destruct the Gundam Wing with him still aboard. Zechs and even Lady Une can do nothing more than stare in amazement...

Word of Lady Une's colony-as-hostage gambit quickly reaches Ambassador Dorian on colony C1013 (the same that Doctor J's transmission came from). This is horrifying news, coming mere moments before the Federation/Colony peace talks are about to begin. The horror is just beginning though, as it turns out his Oz escort has been instructed to assassinate him, the one and only diplomatic bridge between the two camps. This will force the Colonies into a distinctly disadvantaged position in the negotiations, or so Oz sees to think.

Rilina walks in at this point, spying the assassin and her stricken father in an instant. The assassin decides to take her out too as a witness, but Rijeene steps out of the shadows and kills him first. Dorian's dying words are to Rilina, informing her that he's not her biological dad. Her true name is Rilina Peacecraft, last daughter of the Peacecraft lineage who once championed the cause of Absolute Pacifism. Their land is Cinq Kingdom, and he one of its former ministers who fled with her when Cinq was destroyed. Over her cries of disbelief, he tells her that the world's Renewal is still in motion... and that she must bear witness with her own eyes.

Rijeene considers himself fortunate to be present for this momentous turn of events, and when Doctor J arrives explains that Oz has just assassinated the good ambassador. Doctor J isn't pleased that Oz got to Dorian before he had his chance at a conversation, and tells Rilina that he knows all about her: the "princess" who went to the same school as Hiiro. He owns up to being the one who sent Hiiro to the surface, and tells Rilina to come with him so she can carry out her father's wishes, safe from Oz's grasp. Rilina accedes, clinging to the thought of Dorian as her one and only father and determined to see this world's Renewal through.

---

Afterward, the Colonial Gundams vanished, and the five people who issued their orders were captured in due course. The Colonies' anti-Earth resistance ceased completely. Furthermore, the "unsolved" assassination of Dorian forced the Colonies to enter the fledgling Earth Federation under far from favorable terms. With the very concept of the Gundams lost in darkness, none were left to voice objections at the Earth Federation's birth.

### PROLOGUE 3: The Earth's Last Day

With all these obstacles dealt with, the Earth Federation's foundation day drew near. However, the world was anything but united in its desire to join the Federation. The Middle Eastern territories, with a long history of opposition to the Three Great Nations, and the numerous smaller nations still torn by internecine warfare, turned their back on the Federation in favor of independence.

Amidst such circumstances, some semblance of order was coalescing in the

Dark Continent, formerly devoid of any social mechanisms worthy of the name. However, this was to be interrupted by the reappearance of the Invaders...

The former Zexis forces exploring the Dark Continent are doing their best to fend off the Invader packs, but their numbers are few... and spread thin. Still, the metropolis formerly known as Tepperin is well-defended: newly christened "Kamina City" as a beacon of hope to the humans clinging to life nearby.

The crew of Getter Robo have watched Simon's maturation with approving eyes: not only is he head of the Dai-Gurren Gang, but also the de facto leader of all humanity on the continent. Benkei has grown strong too, seemingly the equal of Musashi in power and participating in roughly half their dispatches. Musashi isn't ready to fully relinquish his seat in the cockpit yet though. Even Kitan has gotten past his role as "Beast Buster", since the Beastmen and humans are now friends.

During the battle, Hayato muses that both the Invaders and the influx of Getter Rays have been growing in intensity over the last few months. Is there a relationship?

This question takes a back seat though when a human figure appears on the battlefield. Ryouma recognizes him as being from the Saotome Lab, and almost immediately an army of Getter Robos appear. The mystery figure calls out to change into Shin Dragon, a robot comprised of enough regular-sized Getter units to occlude the entire sky. This is the robot said to herald the final day of the world, which is what Professor Saotome -- very much alive -- intends to do before kicking the bucket.

And guess what: by the STRANGEST OF COINCIDENCES today turns out to be that day. Simon and Ryouma know that they've got to stop this lunatic and his Shin Dragon, though that would seem to be a pretty tall order for a crew that hasn't even mastered Shin Getter just yet.

In fact, Ryouma and the crew have gotten better with time. Shin Dragon, sadly, has too, and Saotome thinks that the Getter Team's struggles are emblematic of human weakness. Corwen and Stinger are overjoyed at the sight of Shin Dragon in action: this is what they've long dreamed of while collaborating with Saotome's Getter Ray research. Hayato can't understand what they're doing at Saotome's side now, since Saotome rejected their approach long ago and insisted on pursuing Getter research himself.

They tell Hayato not to be surprised: they've restored rightful relations and overcome the limitations of mankind. Those limitations include the imbecility to not understand what Getter Rays really are -- Evolution itself! But Saotome views humans as unevolving, and tries to silence the Getter Team's objections by force.

As though that wasn't bad enough, word comes in that the Federation has just launched Deuterium Missiles at the area, fearing the abnormal rise in Getter Rays. That would be Shin Dragon's work, and Saotome is far from worried about Shin Dragon itself -- the Deuterium Missiles would just ignite its powers. They would also wipe out all the humans and Beastmen living in the area, either directly or through fallout. Ryouma realizes there's only one thing to be done: intercept the missiles at high altitude with Shin Getter 1.

That would be easier if Musashi were in great shape, but Saotome's little "shut up" barrage seems to have injured the poor lunthead. Knowing that three pilots are needed for full power, Ryouma rapidly has Benkei take

Musashi's place, tells Musashi not to die while he's gone, and flies off at top speed.

Or, that's what would have happened if not for that dude from the lab intervening. His name is Gou, and he insists that Benkei stay behind and watch over Musashi while he pilots Shin Getter 3. Even Saotome cheers him on as Musashi says that this dude seems somehow trustworthy. Saotome seems to falter at this point, and Corwen says that Ryouma and his fellows have past the point of no return. They must now receive their comeuppance, and as the missiles approach Gou does... something.

It seems a Quake is beginning, and the heartbroken Saotome beseeches Gou to complete his unfinished work. He had no choice but to rely on Shin Dragon, and tells Musashi that Gou is the True... true... somethingorother.

---

The Quake destroyed the Deuterium Missiles headed for the Dark Continent, but also warped the area's dimensional boundaries. Once more, the Dark Continent was isolated from the rest of the world. Thanks to this, there was no way to know what was transpiring inside...

---

You would think that Charles' private shrine-thing-place-whatever would be pretty well guarded. Evidently not well enough to prevent Ribbons from walking in. Charles recognizes Ribbons as the power behind the Federation throne, and Ribbons tries to be all polite and apologetic for invading the Britannian emperor's little vacation spot. He thanks Charles for deciding to participate in the Federation, but Charles wants to know one thing only: how the hell did Ribbons find out about this place?

Ribbons says that he's got his sources of information, and Charles sniffs about the troves of stuff buried deep within Veda. Charles then asks what Ribbons is after, and is told "Renewal" of mankind. That results in a dangerous smile, as Charles' suspicions about how "interesting" Ribbons must be are confirmed. He tells Ribbons that he's welcome to rule the world in stead of Schneizer or Treize, describing such things as being beneath him. Ribbons promises to lead the world into the future, and Charles leaves him with one caution: human beings are inherently unequal. It is through conflict, through theft and hatred and bloodshed and domination that the future lies...

---

In the shadows of the birth of the Earth Federation, the uniting of mankind's will, were the machinations of Ribbons Almark -- controller of the quantum computer called Veda. He and his collaborators strove to shape the world according to their own desires, controlling the populace in the interest of peace, unity and restoration.

And indeed, peace fell over the world. A peace that would continue so long as none became aware of the schemes that underlay it...

## CHAPTER 1: Fighting Girl

One year has passed since the Breaking of the world, and around a month since the birth of the Earth Federation. The common people are beset by doubt and discontent, but are also gifted with something they've not savored in ages:



peace. It is a peace marred by a rising tide of Dimensional Beast violence, seen as a sort of natural disaster now that the Imperium no longer guides the DBs' actions. To combat the increasingly severe damage, the people have taken to hiring private DB Busters. And the arrival of one DB Buster in particular is about to herald the arrival of a new battle...

---

Jeebus Kreist but it's good to be back. As The Bard once said, "What's gone before is prologue", and it's past time for the logue itself. The tale begins on the streets of New Delhi, where the citizens are eagerly (impatiently?) awaiting the arrival of a DB Buster the mayor has hired. Opinions are divided about the value of a private contractor, when a simple phone call could summon the Federation army. Has there ever been an army assembled for purely peaceful purposes before? The rumor mill has it that the Federation army's main task these days is skirmishing with resistance forces worldwide, and that the army has come near but not into New Delhi because they've got targets nearby.

Could it be survivors of the Black Knights? Rogue Gundams? In any case, the prevailing opinion is that everyone should chill out and count on their private Buster, a stalwart from the renowned (if nearly bankrupt) Scott Laboratory. And lo and behold: that Buster turns out to be none other than Esther!

She's the pilot of the Blaster Es (the mass-production version of Traia's Blaster), and has Carlos along to keep an eye on things. She isn't too fond of his habit of calling her "Kitten", but given her propensity to call him "Former Moneybags" maybe she can't complain too loudly. The fact she can't see Crow very often thanks to all this Buster work is more a cause for complaint. but that's a concern for another time. Carlos' firsthand knowledge of the DBs' habits (gathered from all his hanging with the Imperium folks) comes in very handy, and is telling him that a big herd of DBs are about to strike. Whether he truly divulged all he knows in return for not getting imprisoned is an interesting question...

Today's DB is a Daimon class, but Esther has Crow's trademark "so what?!" line ready. Neither she nor Carlos want to get yelled at by Traia, so they plan to avoid as much battle damage as they can. In fact, this battle is a sales opportunity for the Blaster Es: kick butt, and everyone will want one in their driveway.

The first wave of DBs are a tractable opponent, but the next wave is another story. Carlos notices right away that their heads are shaped differently from any DBs he's familiar with, and warns Esther that things are about to get rough. He knows that she won't be able to hang on forever, and fortunately she won't have to go it alone: the Gundam Heavy Arms and Shenlong show up soon.

Actually, that would be the Death Scythe and Sandroock, but whatever. Duo and Quatre are glad to see one of Crow's acquaintances, but they're not willing to trust her entirely on first sight -- they're bailing out as soon as these DBs are dealt with. Or at least, that was the plan until Esther begged them for a chance to say thanks face-to-face.

The thanks are tendered aboard the Scott Lab transport, where Esther tells Duo and Quatre how much she's heard about them from Crow. They, meanwhile, have heard nothing about her from Crow, and Esther resolves to kick Crow's ass for it the next time she sees him. Esther proclaims that she is not Crow's girlfriend, though come to think about it she isn't not his girlfriend

either...

Duo and Quatre hastily change the subject to their fugitive status with the Federation, and again Esther is conflicted. On the one hand, she's got a piece of her mind to give anyone who keeps opposing the Federation... and on the other hand, it's hard to dislike anyone who risks their lives for the lives of the common people. She offers them a chance to rest for a while, and Duo is about to take her up on it until Carlos shows up and needles them about their terrorist status. Before Esther can forcibly shut him up, Carlos decides voluntarily to leave instead and bring news of these new DBs back to Traia. Esther will have to keep up her Busterly duties without his help for a while, giving her plenty of time to exchange thoughts about the state of the world. She thinks to the absent Crow that she's giving her all for her job, and for her love.

## CHAPTER 2. Fugitives

Leaving the tasty environs of New Delhi, the Scott Lab contingent next heads for Myanmar. Along the way, the G-boys explain what they're up to -- which is not the destruction of the Federation as such. Hell, after all the trouble it took to get the entire Earth Sphere on the same chapter (if not the same page), that would just be stupid. And besides, it's not like all one-world governments are bad: the Frontier fleet is from a dimension where that worked out fine. Mind you, in their case mankind united only in the face of total annihilation by aliens, but the principle is still the same.

Big Threats = Big Cooperation, and it's hard to find bigger threats than Gaiou. The trouble with the whole Imperium fiasco is that it forced the people together too quickly, resulting in a Federation with more than a few kinks in it. Too much power is still concentrated in the hands of two few, and the lot of the second-class nations (such as the Colonies) remains little-changed. There's enough inequity going around that an identifiable "third-class" tier exists: nations crippled by internal fighting and under the "supervision" of the UN.

Reasonable voices from the Colony side were mostly silenced by Dorian's assassination, leaving hard-liners on both sides to point fingers at each other. Duo's of the opinion that the Surface was responsible, and fears that Rilina would only withdraw further if she knew her father died a pawn in international politics. The sad fact is that the Three Great Nations are even harsher on each other now that they're not obliged to engage in open warfare, using the machinery of politics to grind each other and anyone nearby into a pulp. This is the true reality of the Earth Federation: "What we don't know keeps the contracts alive an' movin' / They don't gotta burn the books, they just remove 'em".

The real beauty of it all, if you can call it that, is that anyone trying to fight to change the system can simply be branded a terrorist. And insofar as somebody's blood will have to be spilled for things to change, such terrorism will be a truly reviled profession. The G-boys think the path of least resistance is to crush the Federation's two special battalions: the "peace"-keepers of Arrows, and Oz. Oz is the prime target, still funded by the Romfellar Conglomerate, shadowy rulers of the old AEU who have now somehow managed to gain Federation ascendancy even over Britannia and the HPL.

Though the G-boys are acting independently, they're keenly aware of the armed anti-Federation movement called "Catalon". Squashing Catalon is in fact the biggest excuse Arrows uses for murdering whomever they like, wherever they like. This would be a hard thing for the average person to accept without

truly monumental proof, and an even harder thing to confront given the fear of bloodshed the public acquired from the last war.

Esther might not have the vocabulary to express it in words, but she's definitely upset at this false world peace. The G-boys are hoping to get a toehold on the problem by exploiting Arrows' and Oz's dislike for each other, but to do that they'll have to contend with the Federation's spin doctors. Their hope is to gather allies through their travels, and if necessary to maybe join Catalon for some of their operations. It would be really cool, for instance, to find the other Colonial Gundams -- and Hihiro, if he's still alive after self-destructing three months back. Esther's heard from Crow that Hihiro is some kind of self-destructing otaku, but one with an unshakable sense of justice beneath his poker face.

It would be nice to get the Celestial Beings on board too, but there's a little problem: they were all destroyed in space. Once again, the Federation spin doctors have managed to keep that information totally under wraps. Seems the Three Great Nations wanted them out of the way even more than the Colonial Gundams, as there was nothing in particular the Feds could point guns at to keep them at bay.

The conversation is cut off abruptly when Federation Army forces radio Esther to heave to and submit to a cargo search. Her Buster license isn't good enough to avoid the Feds poking around in the hold, so Duo springs into action and pretends to be a hijacker. The idea is to make it seem like Esther and the G-boys aren't collaborating and let Esther escape, but when she hesitates to leave them behind Quatre has to get nasty. Having her around, he says, only makes it harder for them to escape. Esther takes the hint and flies off, and the G-boys agree that they don't want to mix her up in their dirty fight when she deserves the right to lead her own life.

There's some confusion among the Feds, who were expecting some sort of small unit and not Gundams from their recon reports. Still, any Gundam pilots are terrorists, and to be summarily slain. And perversely, the evil name of "Gundam" may be the last hope Duo and Quatre have left.

The Feds get their butts hosed fast, but no sooner do they falter than a group of mercs show up. They'd been pursuing other prey, and now see an opportunity to sell the Gundams to the Federation for big moneys. This apparent contradiction doesn't bother the merc commander at all, and he figures that blaming the whole mess on the Gundams is all he needs.

And that doesn't sit well with Esther, who hasn't actually flown as far away as the G-boys expected. She pulls the whole "What, I was just passing by and discovered people shooting at the Federation army, it's my CIVIC DOOTY to help out!" act. She's learned well from Crow, it would seem. The mercs turn out to be the "Fangs of Dawn", warlike remnants of the WLF (see the previous game) that fulfill all three of Stella's least favorite characteristics: unfair, non-fair and anti-fair. Aren't synonyms in foreign languages fun?

In short order, the Fangs of Dawn's original prey show up: none other than survivors of the Black Knights, Karen and C.C.! The Black Knights are apparently very much alive, and if Karen is any indication, out for some serious-ass, Kill Bill-style payback. C.C. asks who the blinged-out mech belongs to, and the G-boys tell them it's Crow's protege. Karen tells Esther she'll be counting on her, and battle resumes anew.

Fangs of the Dawn sounds bad-ass, but the fact is that these mercs prove pretty toothless in the face of the former Zexis members. Maybe if the

Federation army spent more time hunting down yahoos like the Fangs and less chasing the G-boys they'd actually be earning their paycheck.

Esther invites Karen to the transport to recuperate from what seems to have been a very rough time of it. She and C.C. agree, though C.C. sounds more than a little uncertain that Esther's transport will offer much safety. It's pretty clear pretty fast that Esther is quite taken with the Black Knights' (female) ace.

Meanwhile, news of the Gundam sighting reaches Oz HQ. Treize tells Zechs that he'll have to lead a task force to take on the Gundams sooner or later, preferably sooner lest the Arrows steal a march on Oz. Zechs seems to have lost his enthusiasm for Gundam hunting after the Wing's pilot self-destructed it -- unlike most opponents out there, the unwavering Hiiro strikes Zechs as a true "warrior". The fact that his body wasn't found when Oz picked up the Wing Gundam's wreckage suggests that he must still be alive... and will surely rise up to face Oz again one day. For now though, Treize's sponsor Delmeier demands results, and unless Oz want to find themselves absorbed by Arrows, that's what they've got to produce.

Treize tells his two lieutenants, Zechs and Quatro, to get ready to muster Oz's forces for when the official order to sortie comes. What's more, they'll have full authority to gather anyone from Oz's far-flung forces they need. What he really means is that former Zexis members will be sent to attack the Gundams, testament to how dangerous Treize thinks they are. Quatro, as one of those former Zexis members, clearly has his doubts about the wisdom of this...

Back aboard the transport, it becomes rapidly evident that Crow has made Karen out to be some kind of ferocious she-ogre, feared on battlefields far and wide. If one construes "ogre"ly body type from WoW, that may not be 100% inaccurate, and Crow did add that Karen seems to have some deep thread of kindness beneath her lethal exterior. That's all well and good, but Karen would rather Esther befriend her as one normal person to another, than as some sort of hero worshiper. That works.

C.C. thanks Esther for her hospitality too, laconically requesting pizza for dinner before walking off to rest. She's every bit as enigmatic as Esther had heard, if not more for all that even Karen calls her a "witch". And she is an honest-to-goodness witch, with magical powers and whatnot, as Karen learned after the Black Rebellion when C.C. told her the truth about Lelouch and his Geass. Like it or not though, working with C.C. is Karen's best shot at getting Zero back....

The G-boys are glad Karen and C.C. are safe, and delicately offer their condolences that Zero, despite all his brilliance, was captured and executed. Karen doesn't want to go there -- even with many of the Black Knights imprisoned and her mech in sorry shape, she intends to go on fighting. The G-boys can definitely relate. Esther offers to drop Karen off anywhere she wants, and Karen requests Singapore. She and C.C. mean to work as mercenaries for a friend of hers, raising enough money to return actively to the fight against the Federation. If the Feds won't recognize Area 11 as anything more than a Britannian territory, Karen won't recognize the Feds, period. Esther promises to take Karen to her destination, inwardly wishing she could meet Crow and talk through this spate of complications she never knew existed...

The Federation has allowed Area 11 to remain a Britannian possession, and if the Feds won't recognize Japan, Karen won't recognize the Feds.

Traia takes the news of Esther's unscheduled trip to Singapore with considerable good grace, willing to trust her young Buster to make her own decisions. Of course, that's easier when there's another reason for Esther to be in Singapore: another job, and one that Esther might want to drag her guests along to. How's that again? SEEKRITZ for now. Traia adds that she's been availing herself of Esther's gong: a remarkably good stress reliever. And there's a lot of stress when you manage the kind of Busters Traia's got. Esther happily heads off to transact Business and Love(tm), leaving Traia shaking her head at her optimism.

So what, you might be wondering, is so important in Singapore that it might be worth mixing up two different groups of terrorists in Buster business? Well for starters, there's Ranka, with Alto and Luka on hand guarding her as she tours the local zoo. She's got some of her usual recriminations about enjoying herself while her friends are basically on guard duty, but neither Luka nor Alto are exactly sorry to be here now that they've arrived. Ranka has one concert the following day, and then must return to Island One for some kind of massive joint project Grace has planned with Sheryl.

You best believe that Sheryl has been busting her ass on physical therapy, trying to come back from whatever mystery ailment has sidelined the Galactic Fairy from touring. If only Simon (currently trapped on the Dark Continent) could see the comeback show. Guess the two idol stars will just have to wrack up some amazing concert footage for the inevitable Blu-ray release for the Dai Gurren Gang to watch, eh? Grace's project is supposed to have all manner of special guests, but there's at least one guest whose arm Grace couldn't twist to participate. All the same, with Sheryl and Ranka on stage, Alto sees no reason to worry.

Esther turns up at this point, having been contracted to help the S.M.S. guard Ranka. Crow had told her about the cross-dressing ultra-pretty boy and the fresh-faced lad in surprisingly accurate terms. More body guards can't be a bad thing, especially when it seems that someone is out to actually get the dazzling young woman. Fortunately, yet another bodyguard has mingled with the crowd: Shotarou, a grade-school-aged Interpol agent tasked with opposing "Branch", criminal leader of the so-called Robot Mafia. Shoutarou's handy with a stun gun, and apparently as good an agent as Watta is a CEO. He's also got something in his briefcase called a "V-Con" that lets him control Tetsujin 28, probably considered in some circles the World's Mightiest Robot(tm) until Imagawa enters the conversation.

In any case, it's a handy tool with which to fend off Branch's robot-driving goons, and even comes with its own repair bot "08". Branch has an advantage in numbers and advance planning though, and it looks like he might actually manage to kidnap Ranka until Brela intervenes. Alto \_hates\_ getting further into debt with this guy, especially given the way he looks at Ranka, but without his mech there's little alternative.

Esther's newfound friends show up quickly too, C.C. commenting on how odd it is for personas non grata to be solving hostage crises. Duo tells her not to sweat it -- it's not like the Feds are anywhere close to making it on time. What's the world coming to when the Grim Reaper gets to lecture a witch? C.C. knows very well what it means to be an Ally of Justice, but for right now she wants to take the goons down and the hell out of Dodge before things get messy. And although the Black Knights and G-boys are willing to assist the Interpol's robot, it's an open question how Shotarou feels about them...

As the fight ends, Shotarou finds himself conflicted: as an Interpol agent, he should try to capture the Black Knights and G-boys. Yet they risked their lives to protect the innocent... Just then Chief Ootsuka calls up, telling Shotarou to return to base and offering to take full responsibility for letting the fugitives off. Said fugitives are prepared to "run off" and spare Esther the legal trouble of harboring them.

You can choose to see them off, go to 4S. If you want to stick with them, go to 4T.

In either case, Brela repeats his tired old statement to Alto about Ranka being too good for him before flying off. Shotarou meanwhile is determined to catch Branch next time...

Ranka thanks Alto profusely for protecting her when they get back to her hotel suite. Alto asks if she knows who Brela is, and although she doesn't know consciously, she admits to feeling her chest tighten every time she sees him. What do you suppose the odds are this pertains to her missing memories? Soul-searching will have to wait for later, as Ranka's manager Elmo comes in with Ootsuka and Shotarou. Shotarou turns out to be a classmate of Watta's, which explains how he came to be one of Ootsuka's subordinates.

Ootsuka explains that Branch's forces are becoming a menace too great for Interpol to handle alone, which is how the Crusher squad got involved. Shotarou will be on security detail till the return to Island One, and he's overjoyed to get Ranka's autograph. Alto meanwhile can only hope that Karen and the others don't get themselves killed in vain.

#### CHAPTER 4S. (Route split)

Karen and friends are certain they'll see Esther again, and tell her to see for herself what this world is really like. Traia echoes the sentiment when Esther tells her of the change of plans, offering a little secret to help Esther get over the feeling that she's somehow betrayed Karen's group. All "adults" need something to help them get by, right? In Traia's case, the policy is "No use crying over spilt milk".

Esther has more on her mind than just the fugitives. She's got the opportunity to accompany the Crushers in their Interpol mission, or even the S.M.S. back to the Frontier fleet. Traia says that it's entirely up to her what to do: there's sure to be some fearsome DBs wherever she goes. Traia is confident that she's raised Esther to be able to take care of herself as much as Crow can. For the Crushers, go to 4A. For the S.M.S., go to 4B. Either way, Traia hopes that Esther will do good work to increase the reputation and thus earning power of the Blaster Es -- after all, money is what makes the world go 'round...

#### CHAPTER 4T. (Route split)

Esther is of a mind to see how the world works, and figures the best way to do that is to hang out with the renegades. She says as much to Traia when she radios in, and Esther agrees (like on the other route). This time Traia teaches Esther the phrase "You get yours, I'll get mine," meaning that everyone is entitled to their own sense of right and wrong. As on the other path, Esther will have to decide which group of allies to travel with. She could head to the Middle East to seek the help of the Catalan, or she could head to Kumen, where a group of Astrageans (mostly from the Gilgamesh faction) have set up their own country. The place is on the brink of rupturing from infighting,

but it does have a lot more Astrageus culture than most places on Earth. One has to wonder what could be so important that a people with the balls to refuse Federation entrance would turn around and start battling each other... To head to the Middle East, go to 4C. To go with Karen and friends to Kumen, go to 4D.

#### CHAPTER 4A. Takeo General Company's Onslaught

Shotarou makes it home from Singapore in good order, giving that autograph from Ranka to Mackie as a souvenir. He then introduces the crew at his house to Esther, whose robot Shikishima will be looking after until Esther is officially transferred to Battle Camp. Conveniently, Shoutarou's house has a hangar/lab beneath the tennis court -- it is where Shoutarou's dad Professor Kinda used to work on solar energy. The good professor died in the middle of his work some time ago, and his wife followed not long after... thus leaving Shikishima to look after Shotarou and finish building Tetsujin 28. Kinda always wanted Tetsujin 28 to be used for peace, and his son's been doing a kick-ass job so far. He is, however, just a kid, and Shikishima implores Esther to look out for him as they get to work for the Crushers.

Mackie turns out to be Shikishima Makiko, the prof's daughter. She in turn is in tight with Kappei and Kaoru, and Watta. Watta's company is in precarious financial straits as usual, and if Uchuuta doesn't make good up in space, bankruptcy is imminent. Still, Watta's got time for a spot of tennis with Mackie -- a form of skipping out on homework. There's enough kids around for some mixed-doubles play, but Kappei doesn't have a regular partner to enable joining in. So sad!

Sadness can wait though: there's bad guys at large and they've picked now to raise hell at a jewelry store downtown. The robots used in the heist mark them as some of Branch's Robot Mafiosi, and backing up the police as they run down the fugitives is funner than tennis any old day. And if the kids are going, Esther's going too, for love and professionalism!

Esther has of course heard all about the child super robot pilots from Crow, who was especially grateful to Watta for keeping him fed. Watta tells Esther that Crow's already paid him back in full for that, thanks to a sushi run he treated Watta to some three months back during a visit to Japan. Esther is all sorry she couldn't go out for dinner with Crow as well, and Kappei tells her to shut her yap so his dogs can concentrate on tracking down the bad guys. After all, they say that "A walking dog will be struck by a rod", which Kappei takes as a sure sign that his canine trackers will hit their mark.

The proverb is actually a warning against sticking one's nose where it doesn't belong, and the promising start to the investigation quickly gives way to a car chase. Meanwhile, the folks back at Takeo General Company are reclining in bored ignorance of Watta's plight. They've not had a job in a month, or heard from their man Banjou in two. Their boredom ends abruptly when they catch sight of the TV, where Shotarou and friends are speeding after the criminals down crowded city streets. The shuttle craft can't be used to help out in the middle of town, but Emiko realizes that they might be able to contact Shotarou through Ootsuka.

Ootsuka calls Shoutarou's cel, which Kappei answers for him. The plan is to drive the perps to a specific point, where Takeo forces are supposed to help bring them to justice. The "specific point" turns out to be an amusement park, which can apparently be rapidly evacuated. All it takes is a little bluster from Kojirou and the bad guys are left with no time to escape. A super robot pops out from right beneath their feet, dangling them far above ground with no choice but to surrender.

Case closed, then? Not hardly! Branch and his main force of goons are still on the loose, and they've still got their robots. Not for long if Trider has anything to say about it though, or any of the rest of the do-gooders on the scene. The only snag is a shortage of missiles, owing to the generally impoverished state of Takeo General company.

The Skill Point depends on spreading kills around to the front four pilots, but oddly enough an unlooked-for set of allies show up: King Gainer and friends. They seem to be able to move about openly, despite the fact that Garode is piloting the "Gundam" DX.

With the former Zexis folks on the scene, the Robot Mafia doesn't stand a chance. The team get back to Takeo's offices in time for tea, where Gainer explains that Banjou himself hired his crew to help Watta out. They've not been having an easy time of it, abruptly shut out of the new country they were trying to found by the Quake in the Dark Continent. Those still outside the warped dimensional walls eventually drifted apart and began new lives for themselves in other parts of the world. Work was scarce.

But Banjou gave them a ray of hope, and although Takeo's finances are dire Ootsuka shows up to turn that ray into a full-scale shaft. He's arranged to hire Takeo on as adjunct members of the Crushers, meaning their financial woes are, for now, over. This also means work for Gainer and friends, and for Shotarou and Esther too.

#### CHAPTER 4B. Second Coming

The crew head to space in a shuttle borrowed from L.A.I., the Frontier fleet's unified manufacturing apparatus. Luka just happens to be the son of L.A.I.'s president, though he'd rather focus on piloting than bureaucracy. The shuttle isn't strictly necessary for the Valkyries, as they're fully capable of escape velocity on their own, but it's a great help to Esther. Despite her exterior (or perhaps because of it), Alto can tell that she's still just getting started as a pilot. Could that be... the voice of experience?

In any case, the Blaster Es represents the best learnings from events of the previous war: a mass-production model combining combat prowess with dependable controls. If this sounds like a commercial, that's because it is: Traia gave Esther a script and everything. The Es is essentially a commercial demonstration model, and as such does not use the "VX" (pronounced "Quintuple X", according to the glossary: the highest level of unknown "X"-class gadget). Esther hasn't been told of the Sphere's true nature, knowing only that it's uber-expensive or something.

Luka and Alto aren't surprised at Esther's descriptions of Traia: they remember her as shrewd, inventive, and with fashion sense that the kabuki-trained Alto can definitely respect (as well as her looks, though he won't admit it). Somehow Esther distrusts Alto on female relations grounds, suspecting there's a lot more going on between him and Ranka than either are letting on. This nearly turns into an argument until, as always in these spots, THE ENEMY APPEAR.

Luka's detected a Defold signature, and as the only people in the Earth sphere with that tech (the Frontier fleet, more or less) have no reason to Fold to their position, it can mean but one thing: the Vajra! All hundred of Esther's hours of space combat come from a simulator, but she's insistent that she can help battle these space monsters. She may still be a greenhorn, but her resolve is for real.



Alto recognizes this, but really doesn't want to see her get herself killed out of inexperience -- or any other reason for that matter. She tells him she's got someone she wants to fight to protect as long as she's breathing, and he decides to lead her into battle against the enemy second wave: \_this\_ is how fighting is done!

They make a good combo, and thanks to the arrival of some old allies they won't have to battle the rest of the Vajra alone. Michelle and Alto are still friendly(?) rivals, and the Aquarion folks are eager to show that they too are earning their S.M.S. paychecks. As Esther recounts to herself who all these people are, she's starting to realize that Alto is actually a lot cooler than she thought.

The team easily achieve a "temporary" victory over the Vajra. Jeffrey fears that these were just scouts for another full-scale herd invasion, the first since the previous war. That herd's queen is supposedly dead, raising the possibility that these are a different batch, but whatever the case may be, it portends a lot more bloodshed to come. But, "temporarily", there's cause for celebration as the pilots return to the fleet.

Esther is now crushing on Alto really hard, and of course doesn't just fess up right away. She, like her predecessor Crow, definitely has her peculiarities. Luka has figured out what's going on with her, but is rather hesitant to tell Alto about it. Two familiar faces are absent: Klan and Kanaria are back at the fleet guarding Sheryl, with Sirius and Silva tagging along for good measure. After the mafia threatened Ranka's life, such precautions seem only natural.

Sheryl's left a message for Alto to come visit when he gets back, and the other pilots quickly take to talking about how Alto hasn't decisively picked one of the two idol singers yet. Esther quickly gets the wrong(?) idea and announces that a) Alto isn't all that, and b) she's adding handsome to her list of undesirable qualities in a man. As Ozuma starts yelling at him too, poor Alto can only beg someone, ANYONE for an explanation of what just happened.

#### CHAPTER 4C. The Lost Warriors

Quatre's lieutenant Rasheed acquired some intriguing information: a Colonial Gundam has turned up in Azadistan. There's no definitive word on the CBs, but rumors abound of a mystery mobile suit that's been aiding the anti-Federation forces from the shadows. It's not, to outward appearances anyway, a Gundam. Rasheed will have the Maguanac pursue the matter further, and tells Quatre to be very careful: both the Arrows and Oz are on the scene...

"On the scene" means that Oz is conferring with Azadistan's governmental types, while the Arrows are lying in wait for an excuse to send in the troops and forcibly annex the place for the Federation. Rilina is hanging with Azadistan's princess, and the mere mention of her name seems to shake Hiiro's resolve. This fact has not escaped Trois, but he doesn't criticize Hiiro for it: they've both learned the hard way that acting on emotion is not a bad thing. Trois admits that, like Hiiro, he's been having doubts ever since he and Hiiro hid in a traveling circus in the wake of the self-destruct incident... Are they doing the right thing by biding their time while the Colonies are now legally dominated by the Feds, and would he have the courage to do what Hiiro did if the time comes?

Their soul-searching is interrupted by Catherine, who's glad to hear that her

two circus clowns are hard at work on a "new act". She's very glad that Hiiro healed so quickly from his injuries, and thinks he's the perfect foil for Trois the expressionless clown. She's cooked lots of Trois's favorite food, and orders the two to help set out the dishes so everyone can eat. Catherine is a strict disciplinarian, but seems to be very sweet on Trois -- a state of affairs Trois knows can't continue forever. With Oz and Arrows at the door, maybe the time to end it has already arrived?

Lady Une is parlaying with Marina, promising peace and protection for Azadistan if Marina agrees to join the Federation. Marina asks what would happen if she were to refuse, and Lady Une tells her that any fears of the military forcing her peaceful nation to join are unfounded. Not so convincing, when the fate of Cinq Kingdom graven in the history books. Lady Une's sales pitch amounts to this: all small nations who refused the Federation are still crawling their way back from the ravages of the previous war, far behind the rest of the civilized world. Maybe so, counters Marina, but the small nations who did join have little influence and their common citizens are as poorly off as ever. Is Marina prepared to deny her people the peace of mind that the Federation citizens enjoy? Anyone who would isn't fit to rule a country, in Lady Une's warped view...

...Which is where Rilina comes in (literally). She's seen firsthand how far Oz will go to force its viewpoint on others, and isn't surprised they've been searching for her ever since Dorian was killed. Her eyewitness testimony about the assassination isn't going to stir public opinion, so Rilina has instead opted to kill off the person responsible herself. Marina gets in the path of Rilina's gun, crying out that shooting would make Rilina no better than Oz. The drama is interrupted by Lady Une's cel, and as she leaves the scene she tells Rilina that her life is not Rilina's to take. They'll settle their score soon enough.

Rilina is of course grateful to Marina for returning her to her senses, and has reached an important conclusion: she can't fight the way Hiiro can. She tells Marina of Doctor J and his fellow scientists, and how they raised their representatives from birth to be skilled in the military arts. They have been instilled with the belief that their fighting will lead to peace -- if humans begin wars, humans can end them too. Doctor J sent Hiiro to get those responsible for this war, and according to him Hiiro voluntarily chose to shoulder the burdens of all Colonists because he understands their pain.

Rilina may not have it in her to pull the trigger, but she's got other ways to fight as Hiiro does. She thanks Marina for teaching her of Cinq Kingdom's Absolute Pacifism, and tells her she's sure Hiiro is alive and helping those who would resist the Federation's might. That's a good thing, since Oz and the Arrows' little tiff is about to spill over into the streets of Azadistan's capital. Arrows seems to be deliberately letting armed bad guys push toward the city, and Lady Une reckons Oz isn't in any position to stop them. If only Marina had made the "right" decision sooner, it wouldn't have had to come to this.

However, Oz isn't the only would-be guardian Azadistan has: Hiiro and Trois are on the scene and in no mood to give either Oz or Arrows an excuse to act. Trois knows that Catherine saw him launch his Gundam, and figures that he's got nowhere to return to now. Duo and Quatre show up soon after, and Esther is completely unafraid to be seen with them on the battlefield.

As the battle rages on, the fake terrorists start to run low on ammo and make to flee. Trois declares that all those who see Gundams must die and begins to pursue, only to pull up short as Catherine comes into view. She asks if it really is Trois at the controls, and when he hesitates the

fleeing "terrorist" mounts a counterattack. Trois' mech is in bad shape, and he decides to self-destruct and take the bad guy with him, hopefully protecting Catherine in the process.

His hand is stayed however by none other than Setsuna, who shows up out of nowhere and "simply destroys" Trois' assailant. The Exia is in sorry shape, but Setsuna has more than enough juice to return the favor that Trois and Quatre once paid him here. With his help, the bad guys are in for a world of hurt.

The pain is not unidirectional though: the Arrows still have their their forces lying in wait, including a brand-new "Ahead" mecha, and they were poised for action anyway. Their commander Jinin knows he can't withdraw with the wanted Gundams right in front of his face, and the Gundams know that taking him out will be the easiest way to end this fight.

Jinin flees before the Ahead can be destroyed completely, secure in his belief that the Federation is in the right and prepared to do whatever it takes to enact the Federation's will quickly. Things certainly aren't getting any easier for the G-boys, but Setsuna tells Hiiro to come with him if he wants to try to resolve his doubts. Setsuna will offer him a chance to strike directly at whatever is warping the world. The other G-boys will have to go look for a new place to hang their hats and plot their next move; they'll wait for Trois to say his goodbyes first though. Lady Une, watching the Gundams depart, knows that the world is still accelerating.

Catherine is shocked that the laconic circus performer is actually a Gundam pilot. He tells her he's not sure why he threw himself in harm's way protecting her -- perhaps he didn't care if he lived or died, now that his original goal is gone. She smacks him upside the head, yelling and crying at the same time that he needs to consider how much grief his death would cause those who love him. He can't promise her that he'll come back alive from his adventures... but he does tell her he'll try. That's good enough for her, and she promises to make dinner for him and Hiiro when he does finally come back.

The other pilots overheard all this, and when Trois says he respects the strength of Hiiro and Setsuna to die if necessary, Duo tells him not to be so sure in Hiiro's case. There is Rilina to consider, as it seems all Gundam pilots have a woman they love [including the female ones? @\_@]. Esther smiles that there's only one man she wants doting on her. Trois seems to have found his reason for living, and prays that Hiiro finds the same with Setsuna.

News of the battle reaches Maria, to whom Lady Une has returned. Lady Une claims the Feds have chased the scaaaaary Gundams away, but Maria is interested in the fact that one of the CBs' mecha was spotted on the battlefield. Setsuna must still be alive, and fighting. Marina tells Lady Une that she wants to interact with the Federation on "equitable" terms, and that Lady Une is free to interpret that as refusal to join if she wants. As Lady Une prepares to go file her report, Marina tells her that Rilina, who Lady Une describes as "delusional", is actually just the sort of person who can illuminate the way to true peace. Lady Une isn't much impressed, especially given that Marina won't take up arms for her own cause, but the question is far from settled. Marina herself isn't sure how to proceed, but what she saw in Rilina's eyes, in Hiiro and Setsuna's eyes, is true resolve and something she can believe in.

Rilina meanwhile has decided to leave Azadistan, lest her resolve be softened in its gentle environs. An Oz officer then steps out of the shadows, but not

to arrest her. It is Noin, and she's come to take "Rilina Peacecraft" to where she belongs...

#### CHAPTER 4D. Assemble EX-10

The team arrives at the Kumen base Assemble EX-10, where their old friend Goat greets them. His life is rather upgraded from what Karen remembers in the Shinjuku ghetto: he's now in overall charge of ordnance for Assemble EX-10. And given the internal strife in Kumen, he's got plenty to do and plenty of work for any new collaborators -- which is where Karen and friends come in. Goat offers Karen condolences about Zero, and tells C.C. he's glad to see her as short-tempered as ever. Fortunately he's got loads of pizza to feed her, and anyone brave enough to stick around here will need plenty of nourishment. This, proclaims Goat, is right around the corner from West Hell -- two blocks from South Doubt, it isn't a jail cell. Esther may not be in it for the money like her predecessor, but she's still got reason enough to stick with Karen and brave the hellish fighting to come.

Goat's taken the liberty of fast-tracking Karen's application to the most elite of the Kumen units, putting her right at the tip of Hell's spear. Their mates will be Potalia, Kidayla and Shakko, and Kidayla's initial skepticism over the "cheer girls" quickly turns to shock when he finds out that Karen was the Black Knight's infamous "Red Devil". Karen in turn is impressed by the hulking Shakko, a "Quent" who senses something special in C.C. The squad's leader is Kan Yuu, and he shows up after a brief pause with the final squad member: Kiriko!

Yuu has given Kiriko a thorough examination before accepting him onto the squad: he is after all both a former Black Knight and a former Red Shoulder, and there's every chance he could be a Biller Guerilla agent. The Billers are the Kumen forces' main adversary, and it's known that they have some of the fearsome Red Shoulders on their roster. Yuu still seems to have his doubts about Kiriko, but Gon Nue, commander of Assemble Ex-10, has vouched for him personally. Kidayla smirks at the thought of how many Billers Kiriko is sure to slaughter, and tells Kiriko and Esther that anything which hurts the Kumen mercs' revenue stream will get them some serious comeuppance. Kiriko promises the same should he be interfered with, and it's all Yuu can do to keep his volatile squad from punching each other.

Gon Nue has a message for them via webcast. Every week, 5% of his nation's mercenaries don't come back alive, and which percentile the newcomers fall into depends on their resolve. Remember: this is Hell. C.C. snorts that Gon Nue should have said that "this too is Hell", and Yuu yells at the womenfolk to keep the chitchat short and to follow his orders if they value their asses. And lo and behold, those asses will be on the line sooner rather than later thanks to a Biller assault on the base -- more or less a daily occurrence in these parts.

Kiriko, it turns out, still has his Internal Monologifier in good working order. Kumen, he narrates, is the kind of place where the heat and the humidity cling to the skin. Where every insect carries with it fevered death. The greenery just serves to hide the true nature of this hell-hole, yet the blare of the sirens and shouts of the soldiers make it seem familiar, even reassuring. Kiriko came in search of Fiana, and once more, he steps onto the smoky, bloodstained battlefield.

He chooses for his mech an old-school Scope Dog, preferring its familiar cockpit to the more modern Diving Beetle Goat offered. Goat tells him he's got a lot to catch up about, and tells him not to get himself killed out there.

He also warns Kiriko to be wary of Yuu, who seems to have taken a personal dislike to him. Esther meanwhile is having to deal with a rather unfortunate turn of phrase. When she said the mercs "aren't on her level", she meant it as a compliment, but of course they took it as the opposite. It'll be her job as the only flying mech here to take on the enemy choppers, and maybe mend some fences in the process.

Yuu deliberately sends Kiriko alone into the midst of the enemy, ostensibly to have him prove he's not a spy. Karen hurries off to guard his back as battle begins.

The women earn themselves quite a bit of respect during the battle, even with the money-grubbing Kidayla. Maybe Kidayla would be a better match for Esther than she thought, given the similarity to a Certain Someone(tm). Kiriko doesn't like to be called a Red Shoulder, and makes sure Kidayla knows it. The question is, how'd he answer Yuu's questions about his background? He tells Karen that he enticed Yuu with his knowledge of the Perfect Soldier program.

After the battle, Karen tells the obviously nervous Esther to knock off the bravado and get some rest -- she knows well that Esther doesn't have much experience fighting other people. Kiriko tells Karen to take her own advice too, and although Karen knows he's right, she's still determined to resurrect the Black Knights. Finally smiling, she thanks Kiriko for being worried about him. Kiriko too has people worrying about him, including Vanilla and Kokona. Kokona in particular has been worried sick, but she's prepared to forgive him all his absence when he tells her she's gotten prettier with time. It seems even Kiriko has learned a bit about how to socialize like a normal human. Kiriko's return is as good an occasion as any for a reunion drink, including the Zexis members' new squadmates. Camaraderie may be a hard-one thing, but this hard-bitten crew may just be the best crew to nurture it.

Kumen may be a hellish country of heat and humidity and blood and smoke. Yet it also holds a strange warmth that Kiriko hasn't experienced before -- a warmth that gives him a sliver of hope for the battles to come. Somewhere deep in his heart, he still longs to see Fiana, the world who changed his life, again...

#### CHAPTER 5A. The Melancholy of P.R. Section 2

Esther does her sales pitch for the Blaster Es, the mass-production version of Crow's Blaster. As on the other route, she says that it isn't equipped with a VX, whose true nature (a Sphere) she's ignorant of. And the inhabitants of peaceful Japan, in turn, seem ignorant of the machinations going on inside Arrows and Oz. Esther bristles briefly when Adette calls her "For Work and Love!" catchphrase as simpleminded as Crow is, but then realizes she can't really argue. Crow is dense in some ways, but he's awesome anyhow. Of course, the older womenfolk realize right away that Esther loves Crow.

Speaking of love, Garode tells the others that he's left Tifa back with Rolan and the others at the farm. No sense bringing the girl into a dangerous, uncertain situation, right? It's admirable that Tifa, Rolan, Harry and the others are trying to live in harmony with the land (to the extent that Rolan buried his Gundam in it), but not all the old Zexis members have adapted to such a sedentary life. Gain and Cynthia in particular have been kicking around and looking to ply their skills for hire.

Garode would have happily sold his Gundam to make ends meet if it meant not having to part from Tifa (he tried that before, in fact), but "Gundams" don't

have much resale value just at present. As such, Garode is prepared to keep piloting, even if it earns him unwelcome attention from the Feds. It's not like Hiiro and the others became bad people just because the Federation woke up one morning and said so.

Takeo's financial straights aren't so dire that they can't offer up one hell of an afternoon tea. Still, they're doing far worse than 21st Century, who are fairly rolling in dough. The problem is that P.R. Section 2 are bored out of their gourd, from what Kishita has heard from Akagi.

It seems that a "certain person" is making Akagi and friends report their battles in excruciating, ten-second-interval detail. This means lots of editing and rewrites without any tangible benefit to the pilots battling the Heterodynes, and that in turn means lots of stress. One could perhaps call it an interpersonal conflict between Akagi and "the person", who reminds a lot of the staff of Shiroda in his early days.

"The man" turns out to be the new tactical advisor Saeki, supposedly a protege of Shiroda's. This morning, Saeki announces that the Dai Guard will not be participating in tonight's disaster drill, despite the obvious benefits in community goodwill and in readiness. Saeki says that the decision came from VP Nishijima, a recently ascendant suit who seems to be angling for the CEO's chair. Saeki plains to have the three pilots rehearsing some simulator pattern's he's dreamed up, despite objections from all three that real life requires more than just rote memorization. Saeki fires back that Shiroda used to be a precise, efficient commander until he came into contact with these three, but before the argument can proceed further the alarm klaxons go off.

Saeki brushes off Oosugi's recommendation to ask Takeo for help, saying that Nishijima wants Dai Guard to face the Heterodynes on its own. Saeki is (over)-confident in his tactical plan, and there's no time to argue the point with the Heterodynes at the gates. In fact, there's so little time that Section 2 are forced to fight the enemy in the very heart of Tokyo, frantic to buy time for the residents to evacuate. The battle won't be any easier for the fact that the Great Knot Punisher is down for maintenance, but of course that isn't the Dai Guard's greatest weapon...

The Heterodyne shows itself, but Saeki insists that the team stay put and wait for it to approach. This will of course result in the city getting trashed all the while, and Saeki's lame excuse is that it would be foolhardy to rush in without data upon which to base a strategy. This means, in fact, that he actually doesn't have a strategy, and Akagi and friends would rather see Dai Guard get damaged than the city itself, where all the residents have to live and work.

Nishijima's hopes of manipulating Dai Guard don't stand much of a chance if the pilots are going to ignore Saeki's orders. However, corporate infighting rapidly moves to the bottom of the priority list when a bunch of DBs appear. With no reinforcements to be found, Dai Guard will be forced to fight both them and the Heterodyne alone.

But they're not alone for long: the Takeo forces (Garode and friends included) show up quickly -- too quickly, in fact. The reason is Shiroda, who foresaw that the DBs would follow the Heterodyne onto the battlefield and made appropriate preparations in advance. Among the DBs are two variant types who seem content to guard each other and watch the battle unfold. They're guarding each other, and need to be taken out simultaneously if they're to be taken out at all.

Certainly the red Pyramid wishes it had a friend, especially when Dai Guard shows off its greatest weapon: the Power of Teamwork(tm). Though this isn't strictly necessary to defeat the twins (Garode is around, after all), it certainly doesn't hurt either.

The consensus is that these Heterodynes were dogging it, deprived of vitality now that Gaiou isn't around. The new species are a bit creepy, but seemingly nothing the team can't handle. Damage to the city is at a minimum, and Saeki has been seriously schooled. He, predictably, isn't happy about this, and it rapidly shapes up to be him against the whole rest of Section 2 on the question of who gives the orders around 21st Century.

Matters come to a head as Taigauchi summons the entirety of Section 2 to the main conference room. There, they're surprised to find the staff of Takeo General Company and Ootsuka... and Shiroda! To Saeki's chagrin, Shiroda praises Akagi for his good work at protecting the public (after mildly chiding him for not working better with others). Big news then: Section 2 is now going to join the Crushers thanks to a joint military contract 21st Century has just signed. This means another war is brewing, and though that's hardly cheerful news for Akagi, he's determined as ever to do his part for world peace. This will leave 21st Century more than a little short-staffed, but Taigauchi seems unconcerned (much to Nishijima's annoyance).

One other piece of news: though Shiroda will be joining the Crushers too, his place will be at HQ strategizing -- Saeki will be front-line commander. Hoping to salvage some shred of profit motive, Nishijima has put some kind of shifty proposal to Kojirou -- but that will have to wait till later to unfurl. For now, the Crushers, whose jurisdiction extends to the whole Earth Sphere, are heading to Germany.

#### CHAPTER 5B. Twinkle Star

Ranka has quite a surprise waiting for her in the dressing room she shares with Sheryl: Nanase! Who, it turns out, was hired as costume designer for the upcoming concert... and was worried sick about Ranka's near-kidnapping. Luckily, Ranka survives her bearhug and manages to relate her adventures to the two ladies \_and\_ their bodyguards from the S.M.S... Aquarion folks included. Jun in particular is a Ranka superfan, and is a bit \_too\_ excited to finally spend some quality time with the Superdimensional Cinderella (never mind the crush he's got on Tsugumi). The Galactic Fairy isn't daunted however: as long as there's someone waiting for her, she'll come back from damn near anything.

Romance seems to be the topic of the moment, as Klan tries and fails to deny her interest in the absent Michelle. Sheryl teases Sylvia that her brother-con act is SO last century and that it's time to hop in the sack with the wild Apollo instead. This touches off a minor rampage, and Grace isn't exactly sympathetic. The ease with which Sheryl can talk about other people's love is thanks to her own love... love for "all those" who hear her singing. Ranka claims to feel the same, but she wonders in private if, like her, Sheryl also harbors feelings for Alto.

With everyone assembled, Grace unveils the name of the whole multimedia extravaganza she's been planning: the "Twinkle Project". A fitting name, it would seem, for the two brightest stars in the heavens gathering together in one place. Liina gets a devious smile on her lips, remarking especially to Grace that the stars' brilliance never fades... even in the shadow of evil.

Alto and friends show up at this point, touching off a nifty reunion between him and Sheryl. When she tells him he'll have to work twice as hard to guard

both her and Ranka, Alto smiles and says he'll have to work three times as hard to ride herd on a wild horse like her. He gets to start right away, taking both girls for a little shopping before the rehearsals begin in earnest. Sheryl warns Ranka (nicely) that the two of them are about to spend every waking moment together, the better to be in sync for the concert.

As the entourage head out, Grace sighs a bit: there is one singer not present she really wanted, one whose songs gave great courage to those on the battlefield not that long ago. Translation from Evil Bitch-speak: she wants a spare in case something "happens" to either Ranka or Sheryl. And that person would need a very high level of Song Energy to be of use...

On the way to retail bliss, Sheryl tells Ranka that the Robot Mafia may have had something more on their mind than just demanding a fat ransom. Perhaps someone wants to monopolize her singing for their own entertainment? Maybe that was the reason the two were kidnapped the last time? Whatever the case, the two singers' songs belong to all mankind.

The group's little stroll is disrupted by an explosion up ahead, possibly the work of terrorists. The S.M.S., who've been keeping an eye on their charges from a respectful distance, rush out of the woodwork and head to the scene, leaving Alto with strict instructions not to leave the singers' side. Sure enough, it turns out to be a kidnapping plot with the bombing as a diversion, but if the terrorists think they'll have an easy time of it, they're sorely mistaken. The psychically-powered Elements aren't exactly the sort of bodyguards you can just karate chop and leave behind.

Unfortunately, there seem to be a lot of terrorists, and they've got a really wide area surrounded. They claim to want to kidnap the singers to change the world, by shattering the false peace offered by the Federation, but their tactics are clearly crap. And Esther is not shy about calling them on it, pooh-poohing their plan to force the Frontier fleet's capitulation as so much self-righteous bullshit. Fortunately, she's got an ally lurking in the shadows: Setsuna! He buys the group time to escape, warning that the terrorists aren't done yet.

Setsuna is still driving around in his busted-ass Gundam Exia, determined as ever to destroy all that which has warped the world. And if the CBs actions helped summon that warpage, it's they who must strike at its black heart in penance. Mind you, that's a tall order in a mech as trashed as his, and Esther tells Alto that they've got to go help. Conveniently enough, Brela shows up to watch over the two singers, freeing up the pilots to sortie their mecha.

In fact, the whole S.M.S. bring their power to bear. Ozuma knows the team has to hurry before things get even worse. And by "worse", he means the New Joint Forces, the Frontier army that's now part of the Federation. Once the terrorists are dealt with, he makes a show of shooting in Setsuna's general direction in order to drive him towards the one exit where the Feds can't interfere. Setsuna catches on quickly, and thanks Ozuma before bugging out fast. Ozuma then successfully faces down the army leader before taking his troops off the field too.

As it happens, Grace was behind the whole thing, staging it as a show of good faith to a certain someone. Certainly she expected the S.M.S. and Gundam Exia to vanquish the goons easily. And wouldn't you know it: Mishima is in cahoots too, which would explain why the Frontier forces showed up late. Both of them have a "mysterious" patron, who had hoped that the Exia and the other terrorists would have taken each other out. If you played the previous game, it should be painfully obvious who this patron, who manipulates the Federation from behind the scenes, really is. Mishima of course is a fairly



shady person himself, with ambitions that rival even this patron's designs on world control. Grace can only caution Mishima that said dude's got some SERIOUS computing power on his side, computing that even her intelligence network hasn't been able to penetrate.

Mishima may be ambitious, but he's also a very cautious man. He warns Rijeene against striking before it's time, claiming to be different than the reckless Gundams. They can afford to wait for now, letting the next Vajran attack be the sign for their advance, on the dubious theory that even He(tm) can't predict their movements. Maybe Mishima is more reckless than he lets on?

Esther is the sort of straight-forward kid who has trouble grasping what Ozuma did for Setsuna. Yeah, they shot in his general direction, and yeah, they didn't take him in and fix his broken-down mech. But they did let him go free, and avoided arousing the suspicions of the Joint army in the process. If Setsuna insists on fighting terrorists in a broken-down mech, one has to assume he's got his reasons. Even Alto took a moment to catch on, but when he remembers what Setsuna was like during the previous war, it all made sense. He's one strong-willed guy, and he doesn't fight needless battles.

Esther apologizes to Ozuma, and he tells her he doesn't mind her straightforward approach to life. He tells her he'll be happy to teach her the brains and brawn she'll need to survive, as he once did with Crow. Speaking of whom, Crow was last seen three months ago, when he paid so clandestine a visit to the Frontier fleet that even most of the other S.M.S. weren't aware of it. As his fortunes had greatly improved, it seems he mainly wanted a drinking buddy or two -- which turned out to be Ozuma and Jeffrey, at Crow's treat! That's rare enough to raise doubts about him as an imposter, but it all makes sense as Crow paying them back for supporting him during the previous war. Also, it was him returning from visiting a certain grave... Esther wishes she could grow up quickly so Crow would go drinking with her too, but it ain't that easy.

Sirius and the others return, reporting that the singers are now resting comfortably in their hotel. Both are quite calm, including the normally excitable Ranka. Could her calm be from Brela's influence? It's unclear, but whatever the case the S.M.S. have been relieved of guard duty due to Brela's presence. This frees them to return to Vajra lookout duty, greatly decreasing the likelihood that they'll get to see the Twinkle Project live. That suits Apollo fine: he's been itching for a good fight for quite a while now. Ozuma hopes that Setsuna lives on, and that he won't have to fight the guy in the future.

## CHAPTER 5C. Oz and Arrows

Treize has some explaining to do to his counterparts in Arrows over Oz agents being stationed in Azadistan -- where Arrows was clearly expecting action. Treize initially blows this off as an example of the usual miscommunication between the two camps, but when Goodman forces the issue, Treize tells the commander that Arrows is in no position to criticize Oz's methods after the agent provocateurs they sent in. Goodman accuses Oz of over-leniency, and Treize responds that Arrows has a bad track record on collateral damage: hardly in line with their motto of Efficiency. Goodman would rather see Marina's dangerous delusions of Absolute Pacifism crushed quickly, even at the cost of innocent lives, rather than allow the ideology to spread to its neighbors in the still-unincorporated Middle East.

...And that, Treize sighs, is precisely why the two groups will never get along. At least the point is now clear beyond dispute. Treize tells Goodman

that war ought to be fought only among the proud warriors -- involving anyone else is the idiocy that makes history texts so tedious to read. Goodman isn't surprised to hear that sort of thing out of a nobleman's mouth, and retorts that what the world needs nowadays is the power to enforce unity against the Earth's common threats. Goodman promises to report all this directly to Delmeier and stalks off, leaving Treize to lament that the people seem to have learned the wrong lesson from the previous war. That he himself wasn't able to do anything about it makes him part of the problem too, one supposes.

But enough philosophizing: Zechs is on hand and needs some new orders after a successful anti-terrorism stint in Ezemistan. The winds are blowing again, this time with gale force as they seek to usher in a new age, and Treize wants his lieutenants to taste them firsthand... whatever that means. The common troops are certainly being buffeted by storms from within, as the old Zexis folks find themselves at odds with the treacherous forces of Oz. Camille at least makes an attempt at fitting in, but Shinn isn't willing to let Alex and Muller forget about their illegal attack on Catalon forces after the already surrendered. If not for Treize's generosity(?) in taking in the Zexis pilots, and the fact that the Gundams are currently sealed away to avoid sending the world mixed messages, one imagines that the Oz regulars would already be six feet under.

So far the Zexis pilots have been fighting terrorists, but it seems only a matter of time till they get mixed up in Oz's rumored dirty deeds. Nobody can what Treize is really thinking, but indications are that he's not being the most proactive at using Oz's power for good. In fact, given what his orders to Zechs and Quatro turn out to be, it seems he's all about using Oz's powers for bad: the former Zexis folks are being sent to take on the terrorists' Gundams.

The plan seems to be for Treize to use himself as bait, by going on a bit of an Italian road trip with only a few units (Zechs' squad included) as guards. Formerly known as the "Lightning Baron", apparently Zechs is a full count now, and still as dangerous an opponent as ever. Everyone except Esther realizes straight away that this has to be a trap, but it's a trap they can't afford to not jump into. Taking Oz and Arrows on directly is a recipe for disaster, making this shot at a decapitation strike impossible to pass on. The G-boys can only hope that they're not the only folks with enough enlightened idiocy to take that shot...

As the Oz forces set up to welcome their "guests", Zechs has some questions for Quatro -- like why he sent Camille and the others away from the last line of defense. Could it be that Zechs doesn't want them fighting the enemy Gundams, and if so, why? And IF that's the case, what is Quatro himself still doing hanging with Oz? Something to do with the missing Amuro Rei? Quatro says that he's chosen to fight the Gundams for his own sake, and nothing to do with Amuro. He admits to being only human, and is hoping to satisfy his doubts under Treize's aegis.

Now's not a good time for doubt though, as the forces of terrorism (quote quote) arrive: not just Esther's band, but Wufei as well. Wufei wastes few words on ordering the others to support his surgical attack on Treize, and since he technically got to the scene first the others resign themselves to helping out. Wufei is even impressed by Esther's can-do attitude, which he deadpans is too good for a woman to hold. Oz reinforcements can only be held at bay for five turns, so you'd better hurry!

That Quatro is working for Oz suggests that other former Zexis folks may be around too. But that's a worry the G-boys will have to save for later. Neither Quatro, nor Zechs, are going to let themselves get killed here, with

so much left undone.

Wufei reaches Treize just as the Oz reinforcements arrive, including the aforementioned Zexis folks. It's ghastly to see the former comrades-in-arms split across the battlefield, and Duo can only hope that Wufei hurries: he knows that his side aren't going to be up to fighting their old friends for real.

Wufei dismounts from his Gundam to face Treize, wanting to face his opponent at his opponent's level in a swordfight to the death. This is what Treize was hoping for, and though Wufei is a fair hand with his Blue Dragon Blade, Treize is better with his saber. He does not kill Wufei, allowing him to escape with his life (in disgrace) even knowing that Wufei will be back for more. As Wufei runs off in fury, Treize muses that Wufei is just the sort of warrior he's been looking for. And the next time they fight, Treize will fight Wufei on Wufei's terms: in Mobile Suits.

Wufei's failure is apparent to the other pilots as he dashes away from the battlefield in his Gundam. Duo tells his friends to make themselves scarce too, saving Camille and friends from having to fight them. And since there aren't any orders for pursuit, they too head back to base.

After dismounting, the former Zexis pilots discuss the shock of seeing their friends on the other side of the battle lines. Asked if they're destined to fight, Camille can only say that they must if their beliefs truly differ. The fact is that the Federation is screwed up, badly enough that resistance groups are essentially guaranteed to arise, but in Camille's view the problem isn't with the Federation as a whole. The problematic part is, alas, the Federation's core and those who serve it directly. Which means Arrows, and Oz.

Camille had no problem with Oz while it was acting as a legitimate world police force, but their current spat with Arrows is changing the way the members think, prodding them toward the same old might-makes-right arrogance that marked the Three Great Nations. Leaving Oz to collapse is a tough pill to swallow though: without Oz, who will be the world's police? Even the noble Crushers are just a local force, lacking the authority to face a global foe like the Imperium was... or like Arrows is in danger of becoming. Camille guesses that Treize, and Quatro, are both interested in keeping Arrows neutralized.

If so, Treize just took a huge gamble. He, like Elgan Roddick himself, is an altogether too-inscrutable force. And speaking of Elgan, why the heck is the former "Boatman" leaving Arrows to do as they please? Kira and Aslan are off in space following Lady Une around, and Amuro is missing, so Camille is forced to guess by himself what Quatro's true motives are... and what he ought to be doing going forward.

Wufei is in pretty bad shape in the wake of his defeat, calling himself an unfair bastard who can only fight those weaker than himself. He feels unfit to fight, and it's Esther of all people who tells him that a defeat or two is a piss-poor reason to simply retire. Wufei pauses, telling her that such thoughts make her strong, and stalks off to go God-knows where. Duo tells Esther to leave Wufei alone -- the guy is even more stubborn than Hiroyuki when it comes to stuff like this. Wufei will likely come back, stronger than before, but the team's got big problems to deal with in the meantime.

Oz isn't just going to kick back and let any old jackanapeses assail its supreme commander. There will be reprisals, and those reprisals are going to involve Camille and company. Nevertheless, the group can only keep fighting for their beliefs, and waiting for Wufei, Hiroyuki, and other friendly forces to

settle their doubts and join them.

#### CHAPTER 5D. Maelstrom

Goat had a theory about Kiriko, surmising that the indestructible mercenary would have been busy looking Phantom Lady all this time. This led him to name Vanilla's bar "Club Phantom" in the hopes of luring Kiriko near, and damn if it didn't work like a charm! Kokona sings live every night, and Goat put up half the financing, making for a bar that ain't half bad, despite its disreputable clientele. Kiriko wants only coffee for now, saying that he's come to war-torn Kumen in search of the Red Shoulders working for the other side. He knows that Fiana's kidnapppers, the Secret Society, have dealings with the Red Shoulder survivors -- and if he's ever going to find any clues, they're as good a place to start with as any.

Kiriko's own past as a Red Shoulder certainly didn't make the job interview for the squad any easier, and he only got it due to the direct intervention of Gon Nuu. That wily fox is rumored to have dealings with the top Gilgamesh army folks, from whom he's learned of the existence of the Perfect Soldier program. He wants to use Kiriko to help steal some PS's for himself, so he can cement his ties to the Gilgamesh army -- who in turn want to use the PS program to cement their stature as full-fledged members of the Earth Sphere.

In theory, Gon Nuu could alternately sell the PS's directly to the Federation, though Potalia is disgusted at the thought that Kumen, built upon the sweat of Astragean brows, would voluntarily resubmit to Federation domination. Now, the current war could lead to involuntary assimilation by the Federation at the slightest excuse, which is why Potalia insists on going after Kangelmann and bringing the fighting to a rapid climax. Kangelmann was the third prince of Kumen before assuming control of the Biller guerillas, repudiating his former revolutionary ideals in favor of a military autocracy. Since Potalia was once one of Kangelmann's personal guards, it seems he's taking the change of direction especially hard.

The higher-ups on this side of the schism are aware of the Federation's hungry gaze, and are rumored to be planning an all-out assault on the guerillas. That's fine by Kidayla, who hopes to take out the enemy's fearsome "Blue AT" and pull down a big fat paycheck. The thing seems to follow the Red Shoulders' every command, and has slaughtered damn near everyone who's even caught sight of it -- naturally, this piques Kiriko's interest, though he won't let on why.

At this point, Kidayla calls for another round of brew, and who should appear to deliver it but Karen, dressed up in a fetching bunnygirl getup at Kokona's insistence. And since she's getting paid to make nice with the customers, her only option is to swallow the indignity and make the rough-and-tumble mercs feel like they've got a shot at some of that cotton-tailed ass. Vanilla cracks that he wishes Tamashiro were alive to see this, and Karen's robotic smile momentarily breaks as she growls back not to talk like Tamashiro was dead.

Karen's mood isn't helped by the fact that only she is getting to do the bunnygirl act. Kokona's figured out that C.C. has shoulders way too cold (so to speak) for this kind of work, and that Esther would probably brawl with any of her clientele in 30 seconds flat. On the other hand, Esther makes the perfect drummer for Kokona's backing band. C.C. deadpans to Karen that she should be grateful she got all that nice-girl practice in back at Ashford Academy, and warns that if she gets too pissed off that tail is going to fall right off her butt.

Shakko interrupts with a request to C.C. to come meet the Quent chief when

she's done here. C.C. isn't one to go on other people's errands and tells Shakko to have this chief come to her instead. He warns her that he'll take her by force if he has to, and comments to Kidayla that this tight-lipped woman may just be the enemy of all Quents. That earns him a particularly hard stare from C.C.'s golden eyes.

Kan Yuu bursts in at this point, gathering his men to investigate a Quake that struck 20 klicks to the Northeast. It's an emergency dispatch, SUCH an emergency in fact that the lecherous merc orders Karen to stay dressed just as she is. This makes the Guren's horizontal cockpit layout a truly fascinating experience for the comely ace (and anyone lucky enough to see her on their monitor), but she's not the only one with issues. Esther is in high dudgeon and has brought a triangle aboard her mech, pounding it mercilessly in an attempt to destress over her waitresly shortcomings. It isn't working. Maybe pulverizing some DBs will help?

These are the new breed that's been popping up lately, but that doesn't daunt the crew any. Karen for instance is about as vorpal a bunny has been seen since the Quest for the Holy Grail. And Esther tells the team that these are way weaker than they would be if Gaiou were still around (at least, that's what Traia told her).

Unfortunately, as is so often the case, humans are ultimately their own worst enemy. No sooner are the DBs dealt with than the Biller forces encircling the team break cover. Among them is the Blue A.T., and Kiriko can tell right off the bat that its pilot's reflexes are abnormally high. He narrowly saves Kidayla from getting himself killed, and agrees to take it on one-on-one as per Kan Yuu's orders. It can have but one person at its controls: Fiana.

If C.C. fights the Blue A.T., she notes that its pilot isn't human either. Oh well, if humans can fight each other, one supposes non-humans can do likewise. This non-human turns out not to be Fiana after all, but Ypsilon: a PS who blames Kiriko for turning Proto One from the path she was supposed to tread. He won't tell Kiriko if Fiana is here in Kumen, which is proof enough that she is. Ypsilon won't let Kiriko anywhere near her, and damn near kills Kiriko before Potalia intervenes. Ypsilon growls that Kiriko's death will have to be postponed and withdraws, leaving Kan Yuu to claim victory for his side. Potalia is shaken however, but the fleeting glimpse he caught of one of the Biller footsoldiers -- a woman named Monica.

Those who don't know Kiriko want to know why the lunthead opened his hatch in the face of the enemy A.T., earning himself a serious concussion and by rights a whole lot worse. Karen has some idea of what Kiriko was hoping to accomplish and says that Kiriko ought to tell the rest of the squad himself what was going on. Based on her past history with the guy, she's quite confident he'll pull through. She's steadily rising in the estimation of her teammates, which is good as she fully intends to earn her own keep -- she just wishes C.C. would get off her ass and earn her keep as a bunnygirl instead of scarfing down pizza all day.

Potalia meanwhile is busy contemplating his run-in with Monica, a childhood friend from waaaay back when. Esther noticed his hesitation on the battlefield and asks what's up, learning that Monica used to be the kindest kid imaginable. What could have driven her to become a guerilla? Potalia scowls into his drink, admitting to lowering himself to become a merc just so he could live to see Kumen modernized even a day sooner. If Monica is on the other side, he'll have to show her no mercy either -- and Esther can't stand the thought of friends fighting each other, whatever the cause. She then stops and apologizes for speaking thoughtlessly, but Potalia thanks her for giving him a chance to

vent. He'll figure out for himself what to do about Monica, and secures a promise from Esther not to tell the rest of the squad. She accepts a round of soda in return for her silence, as determined as ever to lead her life without regrets.

Back at base, Ypsilon reports his Kiriko sighting to Borow. Borow assures him he's a perfect Perfect Soldier and has nothing to fear, and Ypsilon asks permission to take Proto One with him on his next mission -- he wants to kill Kiriko in front of her eyes and thereby bring her to her senses. Borow is down with that plan, but the maniacal laughter part will have to wait: Proto One has come with word that she and Ypsilon have been invited (more like ordered) to dine with Kangelmann. Borow sends them on their way, looking forward to taking out Kiriko and completing Ypsilon's training in one fell Sith-like swoop.

#### CHAPTER 6A. The Infernal German Count Appears!

Esther finds herself walking in Crow's footsteps again in Hamburg, as the 21st Century folks describe Crow's treating them all to all-you-can-eat yakiniku. He even went out drinking alone with Aoyama afterward, which momentarily gets Esther suspecting that Crow and Aoyama are More Than Just Friends(tm). Easily corrected when Aoyama says that he has no girl\_friend just at present. Hell, this is even good news for Nakahara, who's had eyes for her handsome coworker for some time now.

The team is supposed to be on the lookout for anyone suspicious, but it feels like they're mostly tied up sightseeing and savoring the fruits of Germany's long experience with sausage manufacture. Shotarou and Gaury "You Forgot I Was a NINJA" are left to do most of the investigating, with Gaury and his store of ancient Yapanese ninjutsu leaving the young agent in dazed awe.

It really would be easier to track down Branch with some of the Crusher's Espers on hand, but they've got more important things to do investigating all the upheaval in the structure of the solar system since the Breaking. They might, however, have enlisted Kouji's aid: he's in Japan and probably not so busy as to not help out where he's needed. Sounds like a trip to Kurogane-ya is in order after matters in Germany are settled.

For the moment though, there's those Branch bastards to think of. And they, it turns out, have been planning to ambush the kid all along. What they weren't planning on is Shotarou to have so many capable friends, including -- as if on cue -- Kouji, who has turned into quite the martial artist under Tsubasa's watchful eyes. After fending off the Branch operatives and getting a bit of breathing room, he explains that he and Sayaka are in Germany in search of Shirou... who has been summoned by a ghost named Stroheim Heinrich.

This is a famed German roboticist, passed away quite some years ago. Matters started when a little blond girl calling herself Lorelai Heinrich came to Kurogane-ya. She claimed to be the good doctor's daughter and that her father was still alive, which immediately got Kouji thinking of the cybernetic resurrection of Baron Ashura. Dr. Hell could well be involved with whatever's afoot, and possibly even behind Lorelai herself. The girl made very good friends with Shirou, and one day Kouji found the two gone with only a note mentioning Germany left behind.

The backstory gets cut short by the arrival of Branch's robot army. Despite seeing his nemesis right before his eyes, Butcher seems to have bigger problems today. He orders his henchmen to hold Shotarou off and starts to flee, and the sad fact is that said minions constitute a threat to the city that can't be ignored. At least Kouji and Sayaka (now piloting Vyunas-A,

which is modeled on her own body) are on hand to help take out the trash. The sight of Vyunas' curves seems a tad distracting to some of the menfolk, but this isn't the time for that [especially if you want the Skill Point].

The initial wave of Robot Mafiosi suck ass, but they're quickly replaced by Mecha-beasts. Kouji's suspicions that Dr. Hell was up to something in Germany? Oh so confirmed, by the presence of Count Brocken... who, despite carrying his head around in his hand, is not a ghost that the likes of Gaury can dispel like some ghost. In fact, he's pretty adamant about the fact that he's vastly more substantial than Ashura.

The proof is in how he orders his robots to ruthlessly kill the townsfolk, which almost sounds intimidating until Setsuna shows up, busted-ass Gundam and all. With his help, the team sends Broken to the same kind of miserable defeat that Ashura is used to.

It is not, however, Miller time. It's actually Smirnoff time, which is the surname of the Arrows commander whose forces show up next. Garode manages to spot them slightly in advance and tell Setsuna to bug out. Saeki confirms to Smirnoff that there was indeed a CB Gundam on this battlefield, but that apprehending it was a lower priority than protecting the citizens. Smirnoff is smart enough to suspect shenanigans from the CBs' former allies, but he also knows that his men were late to the party and that the only Gundam here now is the DX. He offers a word of thanks and leads his men away again.

It's anybody's guess if Setsuna will rejoin the team at their rendezvous point, but he's certainly done his good turn for the day today. Maybe the locals will have a slightly higher opinion of Gundams now that they saved their asses?

As it happens, Setsuna does rejoin the team. He tells his old comrades that the Celestial Beings, as such, are no more. All its members are scattered or dead, leaving him to fight on alone. He's through with fanning the flames of war for its own sake though -- now, he fights against the forces that have warped this world. That's Oz, and Arrows, and the people pulling their strings. He feels that he still has much to learn about his enemy, and doesn't mean to stick around here for long... but seeing the team fighting in their way for the good of the world has helped renew his hope. And upon hearing that the boy he saved called his Gundam an "angel", he even smiles slightly as he walks off.

The problems of Branch and Dr. Hell (and Shirou) remain, and clues appear scarce (read: nonexistent). But appearances can be deceiving, and the team has yet more allies lurking in the shadows. The Kurogane-ya staff have turned out in full on Tsubasa's orders, and Cross tells Kouji that all his problems are interlinked. The key is that Stroheim Heinrich guy.

All this time, Shirou has been cooling with his new lady friend at her family's castle. Apart from her dad, she's had no companionship here at all. Shirou's her first friend, and he as much as admits that he wants to be her friend WITH BENEFITS. This goes right over Lorelai's head, but at least she's amused. Shirou is sure that Kouji won't be too worried about his little trip with her (hey, left a note and everything!), but he's at least smart enough to have connected the Heinrich family name to Kouji's tales of dead professors. When Lorelai warns Shirou that her papa is a bit... odd, he expects something to do with Dr. Hell. He's not prepared though for the sight of the good doctor, or of the doctor's guest: Tsubasa, who Stroheim introduces as Shirou's mother!

Esther is taking her training with the S.M.S. very seriously... so seriously that the sight of her doing pushups is making the old-timers wonder just who this crazy chick is. Bobby is the lone exception: his "inner woman" seems to like Esther's "inner man" quite a bit. Crow too is quite pleased with her progress, and according to Esther he should be -- she's gone through quite a bit back at the Scott Lab.

Crow pounded the basics of piloting into her, but as he's been gone a lot most of her training was left up to Traia. Her idea of training is unconventional to say the least: origami, which sharpens powers of concentration and manual dexterity. She's also been made to sort beans (sharpening her split-second decision making) and sew eyes onto 10,000 teddy bears as a way of improving her aim... not to mention several rounds of retrieving lost pets in order to practice tracking and recon. These sound more like part-time jobs than special training, but the results do speak for themselves.

Apollo has some training for her to try out: all the weird and wacky stuff Fudou made the Elements do. Unfortunately, neither he nor his teammates know why they had to do the stuff, so having Esther do it seems a bit stupid. Then again, maybe the "send your thoughts to someone distant" exercise might have some merit...

All this is a decent enough way to pass the time until this patrol ends, at which point the Macross Quarter will return to fleet defense for the Frontier ships. Patrolling the solar system has gotten a lot harder in the wake of the Breaking, and the original Crushers have had their hands full covering it all. The ones Esther's met on the ground are simply the new "terrestrial" branch of the Crushers, and they'll likely be merging with their spacefaring brethren at some point. There could be another Vajra nest around, and if there is, there'll be a hard fight against the queen to look forward to. One can only hope that there is no nest, and that the Vajra who've turned up lately are simply strays...

The deliberations are interrupted by a warp-out signature in the ship's path: DBs, and plenty of them. It's time for Esther to show off the fruits of her training, and an opportunity for Alto to look covetously at Ozuma's Armored Pack: the sign of the Skull Squadron's number-one pilot.

The DBs are far punier than they used to be, which accords with the theory that Gaiou's departure has sapped them of vitality. But if the team is hoping for a walk in the park, this won't be the day for it: there is a second wave of enemies, and these ones radiate a cold, dark menace that the Elements can sense plainly.

The newcomers are Gishin mecha, who one might have hoped would have given up after Zhul's defeat. No such luck: they've got a new commander named Gel, and he finds the Earthlings' lack of perspective hilarious. Now, if you think back, you might recall that Gel was a Gishin Esper that was defeated during the last war. The fact that he's back can't be a good sign. Fortunately, the spacefaring Crushers show up to help just in the nick of time, and among them, God-Mars!

Just as a reminder, Gel is the dude who offed Takeru's dad, so Takeru has plenty of reason to send Gel back to Hell where he belongs. Though Gel seems to have gotten stronger since his last little death incident, there's no way he's going to prevail today. Then again, that doesn't seem to be his intent: this battle is a mere greeting. NEXT time is when he shows the full powers of Darkness to Takeru and friends. That might mean his new and improved



telepathy or something else, but whatever it is it can't be good.

Between the Vajra and the zombie-ish Gishin army, the world's future looks cloudy at best. Even the usual long-ass reunion speeches are kept short as Takeru frets about his dead adversaries come back to life. Gishin itself, the last time he heard, was well underway to rebirth as a planet of peace -- which would make Gil and his men some kind of extremist fugitives. Apollo advises the troubled Esper not to sweat all the unknowns, and to focus on what he can do: gather information, and keep the Earth as safe as possible until answers present themselves. This unexpected show of good sense raises Apollo in Esther's estimation and causes her to enthusiastically get on board with his weird training program, but Takeru realizes there's even more to it than that. Apollo too is an Esper and should have sensed the same chills that Takeru did... the encouragement speech may have been at least half for his own benefit.

The Crushers report that the Solar system's planets have changed even more than expected in the wake of the Great Quake, but they've found nothing like a Vajra nest anywhere within their search radius. That search radius will simply have to be expanded, but in the mean time a bit of R&R aboard the Frontier fleet is in order (including spectating on the Ranka/Sheryl concert that's coming up). Ozuma welcomes the Crushers, telling them that they may have more battles to fight together before long... and not just the Vajra and Gishin. If he's right, the Frontier fleet's shadowy rulers are likely to act in the not-terribly distant future.

#### CHAPTER 6C. Wandering Angels

Jinin orders his newly-formed Arrows squad to do a little roll-call. There's Andrei Smirnoff from the German expeditionary force, and Louise Halevy the rookie (who also happens to be the daughter of the team's sponsor -- what the hell is a rich girl doing walking onto the battlefield of her own accord??). Their mission is to strike down Catalon forces in the area, and to hunt down the Gundam rumored to be nearby. Louise has a serious bone to pick with the Gundams, believing them responsible for her parents' death, and will have to focus intensely if she wants to stay alive on the battlefield. Andrei, who's been tasked with keeping her alive, isn't thrilled.

Meanwhile, Esther and the crew are putt-putting their way through the skies in her second-hand transport plane. You would imagine that having Carlos Axion Jr. as a benefactor would result in maintenance worth a damn... but you'd be wrong. His position at the Scott Lab is as a mere advisor, as nobody in their right mind wants to feel indebted to him. Given how hard Crow worked to be cleansed of his debts, it's easy to imagine how seriously the rest of the Scott folks take the money thing. It's also easy to see how seriously Esther takes Crow, given how the thought of his freshly scrubbed nakedness sends her into full "L" mode.

Bizarre banter aside, the team does face the logistical problem of where to head next. Oz doesn't seem to be chasing them despite their near-slaughter of Treize, and it doesn't seem to be out of fear of stepping on Arrows' toes. Whatever the reason, Esther's team know they need resupply soon if they are to keep up their fight. They could always contact Catalon, though Catalon's methods seem uncomfortably different from the G-boys' own and Duo distrusts them on general principle. Then again, with so few allies they may not have any choice.

As fate would have it, Arrows forces are attacking a Catalon detachment nearby. Esther is adamant that the team help, which seems fortunate given

that the help the Catalan forces were promised by Klaus is nowhere to be seen. Esther takes a chance and sends her transport off on autopilot, luring about half of the Arrows forces on a wild goose chase after it. The tougher half are in for a personalized ass-whopping as the Catalan forces get the chance to beat a hasty retreat.

Help comes from an unexpected source: Tielia, in a Gundam he calls the C'est La Vie. It seems that the Celestial Beings are even more alive and kicking than anyone thought. Timely in that a group of DBs are on the way: they will keep Esther the DB-hunter tied up while the Gundams rain on Arrows' parade. Interestingly, the DBs seem to be ignoring Arrows entirely...

Once again, the DBs seem weakened relative to the last war, presumably due to Gaiou's death. Jinin's folks aren't doing so hot either, despite using one of the secretly-developed Ahead mecha. Jinin is determined to take out at least one Catalan unit before fleeing, but some mysterious long-range fire puts an end to that.

Of course, that stirs memories of Lockon, but everyone knows he's dead. Right? Of course, that's what they said about the Ptolemeios, and it makes a grand entrance before the team's very eyes. ...Well almost. This is actually the Ptolemeios 2, still crewed by some old friends and ready once more to rock and roll.

Reunion time, again! The first thing Esther and friends discover is that the P2 was designed from the ground up for armed combat. That said, it hasn't actually seen much action yet, so all those armaments are still being fine tuned. The crew have been doing a bit of tuning themselves, including messing with hair styles and adding a few new faces to replace ones last during the previous war. Allelujah isn't on hand, and the CBs have heard that the Feds have taken him prisoner. They had not heard that Setsuna is still alive, and the news gives them great hope for the fight ahead. They, like the G-boys, intend to take Oz and Arrows down -- and what better plan than for the Gundams of a feather to flock together?

#### CHAPTER 6D. Intervention

Kiriko's little hatch-opening stunt and subsequent wounds left him unconscious for three full days, and he's damn lucky to ever wake up again. Kan Yuu figures that the whole fiasco proves beyond any doubt that Kiriko is a spy, but Kiriko typically says not a word in reply. Gon Nuu has requested Kiriko's presence, and the thought of Kiriko grilled by his superior is music to Kan Yuu's ears.

Gon Nuu's plan is to give Arrows officer Lint an example of the PS system, in return for Kumen's official entrance into the Federation. Lint claims that PS's and other such projects are needed so they can consolidate "world peace" more quickly, and congratulates Gon Nuu on deciding to trust Arrows instead of giving the PS back to its Gilgamesh originators. The result will be Kumen getting largely burned to the ground, though Lint smirks that it will rise again like the seeds of some fire-fertilized redwood. He pledges to help Gon Nuu wipe out the Billar guerillas and slithers off, leaving Gon Nuu to fret about just how to actually steal the Gilgamesh army's crown jewel.

When Kan Yuu brings Kiriko in, Gon Nuu greets Kiriko in an almost paternal manner. Ignoring Kan Yuu completely, Gon Nuu tells Kiriko he's the army's trump card. Kiriko confirms that the blue AT he faced is piloted by a PS, and Gon Nuu orders him to invade Kangelmann castle to capture that PS. After a momentary pause, Kiriko agrees. Gon Nuu adds that Assemble Ex-10 is about to

stage all-out war on the Billar guerillas, and Kiriko's squad is to be the vanguard with him as leader. Kan Yuu is to be Kiriko's second-in-command, following a long and detailed recounting of his failings as commander... and you can guess how happy that makes him.

Kangelmann has a pep talk of his own for his troops, decrying the evils of modernization and mechanization that have driven his family's once-beautiful lands to the brink of ruin. He believes Upsilon and Phantom Lady can defend his traditional-values bid, and Upsilon at least sees this as a proud task. That pride might just, Kangelmann notes, be the death of him. Phantom Lady finds herself inexplicably fearing battle, but Upsilon promises to protect her and fight hard enough for the both of them. She is all he's got outside of battle... even though he knows that she thinks only of Kiriko. He vows to her to defeat Kiriko before her very eyes... which is possibly not the wisest thing for him to say.

Kiriko and his squad are going to have it pretty rough, even if the main army's attack draws some heat away from them. Unlike the secret-mongering the mercs are used to, Kiriko is quite willing to answer questions about their mission to capture the blue AT and it's PS pilot. Kiriko allows that his little tete-a-tete with the enemy PS was sort of a personal declaration of war, and Kidayla tells Kiriko that he plans on collecting that AT and the huge bounty attached to it. After all, if this mission succeeds and Kangelmann is killed (a task Potalia claims as his own), Kumen will finally experience peace -- and the mercs will simply move on to the next battlefield.

Kan Yuu phones Kiriko on a private channel before the battle, vowing to claim the blue AT for himself in order to present it to his boss. Kiriko welcomes him to try, having no interest in it himself. That comes as a shock to Kan Yuu, but when the enemy spots the squad there's no time to squawk about it.

Upsilon is nowhere near as hot of shit as he thinks he is, but he does have an advantage over Kiriko: a carefully laid ambush. He and Borow seem poised to get their wish of driving Kiriko from Phantom Lady's mind, but neither of them planned on Phantom Lady physically intervening on Kiriko's behalf. When she does so, with Borow aboard her helicopter, she buys Kiriko enough time to critically damage Upsilon's PT, sustaining enough damage herself that she's forced to land. Kiriko rushes to aid her, while Upsilon has no choice but to flee.

The remaining squad members have problems of their own, and not Upsilon's ambush: the Arrows forces have finally shown themselves. Lint has ordered them to destroy all belligerents, including his supposed allies from Assemble Ex-10. Kan Yuu is extremely quick to bugger off "in pursuit of Kiriko", leaving the rest of the crew to prevent the Feds from intervening any further into Kumeni affairs.

The Arrows forces are a tough nut to crack, but an ally is at hand: Setsuna! Never mind the fact that he's supposed to be dead -- he and his busted-ass Gundam are still terrorizing battlefields worldwide, and still a sight for very sore eyes among the former Zexis members. He only sticks around long enough to see that the current battle ends well, and jets off to continue surveying the extent to which the world has become warped. He does leave behind an ominous warning: Arrows have set their sights on Kumen, and if they're to be stopped it must be done quickly.

Kan Yuu meanwhile tracks down Fiana, figuring out that she too must be a PS. That explains why she tried to save Kiriko in his eyes, and as he tries to move in to capture her Kiriko arrives and bashes him out of the way. Kan Yuu is nothing if not determined, and Kiriko realizes quickly that

he's got no choice but to kill the guy to let Fiana escape... or at least drive him to the point of death.

At least Kiriko gets his reunion with Fiana at long last. Nearby, the old Zexis folks explain to the rest of the mercs in the squad that Kiriko has been searching for the female PS for a very long time... and that there's every possibility that he means to take her and simply escape into the jungle. The mercs are impressed that Karen knows one of the infamous Gundam pilots, and she explains that they've always been ones to fight the hard fight, especially where tyranny is involved. Translation: the team had better hurry if they're to head off a full Federation invasion of Kumen. Though they've lost their two commanders, they still intend to carry out the defeat of Kangelmann with Potalia in the lead. Karen thinks to Kiriko that he should just concentrate on spending time with Fiana.

They've certainly got a lot to talk about, starting with a thorough explanation from Fiana of exactly what the PS regimen includes. The "perfect" soldier apparently has to begin with a genetically-engineered child, followed by years of training, mental manipulation, and subliminal acquisition of all manner of combat knowledge. When Kiriko interrupted that training, Fiana also came to know something of simple humanity, and -- dare we say it? -- love. Unfortunately for her, Kiriko has also been learning during his lifelong pursuit of her. Even a year or so earlier, he'd have accepted her invitation to put all this behind them and flee. Now, however, he's determined to face Upsilon at Kangelmann castle -- he knows, and she too knows if she lets herself stop to think, that it's the only way for them to be together for long.

Still, Kiriko has to wonder why meeting Fiana hasn't ended the fighting. What is so important about rooting out the Secret Society? The ugly fact, burning deep within his heart, is that he has not yet broken free from Hell...

Meanwhile, Kangelmann has decided to launch an all-out assault from his side, now that Phantom Lady has been lost. Borow means to give Upsilon a new PT for this decisive battle, and vows to deliver Kangelmann victory. Kangelmann privately is more than a little peeved at having to rely on degenerates like Borow to achieve that "victory"... which is why he's elected to seek "defeat" instead: defeat, and death both for himself and all his rebel fighters. This isn't exactly music to Treize's ears when he phones up with confirmation of Arrows troops heading to Kumen, but Treize seems willing to go along with whatever Kangelmann has planned. Kangelmann will go to his grave convinced that his nation will rise from the flames reborn, and that if the world is really worth living in, temporary domination by the Federation won't be a problem for long. He has chosen to bet on the future, which is probably the right idea but also rather sucks for people in the present... such as his tea server Monica.

#### CHAPTER 7A. Battle for the Sorrowful Blue Donau!

Shirou responds to the revelation of his mother's identity with a predictable blend of stoicism and whimpering like a cretin. Tsubasa however isn't fazed one bit: she knows that Stroheim has ulterior motives for having his daughter lure Shirou here. She certainly didn't come all the way to Germany to set Shirou's genealogy straight -- she's here for one reason: the Gamia Q series of killer robots. Stroheim tells her not to rush things, and points out to Shirou that he's got another family member to meet.

See, once upon a time, the community of robot researchers boasted three luminaries: Kabuto Juuzou, Stroheim and Kabuto Kenzou. The three of them were involved in excavation of a place called Bardos Island... the place Shirou

had been told his father perished. What his father was actually doing was getting it on with "Nishigori", aka Tsubasa, who at the time was Stroheim's fiancée. Stroheim tried to take in Tsubasa and the child Kenzou gave her before his death, but Juuzou wasn't having it.

Instead a duel developed: Stroheim's robotics versus Juuzou's, and the winner would do with Tsubasa as he liked. Mazinger Z was Juuzou's creation then, but before the actual battle could occur, Stroheim himself perished and went to Hell. Ironically enough, that's where Stroheim met Doctor Hell... who resurrected the guy in return for him making the world's mightiest robot.

Branch, who butts in at this point, figures that he can just walk in and claim that robot. His men have already "dealt" with Stroheim's guardian androids, and he makes a single offer to the eccentric scientist to name his price. Branch says his employer is quite interested in how Stroheim was able to build a robot with a mind of its own. That is how Stroheim meant to win the bet: removing the latency that comes from a human pilot interfacing to the machine.

Too bad for Branch that there's only one rightful owner for this robot... and Ashura has come on behalf of that person. Branch is much displeased to learn that he and his men are 150,000% out of their depth, but at least has the sense to flee in disgrace when Ashura gives him the chance. Ashura then demands that Stroheim hand over the robot, despite his protests that it's not yet finished. Ashura declares that Dr. Hell can finish the rest, which leaves Stroheim no choice but to take Ashura out. He yells to Tsubasa to look after Shirou and Lorelai, and Ashura calls for her Iron Mask troops to counterattack.

That would be easier if Kouji and friends hadn't demolished them. Left with no other choice, Ashura runs off to execute his "final option", and Tsubasa tells Kouji to prepare for a Mecha-beast counterattack. As he dashes off, Kouji tells Shirou to look after his girlfriend. This leaves Stroheim to answer Tsubasa's questions: it was indeed he who built the Gamia-Q's for Dr. Hell. Tsubasa knows full well that only he, or Kenzou, could have mass produced something like that... and given that she's the one who killed Kenzou, she must have been quite afraid of the prospect of his return.

Tsubasa isn't going to let herself be drawn into a war of words, so Stroheim contents himself with inviting her to watch his robot kick Juuzou's robot's ass. Everything started at Bardos Island, the epitome of Mikeene Culture according to what shreds of records survive. There they dwelt, ancestors to the Greeks, protected by legendary giant warriors, until the day Zeus wiped them and all their might from the face of the Earth. Full name: Zeus Mazinger, and from what Stroheim can see from Juuzou's work, the legend made quite an impression.

Juuzou glimpsed what was behind the forbidden door Tsubasa couldn't stop him from opening: the glorious relic of the long departed god. Stroheim however saw nothing, and had the chance at a peaceful life surrounded by his beloved Donau river. Instead, he up and built Donau Alpha-1, craving a resolution for his duel with Juuzou that requires Shirou to bring to its fruition...

Ashura has a hard job ahead, trying to capture Stroheim's masterpiece with a Reaver F9 borrowed from Brocken. (S)he isn't going to waste this one last chance at redemption. The good news is that Branch's forces have fled entirely rather than face Ashura's wrath. The bad(?) news is that Ashura's got a remote control from Bardos Island that can drive Donau Alpha-1 just fine. When Stroheim tries to wrest the robot back, Ashura just zaps him and readies for the showdown with Mazinger.

With his dying soliloquy, Stroheim tells Lorelai his deep dark secret: she's not really his daughter. In fact, she is Donau Alpha-1, a robot with emotions, which Stroheim can no longer bear to hand over to Dr. Hell after the score with Mazinger is settled. What Ashura has is Lorelai's proper body -- Lorelai herself is its brain! Stroheim wasn't lying when he said that Donau wasn't complete, as Lorelai lacks one final thing: the experience of sorrow. Stroheim couldn't bear to do anything to Lorelai herself to make her sad, so his insane plan was to do horrible things to Shirou instead and achieve the same result.

How ironic then that Stroheim is perishing instead as the catalyst for her sorrow. His last wish to her is to defeat Mazinger Z and prove to the world that his tech is superior, engraving his name in the annals of history forever! She agrees, and he tells her to remove her hair ribbon (which turns out to be the Donau combination device) and complete the transformation to robot. Lorelai imperiously tells Shirou, scion of the Kabuto family, to butt out and does as her creator commands.

As she merges with the main body of the robot, its color changes from black to the beloved blue of the Donau river itself. Donau Alpha-1 informs Ashura that she's not his puppet, infuriated that Ashura's people have disturbed her quiet life with her father. Kouji is understandably confused to see Shirou's girlfriend incarnated as a stories-tall death engine, and though Lorelai can't wait to settle the score with him, she's got Ashura to squish first. Kouji tells the team to concentrate on the Mecha-beasts and not fight Shirou's girlfriend, and Shotarou tells Shirou to use his V-Con to communicate with Lorelai. This will require getting Tetsujin right up next to the thing...

When you do, Shirou gets to try his hand at persuading his girlfriend to stop being a psychotic killer gynecoid. Though she appreciates the effort, she's quite resolved to her course of bloodshed.

None of Ashura's forces pose the slightest threat to the mighty robots' duel. Stroheim expires before seeing the outcome, and his last words are to Tsubasa, to not let him come back from the dead this time. Tsubasa frowns mightily at how the "real" scientists always seem to prioritize their research over the rest of their lives. She also knows that it's not the "world" at large Stroheim wanted to see the superiority of his robot: it's Tsubasa herself. However, Tsubasa's more hardcore than Herr Doktor knew -- it is she who arranged the accident that killed him the first time. She needed what Juuzou was building that urgently...

As for Kouji, he's determined to let Lorelai have her shot, despite his teammates' and his brother's objections. If this is to be a showdown between the Kabuto and Heinrich families, then so be it. Lorelai puts up a good fight, but ultimately can't defeat Kouji and Mazinger Z. With a final apology to Shirou, she races off into the night... presumably to avoid Shirou seeing her die.

Is all this so sad because Lorelai actually had a mind? Would it have been better if she was just a brainless machine? Tough questions indeed. Tsubasa's lips curl in an evil sneer as she contemplates Stroheim's final act of "science", stealing his own daughter's future. Then again, she knows full well that she's hardly any better qualified as a parent...

After the battle, Esther takes Shirou under her wing for some impromptu counseling. Her own troubled background makes her more the voice of experience than most people here. Tsubasa comes over to the other pilots to congratulate them, telling Kouji to ask Shirou why she's in Germany. For now, she's got news for Kouji: she's evicting him from Kurogane-Ya. His training may be

incomplete, but Dr. Hell and the others rotting the world from the shadows are about to make a move in a big way. These punks from the Robot Mafia are just the tip of a vast iceberg, as her many years have made abundantly clear. And unless she's suddenly gone senile, the battle to come will get even worse than the previous war.

Every one of the pilots has their reasons to persevere anyway, and Kouji swears on Shirou and Lorelai's tears not to ever lose or let anyone experience that grief again. And what timing: word has just arrived from Ootsuka that it's time to return to Japan and join the Crushers and S.M.S. There's been no sign of Ankokuji, who's been investigating the Gamia-Q's all over Germany, but Tsubasa is sure he'll turn up at some point soon. Tsubasa will be heading home too, just as glad that she didn't have to deal with her erstwhile husband coming back to life. She's got plenty else on her plate as it is.

When Dr. Hell learns that Ashura and Brocken failed, he sighs and says that he's got no choice but to use "it" instead. Dangerous, yes, but according to the Black Knowledge, timing is running out for them all. Dr. Hell tells Pigman to have Brocken buy them all time while he gets "it" ready for battle. Pigman himself is to investigate Branch, in preparation for Dr. Hell to enlist the Robot Mafia's help in saving the world.

#### CHAPTER 7B. Dimension Warp Zone

The first concert in the Twinkle Project tour gets off to a jaw-dropping start, as Sheryl seems determined to make up for all the time she spent recuperating. Ranka is rocking too, and Grace loves every moment of it: the more the "Little Queen" sings, the more "they" will be drawn to the area. And that will open the door to the future. Let the Superdimensional Cinderella call for the the flames of battle! And let the bootleggers get their microphones ready: the new song "Lion" isn't going to be performed anywhere except for this tour...

One group of people not at the concert at the S.M.S./Crusher squad, whose brief "shore" leave at the Frontier fleet is mainly being spent on guard duty. The recent additions to the team can only sigh in envy of the Zexis pilots and all the hanging out they've done with the two idol stars. Ozuma's even made peace with the thought of Ranka pursuing a career as a singer, which makes it easier for him (and hence his subordinates) to leave on their next assignment with a clear conscience.

That assignment is checking out the last unexplored "dark zone" in the solar system: a spot far distant from all habitations and shipping lanes. This is a rather special dark zone however, insofar as every previous attempt to survey it has resulted in the surveyors going missing. It seems spacetime in the area has been badly warped by the Breaking, which may be connected to precisely how the Frontier fleet got to this world in the first place: the zone is uncomfortably close to the fleet's current position.

This so-called "Dimension Warp Zone" is space's equivalent to the surface's Dark Continent, and should make for "exciting" adventuring at the very least. Esther is so ready to get in there and maybe fight some DBs. She's got all her catchphrases operational as the team venture into the cosmic Bermuda Triangle, whose dimensional waters start out calm. Takeru's got a bad feeling though, and given he's an Esper that's worth heeding.

In fact, trouble shows up almost immediately in the form of a Gishin detachment. Gel is on hand, as is Varen -- both of whom are supposed to be dead. Takeru isn't buying the "raised by the Powers of Darkness" explanation, but however they came back the fact is the team has to fend them off. The

two revenants announce that they're going to head for the Frontier fleet and its buildup of energy, which is all the more reason for the Skull Squad to seal their doom.

No sooner does battle begin than a bunch of Vajra Fold into the area, seemingly intent on attacking both sides. At least the fact they Folded means that there isn't a Nest hiding around here somewhere. Along behind them comes Bardeos of all things, victim of a loused-up Subspace Jump. Its pilots are quick to grasp the tactical situation, and worries about precisely how they got here will have to wait till later.

Further into the battle, two new DBs show up: big ones, who seem more intent on protecting each other and watching the battle than on participating in it. They still need extermination, of course.

The Gishin folks have Mars worried more: they seem bound and determined to attack the idol stars' concerts, and Mars begins to suspect that they're somehow after the musical energy those concerts unleash. In any case, the explosions the team sees certainly makes it look like Gel and Valen have finally died the final death this time...

There must be something weird about this place, given how the DBs and the Gishin showed up all at once. Detailed analysis will have to be done back at HQ, so for now the team can withdraw to (relative) safety. Marin won't rest easy though -- what he saw in Subspace disturbed him greatly, even if it didn't register on sensors and is "probably" just his imagination [read: OH SO TOTALLY not his imagination...]

Before the Quarter can rejoin the Frontier fleet, Mishima phones up with new orders: the S.M.S. and Crushers are to head to Earth. Mishima reminds Jeffrey that the Frontier government has the right to determine the S.M.S.'s posting, and says they've determined that the regular army can handle the sporadic threat of the Vajra and Gishin. Lunacy perhaps, but orders are orders and Ootsuka of the Crushers probably has something useful for the Valkyries to do. Jeffrey presumes that Mishima has gotten the S.M.S.'s owner's permission for all this, and heads to the Earth as the Frontier fleet's representative.

That is a super-fishy way of putting it, and Cathy wishes she could guess what her fiancée Mishima is really up to. Nor has she seen Mishima in some time, and the bridge bunnies can't help but suspect that Cathy may be having feelings for her old flame Ozuma again. Ifso, Bobby might have a thing or two to say about it. In any event, it's off to Earth for the Quarter and its crew.

The usual reunioning for the Bardeos crew is tempered by the knowledge that something was able to deliberately drag them out of Subspace and into this world. The other Crushers in God Sigma are glad Marin and friends are okay, and assure him that they can handle the rest of their mission while he hangs out near Earth. Ozuma comes to break the news of the trip to the Earth to the pilots, saying that he himself will be staying behind on the Frontier fleet to run a little errand (something sort of to do with Ranka, maybe). While he's gone, Alto will be in command of the Skull Squad. Luka asks to stay with the Frontier fleet as well to help research what the deal is with the Vajra, leaving the squad with just two planes. Still, it's not such a bad assignment, and Ozuma even gives Alto a Tornado Pack to improve his combat abilities in the skies of the Earth. Esther just hopes she can run into Crow now that the battlefield is shifting back to the surface...



Setsuna takes Hiiro to a city devastated by Arrows attack, doomed by nothing more than the rumor that Catalan agents were nearby. This sort of sight is becoming frightfully common nowadays, and Oz is in danger of joining Arrows as a perpetrator. Setsuna tells Hiiro that they're both partially responsible for letting things reach this point, as they weren't able to root out those who perverted their quest to change the world. There's no time to stand around looking pathetic though: Hiiro needs to head to the Oz base at Anballer, where Setsuna's heard Hiiro's Gundam is being kept. With that, Setsuna parts company with Hiiro, and Hiiro explains to a passing refugee girl that they've all got their battles to fight.

Aboard the Ptolemy-2, the team feast their eyes on a new set of Gundams Ian's been readying for the CBs. They're all improvements over the previous series, and there's even a long-range sniperbot... for You Know Who. Esther is asked to give it a try, but she protests that she's a rank amateur at firearms, relying on Crow's motion data for the Blaster-Es's gunnery. As valuable as his sniping was, Lockon was even more valuable for his human relations acumen -- forging the diverse Meisters into a bona fide team. Esther wishes the G-boys could have someone like that.

The pilots leave their mecha in Ian's care and head off to plan the team's next move. As they're heading out though, Ian asks Esther if the es uses a "VX". She hasn't been told the real nature of the Sphere, hearing only that the thing's darned expensive and thus unsuitable for a mass-production mech. Probably just as well that she hadn't been told the Truth(tm). As it is, Ian and Milena will still have their hands full: indications are that Ioria may have more surprises like the Trans-Am system in store. One has to wonder if the Colonial "Gundams" and the Celestial Beings' "Gundams" have something more in common than just their name.

Tielia's plan is for the team to head to Anballer, on a tip from Liu Mei that a Gundam's there. As that base is home to Oz's mecha test program, there's every possibility that it's what's left of Hiiro's Wing Gundam. Further, info's come in that Zechs Marquis has headed to the base, presumably to be a test pilot for whatever new machine they're developing based on the Wing Gundam's wreckage. They've got to be stopped, and fast, even if it means tangling with Quatro, Shinn and the others. After all, it's only fair to repay Hiiro's time-buying self-destruction by cleaning up the the mess he left behind.

Camille and Shinn are indeed watching the team's approach, and not from their cockpits either. It would seem their Gundams are being held in secured hangars on this base, and only a very high-ranking officer could get anyone inside. Then again, by not sortying they won't have to fight their old comrades-in-arms.

Tielia is in forward command, quite a bit calmer than what Crow described to Esther. He tells her that he had to change if he wanted to change the world, which is a pretty good way to look at it if you ask me. Quatro commands the troops to surround and overpower the Gundams, and he inwardly thinks to Camille that Camille is going to have to settle his doubts by himself... just as Quatro is doing.

Hiiro tries to use the battle as cover to sneak into the base, but is discovered all too quickly. Alex and Muller fly over in their mecha and proceed to attack the clearly un-mecha-ed guy, in violation of every rule of war there is. The two Oz pilots won't heed Esther's cries to stop, but maybe they'll heed Zechs' fury. Of course not, and not only do they not heed him, they take it into their heads that he needs to be punished too.

BIG mistake. Zechs cuts the two of them in half when they won't quit, lamenting how the times have warped their minds before proclaiming that they don't deserve to possess strength. Realizing that he's come to the point of no return, he lands and dismounts to face Hiiro. After ascertaining that neither of them are operating under their real name, Zechs tells Hiiro that he's prepared a gift for him: the Wing Gundam, fully repaired. He tells Hiiro to fight him with it. Hiiro is willing to use any means available to help make up for his past mistakes, and says he'll offer thanks to Zechs in his own way. His unrelenting eyes are what Zechs was hoping to see: the eyes of a true warrior, unbound by vain aesthetics or other martial-romantic twaddle. If that's why Zechs wants to fight Hiiro, Hiiro is all for it... and he means to take Zechs' life in the process.

With all this going on, what should Camille and friends do? Their dilemma is solved when Treize phones up and announces to them that, on his authority as Oz supreme commander, their Gundams are now cleared for use. He tells them to saddle up, and to fight who they judge to be their enemy. Shinn at least knows who that enemy is: both Oz and Arrows.

All this makes for a pretty confusing scene to the pilots already sortied, but they work it out quickly enough. Camille announces to Quatro that he and the others are leaving Oz, vowing to take it down now that it's lost sight of itself. Realizing that Treize must have set all this up deliberately, Quatro orders Camille and the others to fly as far as their treacherous wings will take them.

Zechs isn't satisfied with a duel for "points" -- he wants a true life-or-death showdown. Hiiro is about to give it to him when, of all people, Rilina shows up! Zechs reflexively calls her "Princess" Rilina, marking himself a resident of Cinq Kingdom. Rilina heard from Noin that Zechs would try something like this, and tells him that the duel is already decided. She orders him in the name of the Peacecraft family to sheath his sword, and Zechs likes the strength he hears in her voice. All the same, he means to carry out revenge for all the subordinates Hiiro has killed.

Rilina counters that fighting out of hatred just leads to more fighting... to no avail. She complains to Noin that the commander she loves so much seems to be a bloody beast, not the person Noin told her to come try to dissuade from fighting. Noin understands her view, but says that she still believes in whatever Zechs is trying to do.

Genuinely pissed off at this point, Rilina orders Hiiro to demolish Zechs and clear the shame that Cinq has to endure by having one of its own as part of sucktastical Oz. Noin begs her to rescind the order, no matter how justified -- it's too sad for Rilina to desire her own brother's death! Yes, Zechs' real name is Milliard Peacecraft, and at that revelation, Zechs finally decides to flee and save the duel with Hiiro for later.

Hiiro notes that Rilina seems to have found her answer, and he is in fact. Hiiro flies off ahead, letting his once-and-future teammates chat with Rilina.

Later, Treize phones Zechs for a status report. He tells Zechs not to sweat Camille and friends' departure: that was his "mistake" in authorizing them the use of their Gundams. And Zechs is not to be reprimanded for punishing the two very out-of-line Oz soldiers either. On the other hand, secretly refurbishing the Wing Gundam and directly handing it over to a wanted terrorist isn't acceptable, and Treize tells Quatro he's in command of the squad while Zechs' punishment is decided. Zechs and Quatro clearly have their own agendas, and for whatever reason both those agendas require sticking with Oz for now.

Noin rendezvous with the team, greeting the pilots she's faced across the battlefield so often as an ex-Oz operative. Most of the pilots are amazed that Rilina turns out to be a princess, but the CBs have known about it for ages. Setsuna in fact was assigned to keep an eye on her in Area 11, given how influential Cinq Kingdom was in the AEU before its destruction. Veda forecast that someone would try to use her as a pawn, and whaddya know, they did! Rilina told Noin quite a bit about Hiiro, and although it's doubtful they're lovers (much to Esther's disappointment @@) it is clear that Rilina has great respect for Hiiro as a sort of noble predator, with her the prey. Having seen Hiiro battling her beloved Zechs, Noin can sort of identify with that.

Rilina has become an outspoken enemy of the Federation and its policy of the strong trampling the weak, gathering more supporters to her Absolute Pacifism every day. It seems that at long last, she's on the same side as the G-boys and CBs, whose perseverance has been a major inspiration to Noin and Rilina both. Well, they'll have more help from now on: Camille and friends are throwing in their lot with them too -- thereby completing the transformation of "Gundam" into a symbol of dissent.

Oz's defeat today should keep them quiet for a while, so the group expect Arrows to be their main problem for now. Noin's heard that they're busy in Kumen, trying to expand Federation influence with their usual underhanded methods. Word is that Karen and the other Black Knight survivors have managed to elude the Arrows forces, and Duo figures they might appreciate a lift from the Ptolemy-2. Quatre has Rasheed start working on contacting them, and it seems to be farewell for now between the rebels and the Cinq Kingdom folks. The Gundam pilots can only hope that Quatro will do whatever he needs to do and part from Oz before they're forced to take him down. Certainly they can all cheer on Cinq Kingdom's good work.

After Team Gundam leave, Rilina emerges, finally calmed down. Pargan apologizes to her for not telling her about her brother, but given that he's the only reason she's still alive -- having spirited her out of Cinq Kingdom before its downfall -- she can't be too upset with him. Noin tells Rilina that Zechs swore revenge on the AEU that day, siding with Oz as the fastest way to assemble the necessary firepower. He's told Noin that he's got too much blood on his hands to lead the revival of Cinq, and believes that Rilina is the best suited. Poor Zechs seems to be losing sight of himself as the new Federation subverts Oz's mission, and the fight versus the Gundams seems to be the only way the warrior in him can stay focused and ready when Cinq calls.

Rilina asks if Noin thinks Zechs found himself. Noin can only hope so, as she loves Zechs deeply and isn't afraid to admit it. Rilina tells her to keep watching over her brother, tough though that task may be thanks to their Peacecraft blood. Rilina and Pargan will be returning to Cinq itself, where certain people are there awaiting her return. She can only hope that her path will cross Hiiro's once more.

Meanwhile, in some anonymous yet luxurious location, Ribbons is chatting with Liu Mei by videophone. Ribbons still has Veda, and with it "all" information fit to print in the world. The topic is the CBs, who have now officially re-entered world events thanks to the info that Liu Mei leaked. She cautions him that the CBs' war power is on the rise again, but Ribbons sniffs that it's well within expected parameters and nothing to worry about. Besides, if they don't act, the world will simply get bored... which is the last thing he wants. Liu Mei asks if that's what Ioria wanted, and he tells her to think of it as what he wants. He says that her role will be to lead the CBs, and says he'll call again when the time is right.

As she hangs up, Ribbons observes to Boone in particular that humans are cruel,

and therefore easily controlled. Rijeene then walks in with some guests of Ribbons, and he asks him to wait outside. Rijeene accedes, which is nothing more or less than Ribbons expects of him. The guest turns out to be none other than Amuro, and it took forever to set this meeting up. He introduces himself as the "Innovator", and tells Amuro to tell him of what revolution awaits mankind after all the fighting has ended. Amuro presumably had no idea who this dude was when he had him transferred here from Oz, and he's definitely not so sure about the guy now...

#### CHAPTER 7D. A Turn for the Worse

Word reaches Club Phantom that Kiriko has finally found Fiana, having left the squad to do so. Kokona realizes that Kiriko might not be coming back, and given that the warfare in this country is about over there's little reason for Goat the arms march ant to stick around either. Kokona clearly isn't sure how to feel about this, but Vanilla tells her to buck up and concentrate on making enough money to survive. Kiriko will be back one day, with a bride, and they need to have a place for him to call home. Besides, it's a waste for Kokona to cry tears for Kiriko when there's "someone else" close by who cares for her.

The little heart-to-heart talk gets interrupted by explosions and air raid sirens: the Federation army has apparently decided to attack Kumen. Lint explains to the thunderstruck Gon Nuu that he's decided not to wait for the Billar guerillas to be dealt with, and tells him to blame his own incompetence in not laying hands on the PS system faster. Of course, Lint meant to pull this all along, especially since he's got the Secret Society on his side. All that remains is for the squad sent to Kangelmann castle to clean up the rebels, and they have a knight who's even more thorough than Lint himself is. This sounds like a great plan, until word arrives of a Gundam at Ex-10...

Airy tells Borow to kill Proto One if he can't capture her, insisting that Upsilon complete his transformation to PS at all costs. Airy orders Upsilon to do nothing other than show him the maximum, peerless power of the PS system. To that end, Airy is giving him the latest AT, specially designed to directly funnel a At's combat potential into its actuators. Borow adds that Kumen is about to collapse, and what matters most is for Upsilon to pursue and demolish Kiriko. No worries about Kangelmann -- he knew he was going to lose from before he ever started this war. Ultimately, Upsilon needs to show the Assemble mercs the power of his AT and bug the hell out. Interestingly, it seems Kiriko himself has decided to kick off the hostilities...

Actually, it's Kiriko plus Fiana, and they're after Borow himself. The Black Knights show up in short order to help, impressed to see that Kiriko and his woman have not run off to hide, but instead opted to fight through their problems. Battle with Upsilon is now inevitable, and that suits Kiriko fine.

The problem with Upsilon showing up in his fancy new mech is that Federation forces aren't far behind... and leading them is none other than Suzaku! He announces as "Knight of Seven" that the army's objective is to vanquish all those who threaten the peace of Kumen. He orders both the loyalists and guerillas to be attacked, without exception. The Arrows troops aren't entirely sure they like being ordered around by one of the Knights of the Round, still independent despite Britannia's assimilation into the Federation. They stand as a testament to the Britannian emperor's continued power if nothing else.

Karen is OH SO GLAD to see Suzaku, which translates to wanting to kill his ass as dead as possible. He makes no reply to Karen's accusations of using force to bend others to his will, and Potalia tells the rest of the team

they've got no choice but to attack all Kumen's enemies -- including the dreaded Lancelot.

Suzaku may tell himself that he has no regrets, that he's doing the most expedient thing to bring about peace, but nobody else seems to be buying it. He does ask Karen why she continues to fight when Zero's dead, adding that she has no future if she continues battling. He takes off before she can answer, leaving her VERY pissed off in his wake.

Upsilon discovers quickly that his little "test flight" is fraught with peril too. He flees in panic back to Borow when his new mech shows signs of being crap, and Kiriko and Fiana seize the opportunity to follow. Potalia tells Karen, C.C. and Esther to follow Kiriko while he goes to kill Kangelmann. Kidayla and Shakko get to hold off any stray enemies headed toward the palace, which in Kidayla's view is a superb chance to level up his "kill count".

Potalia knows he's got to hurry before Arrows arrives, and before long he runs into Monica. He tells her he's fighting as part of Assemble to see Kumen modernized, and asks what she's fighting for. Before she can answer, she gets machine-gunned by one of the Biller guerillas. As she lays bleeding to death, she tells Potalia that this whole war is just a farce, an experiment in Kangelmann's eyes. She tells him where Kangelmann is, and with her last breath tells him she's glad she saw him one more time.

Borow meanwhile is readying his getaway, aggravated that Upsilon didn't bug out at the first sign of Arrows trouble. Too bad for him that Kiriko and Fiana are hot on his trail, and keep him from leaving. Kiriko knows that he's got to die as one of the Secret Society's commanders, but also knows that Borow isn't the true mastermind behind all his troubles. He asks Borow why he brought Fiana and Upsilon to Kumen, and Borow admits that the PS's still have mental problems to work out. It's a matter of how to link their emotions and their fighting abilities.

Ultimately, both Proto One and Upsilon have proved too fickle. The only way to make a truly perfect weapon is to imbue a PS with pure malice. And sadly, there's no way to reverse what's already been done to the PS candidates. At this point Upsilon shows up, trashing Kiriko's mech and knocking him to the ground. He dismounts so as to fight Kiriko on even footing, but Fiana points her Mach's guns at him and tells him to leave Kiriko alone. She insists that she can shoot him, because she loves Kiriko. What she manages to do is kill Borow and wound Upsilon...

...whereat a bunch of military types show up and seize her. Karen rescues Kiriko from getting gunned down, insistent that they've got no leeway to rescue Fiana before fleeing. As he vanishes into the underbrush, Upsilon vows to overcome his disgrace and kill Kiriko in front of Fiana one day...

Potalia finally makes his way to Kangelmann, who's astonished to see his old friend here. Potalia wants to know why Kangelmann, if he is his friend, betrayed him. Kangelmann curses Potalia for being too dense to understand what he's been through, and won't give Potalia a straight answer as to why he started the war. Apparently it really was an "experiment" of some kind to Kangelmann, and Potalia means to make him pay using Kumen's traditional sword form, "Balancing". This is risky, since Kangelmann used to beat him three-to-two at that martial art, but Potalia's got a motive now.

Also, Kangelmann makes no attempt to dodge. He tells Potalia that it's time for the old ways to end, that rebellion against the old is the best way to motivate the young. Indeed, Kangelmann planned to die all along, and take

with him every vestige of the old order. That's his role as king. He figures he's about to go to hell, and Kumen is about to be pressed into the Federation. Arrows, at this very moment, is probably burning both the palace and Assemble Ex-10, but there's a secret route out of the country that nobody else knows. He tells Potalia to keep fighting those who would forestall the future's arrival.

Potalia can only allow himself a few tears for Monica and his beloved friend, and then heads to rendezvous with the rest of the team. Karen apologizes to Kiriko for taking him away from his ladyfriend, but Kiriko thanks her for her levelheaded decision. They're joined by not only Kidayla and Shakko, but also Vanilla and co. They were saved from Ex-10 by a certain mean-eyed Gundam pilot (that would be Setsuna), and have come to deliver a huge sum of dough to Karen to help with the war effort. That'll certainly come in handy as Karen reassembles the Black Knights, and although Vanilla wants it repaid someday he considers himself one of the Black Knights' biggest supporters. Vanilla also passes word that the team is to meet up with friends of Quatre's who'll be waiting for them at the border. Potalia and friends will stay and do what they can within Kumen, but it'll be up to Karen and friends to finish breaking down the old order and bringing about a new, better one.

The final stroke is when Kan Yuu sticks his head out, thinking to command his former subordinates to kill Kiriko for a long litany of crimes. He is the one deserving death for all the suffering he's caused, and the team carry that out with unusual speed. Nobody is left to stop the team now.

As the green-and-red hell that is Kumen vanishes in the distance, Kiriko ponders Fiana's word: "love". Once it meant nothing to him, but now it will be a small candle in his heart to light the way in the next hell he'll face.

Behind him, Rochina gloats over the brief time Kiriko got to spend with Fiana. He's interested to see where Kiriko will head next, and inwardly tells Kiriko that he's always in the palm of "his" hand. Rochina means to see the fate of Kiriko, the abnormal life form, to the very end...

## CHAPTER 8AB. A Storm Threatens

[I kept route 7A as a step towards getting Lorelai]

The reunion of the Crushers is, alas, no cause for celebration, coming as it does on the wings of a rising storm of bloodshed. The Robot Mafia have grown too powerful for the world's police to handle, Dr. Hell is up to his old tricks, and the specters of Vajra and Gishin fighters menace the skies above. PLUS there's Gundams stirring revolt, which Jeffrey at least isn't terribly surprised by. In fact, a part of him is even cheering them on, given all the doubts he has about the present state of the Federation. Doubts, as he points out to Saeki, that he's entitled to as one of the people who helped found the Federation in the first place. And lest there be any doubt, he says that he agrees with resistance to the current Federation state -- NOT to the very concept of the Federation itself. Otherwise, he and his men wouldn't be here helping fend off mankind's common enemies. Saeki isn't entirely convinced by that yet, but Jeffrey is sure he'll come around in time.

As all the various organizations represented have worked together before, Ootsuka predicts little trouble with operations going forward. The pilots, and the staffers, have already started bonding... and where better to get in some final R&R than at the Kurogane-Ya in Atami?

While soaking up the seaside breeze, the pilots quickly take to shoptalk,

including the apparent Vajra stragglers and the strange force that aborted Marin's subspace teleport near the "Dimension Warp Zone". Oh, and those Gishin ghost-type folks, who Sirius writes off as mere mortals who turned out to be better at soaking damage than everyone thought. Such worries seem far away compared to the immediate problem of how Esther will explain her sort-of-crush/sort-of-love for Crow.

There's yet another new member to keep track of: a Crusher cadet named "Namida". Which is TOTALLY NOT like a bad omen or anything! His day job is helping at the base cafe, but apparently he's got enough potential to have started the training. He came here with Takeru's mother Shizuko, who hit it off with Tsubasa right away and has often joined her for tea. That tea isn't going smoothly today though, as Kouji and Tsubasa appear to be having a bit of an argument. Could this be related to the mess with Shirou [that you could have read on the appropriate path above]?

Kouji indeed has questions for Tsubasa: questions that need answering. He now knows that she's his and Shirou's mother, as well as their father's killer. Kouji is understandably reluctant to accept her as his mom, but she cautions him that his beloved Juuzou knew everything all along. Kouji tries protesting that she probably just intimidated him into silence, but Tsubasa berates him as still just a kid, and a kid without full knowledge of the facts. Like she told him: he'd better be able to touch the elusive Oyasu in a fight before daring to contradict her to her face. Showing admirable restraint under the circumstances, Kouji growls that he plans to hold her to that and stalks off. Shizuko overheard the exchange, and tries to assure Tsubasa that her son is strong enough to accept the truth in time. Tsubasa, however, has reason to suspect that the whole truth might turn Kouji even more against her...

Kouji heads straight to the courtyard to face off against Oyasu, which is an exercise in futility given his unmastered rage. Tsubasa's minions watch from the sidelines, figuring that no advise they would give would get through to the guy in his current state. The Elements however come from a different school of thought, having learned from Commander Fudou's unconventional methods that sometimes a change of perspective is needed.

Apollo gets in Kouji's way long enough to convince him to take off his shoes. Fudou used that to teach them visceral appreciation of the Earth's life force, which doesn't seem immediately relevant to Kouji. It does, however, serve to break up the action and get him to calm down some. Apollo isn't big on articulating the spiritual mumbo-jumbo, but he does know that Kouji is focusing too much on his hands -- if he wants to touch Oyasu, he needs to ram her with his entire body. At least, that's how Apollo thinks when he fires his Infinite Punch, and how Ryouma once described his Righteous Fist Strike.

Bad news arrives just then: unknown forces are approaching the Photon Power Laboratory! Well, maybe it's not all bad, given that this is the new joint team's first real dispatch. Of course Kouji will be in the vanguard defending his home base. He'll have to do so without the Jet Scrander though, as it's down for maintenance -- incredibly relevant to the previous discussion, as the enemies today are Dr. Hell's flying robots! Their leader is Brocken, who has the unsettling habit of wandering around with his head in his hands like some sort of bad horror novel. As Brocken and Kouji trade bluster, Dr. Yumi realizes that Dr. Hell may have figured out the lab's secret.

Jeffrey designates a final line of defense around the base, telling the team that he's confident they can keep the bad guys out -- the best he can do, as he tells Saeki, given that the enemy's intentions are unclear. The psychology is undeniable, as all the pilots get super fired up.

The team quickly chew through Brocken's cannon fodder, forcing him to use his "trump card", the Mechabeast Birdon B7. It is very fast, too fast for the naked eye to follow in fact, and easily evades Kouji's Rocket Punch. Kouji's friends have to remind him of the special training he's just undergone, and when he gets his head clear he's able to hit the thing anyway. With the newly repaired Scrander now available, Kouji isn't going to lose any more today!

Brocken is defeated so soundly that he loses his head, as it were. He's still got enough composure to order his men to retreat and save their flagship, lest they simply repeat Ashura's record for gross incompetence. There was never any real doubt that the team would prevail against Dr. Hell's stooges -- the question is, what about the bigger enemies lurking in the shadows? That's why Kouji wants to return to Atami for a bit, which Jeffrey allows without even having to ask the reason. He knows that Kouji'll come back an even stronger man.

Back at Bardos Island, news of the battle hangs heavy in the air. While Brocken failed to defeat Mazinger, he did manage to divert its and Tsubasa's attention a bit longer from what Dr. Hell is really up to. Ashura wants another shot at Kouji and friends, not just as a diversion but to kill them once and for all. This Dr. Hell does not permit, given how the current stock of Mechabeasts is obviously not up to the task. The remedy will come from the island's deepest forbidden depths, from which Ashura feels a strange sense of familiarity mixed in with the grief and rage that assail his/her every fiber. Is it the ancient Mikeene memories within that are stirring? Dr. Hell tells Ashura that he must acquire all power in time for the Final Day he saw in the Black Knowledge, and prepares to make final adjustments to the dreaded Kedra...

Kouji's flown straight to Kurogane-Ya, where Tsubasa is waiting for him. Kouji thanks her for the kindness she's shown him and Shirou, but says that it's time for him to part ways, if indeed Tsubasa truly killed his father. She doesn't deny the deed, saying that Kenzou was as good as dead even without her lifting a finger. Still, there was a reason she had to kill him with her own hands, the same hands that will close around Kouji if he ever matures enough to be worthy of the whole truth. Kouji's response, calm and a bit sad, is to tell Shirou that the Photon Power Lab is their new home. He passes along thanks to Cross and the others and trudges off, Tsubasa watching him go all the while. She knows that unless he can truly master Mazinger's power, both she and the world at large are finished. She'd rather have him hate her, with all his heart, if doing so will make him even one iota stronger...

#### CHAPTER 8CD. Twin Drive

[I kept 7D, for "Zero Points" toward a brighter(?) future.]

Cue the reunion, and read above if you want to know what people've been up to. Up to no good, if the Federation is to be believed. The Feds have Allelujah locked up somewhere, but most of the rest of the usual suspects are alive and on the warpath. That includes Hiroy, whose Gundam was reassembled by none other than Zechs "Who Was That Masked Man" Marquis of Oz, but does NOT include Chang "Err, Actually I'm Left-Handed After All" Wufei who's busy getting over his duel with Treize. Karen is just glad that she and the CBs genuinely share an objective this time around.

The G-boys have fixed Kiriko up a new mech, complete with the Scarlet Letter<sup>W</sup>Red Shoulder coloration and weapons pack. Kiriko, who's acting a bit more like a human being thanks to all his time with Fiana, is duly grateful. Just in time it seems for the group's first mission, which is



an assault on a supply depot in the Gobi Desert -- actually a Federation prison rumored to contain all kinds of heavily-guarded folks. The briefing is carried out by Milena, Ian's much-prettier daughter, and Tielia, who indicate that the mission will actually be to support a Catalan force seeking to save some folks bagged by Arrows. This wouldn't usually be necessary, or even desirable given Catalan's penchant for indiscriminate terrorism, but the Gobi base has an extra-special guard these days: the Knight of Seven.

Kururugi Suzaku, who was once numbered among the Zexis stalwarts, is now at the top of Karen's shitlist... which should make for an interesting battle! But first, we have to meet some of the other folks whose lives are at stake... such as poor Saji, incarcerated for aiding Catalan when all he really did was help build Space Colonies. Suzaku has in fact come to see him, using his special license to get the warden to leave the two of them alone. He tells Saji that Ashford Academy, and all its Council members, are all undamaged in the wake of the Black Rebellion, and intimates he may be able to get Saji released.

That is, IF Saji satisfies him that he had nothing to do with the Black Knights before he went off to space. Suzaku accuses him of being a Black Knights agent, tasked with gathering information on Britannians and then conveniently transferring out of school just before the shooting started. Saji is totally bewildered, countering that Suzaku knows precisely why he dropped out of school: to make his dreams of life with Louise come true. Saji shows enough unfiltered indignation at the insinuation that Louise's dreadful accident was deliberate that Suzaku relents, never exactly apologizing for suspecting his former classmate of espionage. Saji mutters that Suzaku's changed, and Suzaku responds that he didn't do so by choice. Suzaku then gets up to leave, NOT planning on seeing that Saji is released after all -- who does Saji think he is, asks Suzaku, that he should be treated specially? Apparently Suzaku's once-famed commitment to justice has been put out to pasture (or is that "shot in the head") in the interest of world peace.

This bitter parting is interrupted by air raid sirens, announcing the arrival of you-know-who. Catalan forces are in the lead, and they are getting slaughtered in a major hurry by Suzaku's Lancelot. Watching from the sidelines, Louise muses about the tale of the lowly Eleven who's risen to the Knights of the Round. His composure is tested when a new contender arrives: a Gundam! Jinin is content to let Suzaku take it on, but its pilot has other things on his mind. Setsuna remembers these bloodstained sands well, and they are nothing like the world he, or Lockon, envisioned.

Setsuna is more than the regular troopers can handle, but one busted Gundam is no match for a top-end KMF... especially with Suzaku at the controls. Suzaku demands to know why the CBs insist on causing more fighting in the world, but is prevented from finishing him off by the arrival of the the cavalry. The spat between the CBs and Arrows, severe though it is, is a first-world problem compared to the blood feud between Karen and Suzaku. She owes him for a certain incident, and is hardly inclined to listen when he calls her "obsessed with the past". There's no reason to wonder if combat is "inevitable" or not -- just start shooting people's asses!

Suzaku defends his interference with Kumeni affairs by saying that they were a source of friction -- sure to seed dangerous ideas to their neighboring states. Unity is Peace(tm)! Karen is SO not having that.

Still, the battle is dragging on for purely plot-based reasons, and the team find themselves wishing for even one more unit to "even the odds". That would be Setsuna, who's about to receive a new mech from Ian: the 00 ("Double-Oh"). Ian transplanted the GN Drive from the Exia into it, so it's now the first

Gundam with two of the darn things thanks to the sensibly-named Twin Drive System. The other GN Drive came straight from the CB's first Gundam, the 0 ("Zero"), and it appears Ioria deliberately made the Exia's GN Drive with numerous similarities for easy linkage. Like the Trans-Am system, this is 200 year-old science, so there's no telling if it'll actually work.

Early indications are "no", as Setsuna is forced to sortie before the two GN Drives are stable. But of course it works out at the last second, resulting in a terrifying display of Trans-Am clout that triggers some kind of warning in the Wing Gundam's displays. Camille too feels some kind of misgivings, but he passes this off as his imagination.

One rare moment of surprise for Suzaku comes when he sees Louise as an Arrows soldier -- what the hell is she doing as one of them? A better question is what he and Arrows were doing in Kumen, whose struggles the Secret Society was supposed to be behind... has the Secret Society already been turned by the Feds? One thing is certain: if World Peace requires becoming part of the Britannian emperor's mad schemes, Setsuna will just have to bring that whole world down around their ears. When he gets his ass beat, his final words are that the Gundams and Black Knights aren't wanted in this world, destabilizing influence that they are.

We'll see which side is unwanted by the World in due course. For now, there are prisoners to free. The remaining base staff make this look easy by beating a hasty retreat, but it turns out they've left Automaton in their wake: self-guided antipersonnel weapons that seem to specialize in indiscriminate carnage. Several of them activate throughout the depot, spewing gunfire and grenades in all directions. Saji nearly buys the farm if not for Setsuna's quick action, and the scene is set for Saji to demand Setsuna answer for all the CB's actions during the previous war... actions that in one sense led to the loss of damn near everyone Saji loves. Setsuna listens to the charges in silence, making no reply as Saji breaks down in tears and Karen runs over to the duo...

Meanwhile, it's the OH WHATS UP RIBBONS! Are we in a bad mood today? Something to do with the CBs' new GN drive perhaps? Which he doesn't know dick about, despite having accessed Veda's Level 7 data? Rijeene knows when he's taunted Ribbons enough and leaves him to chat with Amuro. This new twin-GN Drive mech seems to emit more than double the GN Particles of a single-drive mech... more like square if Ribbons' eyes aren't deceiving him. Ribbons admits that Ioria's ongoing machinations have him a bit pissed: the 200 year-old scientist is turning out to be more like a god every day. And Ribbons is on his throne now, which isn't exactly music to Amuro's ears. He wants to know what Ribbons intends to do with him, now that Amuro's been made a virtual prisoner, and Ribbons will only say that it's of certain benefit to him... as a Newtype. Now why would Ribbons know about Newtypes...?

#### CHAPTER 9AB. We're All Alive

The reunion at Battle Camp is one of those bittersweet ones, since it portends lots more warfare for all concerned. It's especially galling, since a Certain Event(tm) is happening at Odaiba, and Myna isn't going to get to go and load up on doujinshi [it seems she prefers the straight stuff, for whatever that's worth...]. At least there's some positive news: ADiC, the Axion's "Another Dimension Creature" research institute, have figured out something about the latest round of DBs -- their abnormally shaped "head" section is actually artificial. This would mean that someone managed to deliberately perform cybersurgery on interdimensional monsters... which sounds kind of tough.

But on to more important matters: has Monica gotten it on with Jeffrey yet?! And has Cathy patched things up with Ozuma, or is Bobby still angling to get into his pants?! Is it a three-way with Cathy's incommunicado fiancée? And what about Section 2 and all the romantic possibilities??? ...Or, what about the ongoing argument between Akagi and Saeki over the proper way to do their job. Akagi is focused on the "now" of protecting people, while Saeki is fixated on the "later" -- stuff like avoiding damage lest future dispatches suffer. Is it that Saeki is too much of a micromanager, or that Akagi is too much of a macro-sensationalist?

The other pilots watch from the sidelines, reasoning through the issue among themselves. While it's true that conservative tactics lead to unnecessary damage, it's also true that rushing in headlong is a good way to fall into enemy traps, as Marin knows first hand. All Apollo wants to know is when the fistfight starts, and even Esther unconsciously realizes that it'd be sort of satisfying. Besides, don't fisticuffs usually fertilize friendships in these stories? Only for kids, says Aoyama: if adults start throwing punches, someone is going to get incarcerated for a long time.

Shizuko then gets into the act, asking the teammates to figure out a way to understand each other (and maybe stop yelling in the middle of her store while they're at it). The Takeo General Company staffers manage to talk sense into the two, getting them to shut up and have lunch already. Fortunately, both Akagi and Esther are amenable to a little culinary therapy. The one person still agitated is Kojirou, who's been out of sorts for some time. Ibuki is especially worried about the faithful old guy -- and maybe even a bit hot for him? That will just have to remain imponderable, as the Heterodyne warning sounds.

This new Heterodyne is attacking a major populated area, and is strong enough that Kokubouger (and with it, Akagi's mecha teacher) wasn't able to halt it. Kokubouger is part of the Federation's nascent anti-Heterodyne efforts, though some on the team darkly suspect that those efforts are even farther behind than they should be due to Oz and Arrows' preferred funding. In any case, Tokyo is in danger [again] and nobody is quite sure how best to take down the Heterodyne. Absent enough data to form a Saeki-style strategy, an Akagi-style assault may be the only choice for now. On the third hand, the area's dimensional barriers are probably quite feeble after the Heterodyne's arrival; could there be DBs waiting in the wings?

No, actually: Takeru and Apollo both sense something far worse -- waves of dark, cold fear portending "His" arrival. Yup, it's the Gishin, with Valen in a new mech called the Daedalus she says has been specially prepared to take the whole team to the Dark. Takeru can feel her psych, a sure sign that she has not been simply resurrected with cybernetics. She repeats that it was the Power of the Darkness(tm) itself that sent her back, which might be true but is also not very useful.

Saeki hesitates over which adversary to take on first, and Akagi points out that unlike the Gishin, the Heterodyne seems bent on destroying everything nearby. Saeki and Jeffrey agree with him: the Heterodyne is top priority!

Next priority is Valen, who claims to have even more despair in store for the team. Too bad that the despair is all hers: the Grand Knights are back! Fog Sweeper has told them to help the Crushers, and that they shall... and not a moment too soon, since Valen's nefarious plan involves resurrecting... the Zeravia! It seems the Power of the Darkness(tm) is capable not only of bringing back the dead, but even summoning enemies from other worlds: kind of scary stuff.

Akagi, for one, is NOT scared; instead, he's interested in taking out whoever these bad guys are and saving the day. Jeffrey remarks that the Breaking featured a seemingly unending string of stronger and stronger enemies, and living through them all required utterly unshakable will. Akagi has that will, and even one such person on a team can be infectious. Indeed, even Saeki gets his shit together and devises a battle plan... which amounts to "take out the commander first", but still it's better than nothing.

What's more, it works! Valen warns the team that the Power of Darkness (tm) is far more menacing than the goons they've just faced, but her mech explodes before her speech can conclude. It sounds like she's dead for good this time, but there's no telling who might be next on the Zombies With Grudges list. At least there are people like Akagi on the team, who're too stupid to know when the odds are overwhelming!

Though the battle was won, evil machinations are at work behind the scenes. Dokujima, an army rep, has come to Nishijima with a shady proposal: force Taigauchi to retire, and get 21st Century to fall under military control. This will put Dai Guard where it can shore up the military's obvious shortcomings vis a vis the Heterodyne menace, but is certainly easier said than done. Nishijima plans to pull this off by staging a coup of sorts, forcibly taking over one of 21st Century's rivals (one with its own robot, no less) and impressing the Board of Directors. This is... not quite what Dokujima had in mind, but if he wants 21st Century on his side, Nishijima seems to be the only one he can turn to.

Back at base, Shiroda hears Saeki's preliminary report on the battle, including his misgivings about Akagi's way of doing things. Shiroda promises to come up with an impartial resolution, and after hanging up explains to Ootsuka that Saeki is a man who gives a lot of weight to high-confidence solutions. That he qualified his concerns as "personal" means that even he acknowledges Akagi's prowess. In fact, all Saeki really wants is to vent a little... just like Shiroda himself once did. Akagi then phones up, probably with similar concerns about Saeki, and Shiroda assures Ootsuka he won't let any of the ensuing "meetings" disturb the team's overall efforts.

#### CHAPTER 9CD. The Day The Demon God Awoke

The battle in the Gobi desert has reminded the team of something common-sense: if Arrows and Oz can cause that much trouble, fighting the whole Federation army would be a total impossibility. Setting aside differences in armaments, the team is really suffering from the lack of a commander like Sumeragi or Zero. It's Esther's view that Quatre could make a good commander too, given his empathic understanding for his teammates. Sumeragi and Zero's command acumen came from the opposite side of the spectrum: the ability to see their team as pawns and direct them dispassionately. Sumeragi might not have shown that aspect in Zexis' vision often, but Tielia at least is convinced that she would have sacrificed everything if she had to to win.

It seems that Sumeragi is unavailable at the moment, due to some sort of private matter her fellow CBs are unwilling to discuss. And the team can't just go and hire someone from 21st Century or the like... so who they gonna call? Well... it turns out that Karen and C.C. have been harboring a painful secret: rumors of Zero's death have been sliiiiiightly exaggerated. Zero is in fact alive, and is being held in Area 11 -- where the Black Knights have conveniently just finished preparations for a rescue attempt. That decides the team's next mission: rescuing Zero.

C.C. takes Karen aside, telling her it's too late for regrets. Karen

tearfully says that she doesn't want to leave things like this either, and C.C. promises that when she makes contact with Zero, all the wheels will resume turning once more. But will that really be for the best, one wonders...

Back in Ashford Academy, there's a mad dash in progress between a male student and a female P.E. teacher. The teacher, none other than Viletta, is insisting to Lelouch that it'll take more than paper test results to pass her class. Lelouch's friends on the Student Council watch from the sidelines, at once amused and concerned for his welfare. Many of their old friends from abroad are gone thanks to the Black Rebellion, and a new crop of students installed due to the formation of the Federation. And then there's Lelouch's brother Rolo, who's getting dragged along to some unauthorized extra-curricular activity in violation of Viletta's orders. Some with good imaginations might remember this as a new development...

Of the former students, Saji at least is accounted for aboard the Ptolemy-2. He's not thrilled to be aboard a CB ship, blaming them and the Black Knights for Area 11's woes. He's not any happier with Suzaku, who turned out to be a much ratter bastard than he ever suspected. The CBs give him food, water, and a Red Haro to answer whatever questions he might have, and Karen says they'll let him off once the ship reaches Area 11. That won't be the end of his troubles though: Arrows has him pegged as a Catalan operative, and aren't known to give up easily.

Lasse tells Saji that the CBs are not intending to go back to their old policy of inflaming warfare -- rather, they're hunting Oz and especially Arrows, who so far have committed at least 14 instances of genocide under the name of "suppressing rebellion". Tens of thousands lay dead, and all news of it has been systematically hushed up: easy to do when Automata do the final killing, as was the case back in Gobi. Saji protests that the Feds are the good guys, for defeating the Imperium that only got a toehold because of the terrorists' actions.

Ahhh, now the error of his ways is clear to Karen. Unfortunately, odds are very good that Saji and those living a normal life like him can't handle the truth. Nor is that his fault: the Federation government is all too good at hiding the facts from those it purports to protect. It is true, Lasse says, that the foundation of the Federation is thanks to the CBs... and so it's only right that the CBs see to its correction. Sure, fighting will mean that people die. Then again, people will die even if the CBs and Black Knights don't fight. Karen won't ask Saji to agree with what she does, but she does want him to see the truth for himself. Maybe this is because she herself is wavering over what to do? Perhaps, but it's a far worse life knowing that things are fucked and being unable to do anything about it.

Back in the Tokyo Settlement, Lelouch has led Rolo to an opulent underground casino. It caters to the sense of entitlement of the remaining Britannian nobility, who live out their desires to dominate others in places such as this. Lelouch isn't one to be used by others, but he also despairs of anything ever changing: the world is too neatly arranged, to inexorably sewn together with a hierarchy of adult privilege. Zero, the leader of the Black Knights, was foolish to think he had the power to change anything. More than anything else, Lelouch finds himself caught between powerlessness and ennui: his story of wanting to face the mighty Black King in better-chess is just a cover.

One of the casino's maids comes over to offer libations: it's Karen, very fetchingly attired as a bunny girl. Lelouch comments that she's been made to don a very eye-catching outfit, apologizing if he offended her. She meekly says that she wouldn't dream of asking a Britannian to apologize to her, an Eleven, adding that the powerless must bear up under their lot in life.

Lelouch tells her, rationally enough, not to force her value system on him, but Black King interrupts and tells Karen to shut her piehole and concentrate on servicing the guests. The guy is a total mafia don, and his swagger clearly doesn't sit well with Lelouch: in just a few minutes, Lelouch says, Black King is about to find out just how low on the food chain he really is.

The ensuing chess match is aborted before it can begin by an explosion somewhere in the building: the Black Knights' plans are in motion! The bomb Karen planted was phase one; phase two involves an armed assault by the team's pilots, pitting them against the Guilford's security forces. Among them is Koorasawar "the Immortal", still somehow alive after all this time. Guilford is content to leave the casino blast to the Information Bureau forces, whose chain of command leads directly to the Emperor, and concentrate on the encroaching Gundams. He's counting on Koorasawar's past experience with them to carry the day, adding that this is a good opportunity to get into good graces with a Certain Someone.

The question is: will Esther and friends be able to raise enough hell to divert attention from Karen and C.C.'s bid to contact Lelouch? Well, the good news(?) is that the blast separated Lelouch and Rolo. The bad news is that Karen got separated from him too, but at least she's got the remaining active Black Knights to help her. Carales, the new governor of the area, thinks this is a great time to plunge the locals deeper into despair, and order Guilford to slaughter all the rebels.

It takes a while to locate Lelouch in all the confusion. He meanwhile is trying to locate his brother, determined that he should at least be able to accomplish that much. What he finds instead is a Black Knight KMF, and inside it C.C. She tells him she's an ally, and that his true enemies are Britannia, and the world at large. He does not immediately remember his "partner in crime", but she remembers him: the real him. She tells him the Britannian emperor has altered his memories, but is shot by forces off-camera before she can finish her speech.

Those forces are the Intelligence forces, who've been keeping Lelouch under minute observation ever since the Rebellion. They've been using him as bait to catch C.C., but as a wise man once said, "Be careful what you fish for." The Intelligence officer tells Lelouch, a.k.a. Zero, that it's time to die now that he's served his purpose, but he clearly wasn't counting on C.C. being able to return Lelouch's memories. Or his power.

The Power of the King may make one lonely, but it also comes in HELLUVA handy at times like this. The officer is stunned that C.C. can still move after he shot her in the heart, but Lelouch is now quite calm and collected. Does Might really make Right? Is revenge always bad? Is friendship always good? In any case, the Intelligence agents, so intent on ending Lelouch's life, aren't going to find out after he orders them to die.

Lelouch had the feeling that something was wrong in his life, and the overwritten memories and false existence provide the perfect explanation. It seems his subconscious was always seeking the truth on some level, seeking to change the world. He confirms to C.C. that he remembers everything, including his ordeal when Suzaku dragged him before Charles. Suzaku, bad little good little boy that he is, parlayed Zero's capture into a position with the Knights of the Round. Charles mentioned in passing that neither Britannia, nor the Federation, would matter in the new world he seeks (and refused to comment further), right before stealing everything that mattered to Lelouch from his mind.

Well, payback is going to be one serious motherfucker, and it's going to

take a long time to see it through, but Lelouch is nothing if not patient. For now, the question is how Lelouch can avoid having the people holding Nanaly decide to do her in on his account. At least the Gundams have banded together against the Federation: like the Black Knights, they aren't satisfied with the current state of the world. He needs to find whoever gave Charles his Geass... and figure out who the hell Rolo is, given that he's certainly not Lelouch's real brother.

Karen arrives at this point, and Lelouch says he'll be taking over C.C.'s mech. He wants her to get to somewhere safe, but there really isn't any such place in this world. C.C. walks off, leaving Karen and Lelouch to have their own heart-to-heart talk. He's not exactly thrilled that she didn't intervene when Suzaku subdued him at Kaminejima, and she counters that he'd been deceiving her all along both about his identity and about his Geass ability. She demands to know if he warped her heart to give her her loyalty to "Zero", and he laughs momentarily in response. Her heart, he tells her, is her own -- as are her loyalties. He adds that she can be proud of herself for choosing him, and she counters that she wants to believe, else she wouldn't be here. But just so they're both clear: she believes in "Zero", not in "Lelouch". That's fine by him, and as "Lelouch" he tells her she might want to change into some more modest clothing at some point.

As "Zero", he tells her they're going to bust out of this joint and get back to improving the world. In the cockpit, he wryly notes that C.C. even got his trademark cloak and mask ready for him. Getting out into the open is easy, but a new menace appears: a mass-production version of the Lancelot that is somehow able to move far faster than it should. The rest of the team isn't sure what he's talking about, but Tobu, the only one of the Four Holy Blades still active, tells Karen to take Zero and flee while he holds their adversary off.

Zero tells him that sacrificing oneself isn't the way to beat Britannia, but the mystery KMF seems to be giving both him and Karen an unfeasible amount of trouble. Tobu intervenes, grabbing the mech and telling Zero that he intends to see that Zero is not sacrificed here. He charges Karen with Zero's wellbeing, and Zero with the wellbeing of the Japanese people. He then self-destructs, doing enough damage to force the mystery assailant to flee before another wave of bad guys appear. Zero quickly assumes control of the team, vowing to lead everyone to victory. He is, in fact Zero: the man who will destroy and remake the world!!

Guilford would love to be the one to stuff that particular genie back into the bottle, but it's a task far beyond his capabilities. Carales tries his hand next, clearly not believing that "the" Zero could be facing him after he was executed. Zero declares that proof is at hand, and begins analyzing Carales' battle plans. Carales loves letting other people fight his battles of attrition, while he waits in a place of safety to swoop in and claim victory. Zero predicted long ago where he would be watching the battle from, and has had his "subordinates" fiddle with the explosive bolts that hold the Tokyo Settlement together. Result: decisive.

Zero then forcibly broadcasts to the world about his return, and Guilford has to admit that only the real Zero could have demolished Carales so easily. He is fairly certain Zero was executed, and (unsurprisingly) knows of no good reason why Zero would have been silent all this time had he somehow escaped the hangman's noose.

Zero tells Britanniains, and indeed Federation types everywhere, that he is saddened that the world had changed not a whit from its old habits of lording

strength over the weak, of war and discrimination. So long as the mighty lie to the feeble, he'll continue his struggle. Meanwhile, back at Ashford Academy it seems that Rolo is in league with Viletta as part of the surveillance operation, and both are about convinced that Lelouch's memory has returned until he apparently calls them (in the middle of the broadcast) from the school grounds. FUNKY.

It's been an expensive rescue in terms of loss of life on the good guys' side, and Zero has "reasons" he can't show up in person. Instead he's resorted to having C.C. convey his message of thanks, and promise of eventual cooperation with the CBs. For now, he intends to finish reconstituting the Black Knights and figuring out how to liberate Japan. Camille asks her if this is the Zero they know, and she tells him that's a silly question. "Zero" is an identity whose value lies in actions; that is, his identity is unimportant. Insofar as nobody else knew his identity before, the pilots agree to treat this Zero like the previous one so long as the results hold up. C.C. plans to head back to Zero's side, but Karen -- at her request -- will remain posted with the CBs to act as an intermediary. Inwardly C.C. isn't surprised that Karen still bears emotional scars from Lelouch's (pseudo?-)duplicity, and also knows that Lelouch won't be able to keep up his charade in front of Rolo forever, whether or not Nanaly's life would be at risk. Hiirou privately suspects Zero's true identity, but keeps his thoughts to himself.

Back at the imperial court, Charles has invited Suzaku to walk and chat with him. He tells Suzaku not to worry about catching C.C.: she'll appear before him of her own accord before long. He takes Suzaku somewhere special -- a strange place none of the Knights of the Round or even Schneizer himself know exist. This is because Suzaku alone knows Zero's identity and his power. The odd structure is not a shrine, as Suzaku suspects; Charles calls it a sort of weapon for destroying God: the "Sword of Akasha".

#### CHAPTER 10AB. Separation from Tranquility

It turns out that the Gran Knights have been guests of Dragons' Hive ever since the Breaking, and by "guests" we mean "errand-runners". And the errands in question included anti-terrorism and anti-DB operations, all gratis, which harmed the prices other do-gooders like the Scott Lab could charge for similar exploits. The Gran Knights' relatively cushy lifestyle in Sandman Castle didn't prepare them for the harsh training regimen of the Beast squadron, and especially its leader Shinobu. Things got easier a month or so ago when the Beast units left on some kind of mission, with nary a word as to what the mission actually entailed. F.S. is as laconic a commander as Sandman, in his way, and that reminds the team of Fudou and Tanaka. Are all middle-aged dudes like that? Maybe not if Kojirou and friends are any indication... in which case Fudou and the others are just weirdos.

Speaking of Fudou and Sandman, where the hell are they? Presumably they're somewhere in this world, yet they haven't shown their face to their respective teams. It's unlikely that they ended up dead somewhere, but it's anybody's guess where they've gotten to. That means it's up to WILL to figure out why some Zeravia stragglers(?) appeared. And as for Team D...

...They've gone back to their day jobs. Aoi's busy modeling and motor cycling, and Kurara has returned to the police as a narcotics agent. Sure enough, the two run into each other by chance [uh huh] in Shibuya, comparing notes on civilian life. It seems Eiyda and her manager Johnny are back into the idol singer world, and participating in the ubiquitous Twinkle Project. Kamon has become Isabelle Cronkite's assistant, and has stayed in touch with Kurara in search of leads for new stories. All very well and good, but the two



women both seem to know that they're destined for more in life than this...

Eiyda is in fact somewhat nervous about the Twinkle Project's first stop in Tokyo, heart pounding at just the thought of rehearsal. Ranka is more excited than nervous, proof of how far she's come as a bona fide idol star. Sheryl assures the other two singers that what the crowd wants to see is the real, unvarnished "them", not a calculated facade... and if that means a few jitters along the way, so be it. It feels to Ranka like Sheryl is back to full strength, easily fit to be the leader of the show.

Alto is on hand too, called in at the last minute as a bodyguard. He's got his usual blank expression on, which has Johnny rather on edge. Alto too is part of the Twinkle Project, and he needs to encourage the singers as much as possible. That would be easier without Brela hanging around, given his perpetual assessment of Alto as "unworthy" of Ranka. Grace finally comes clean (a bit) about the guy: he, like her, is from the Galaxy fleet, hired to protect the singers from the shadows. As for why Alto is "unfit" for Ranka, Grace claims it's a simple matter of not wanting a scandalous love affair to get into the tabloids. If so, why hire Alto as a bodyguard at all, knowing what close proximity he'd be to her? Grace smiles and says that she merely wishes to avoid private enveiglements -- she actually wants him near her to the extent that "neighborly" love will still improve Ranka's singing.

Johnny realizes right off the bat that this is bullshit, but before he can call her on it, forces unknown set off some kind of explosive nearby. Brela's enhanced senses (like all of Galaxy's pilots) tell him there's also gunfire, a sure sign that someone means to end the concert series before it begins. This isn't precisely what Alto had in mind as a bodyguard, but he's certainly equal to the challenge.

And who's the Challenger? Branch, as it turns out, with lots of firepower on loan from his mysterious employer. He doesn't know who would want the Robot Mafia to kill some singing girls, but he does know a moneymaking chance when he sees it. His plan isn't to kill the singers, but rather to kidnap them and report them dead to his employer. Alto is aggravated that everywhere he goes, people always want to kidnap Sheryl and Ranka, but Brela ignores him in favor of a private transmission from Grace. She tells him that she'll brook no more unauthorized stunts on his part, if he wants her help in recovering his lost memories. This time, his mission is to arrange for as precarious a situation as he can, as Grace thinks it will further fuel the singers' energies. And it's those energies that will cause the Little Queen to call out across space and time to Them...

Before too long, a new player arrives: Aoi, in the Nova Eagle. She tells Alto that modeling is a pretty stressful job, and hints that she doesn't want anyone obstructing the concert any more than he does. In short: she's back to active duty, and eager to kick some terrorist ass.

Further reinforcements are close at hand, bringing an end to Grace's little charade. At least Grace can use the opportunity to gauge the team's strengths? Sounds like a good plan until some interlopers arrive -- a menace that not even Grace has ever heard of before.

Johnny shields Eiyda from falling debris, reminding the both of them of the first time Johnny protected her. That's when Eiyda truly fell in love, and that love is now totally mutual. Fortunate then that Johnny's teammates are on hand to help him protect her, though that means leaving the tranquil life behind.

Team D, it would seem, is back with a vengeance. And just in time, since

these new enemies came from beyond Earth's dimensional walls. It's not a pleasant thought that the current menagerie of menaces lurking Beyond is incomplete, and Saeki recommends hauling one of the enemy carcasses back to base for inspection. Alto meanwhile has to admit that Brela is one hot pilot, and Johnny tells Brela to take good care of Eiyda in his absence. He of course wants to protect the love of his life, but he also wants to protect the world at large, which the both of them cherish deeply. That'll be Alto's task too, as it seems pretty clear that the Twinkle Project won't need his services as bodyguard anymore.

Kamon too will be leaving his current life behind, and Isabelle is okay with that... provided he keep a daily log of Dancougar's activities. She'll be heading off in search of the Gundams she's heard are active again, and admits freely that she's doing so on behalf of her departed friend. The truth lies at the end of the trail made of up the facts, and it's those facts that Isabelle craves. And for whatever it's worth, the first fact is this: the super robot Isabelle's been chasing isn't just "Dancougar", but rather "Dancougar Nova".

The usual reunions speeches get spoken, the usual beefing over Alto's unwillingness to choose between Sheryl and Ranka gets beefed, and as usual the pilots turn out to be a pretty merry lot. Michelle confides to Klan that even he (as Alto's closest friend) has no idea who Alto will pick... but he does know this much: Alto doesn't have the constitution to romance both idol singers at once. When the time is right, he'll choose one or the other for sure...

#### CHAPTER 10CD. The Other Lockon

With his memories newly recovered, Lelouch takes stock of his situation at Ashford Academy. Most of his friends have had their memories altered to accord with the one Charles gave him, and Rolo and Viletta have been posted to keep tabs on him. Lelouch always suspected Charles of rat-bastardy, but the number of people he's treated like pawns to catch C.C. has Lelouch newly aghast. He makes out to his classmates that this "new Zero" business is a complete puzzlement, managing to fool Rolo into assuming that he has not in fact regained his memory. ...Which is good, because Rolo is under orders to kill Lelouch immediately should that happen.

One thing Lelouch is not worried about is the little twerp actually figuring out what's really going on, especially since Rolo seems to think of him as more than just an assignment. Still, with so much scrutiny around him, Lelouch knows he's got to ready his next gambit in a hurry. Rolo will get a suitable comeuppance for trying to replace Nanaly in his life soon enough...

Saji has elected not to deplane in Area 11, and is in no hurry to explain why to Karen. Karen for her part isn't exactly forthcoming about Zero's return, or how that green-haired pizza fiend of a girl which Saji saw on the news might figure in. If Saji won't say why he's sticking with the CBs, Karen won't explain why she's not getting back into terrorism with the Black Knights.

The impasse lasts around ten seconds, max. Saji cracks first, admitting that he's desperate to know The Truth(tm). His elder sister Louise was a journalist following the CBs when she was killed, but given how the Red Haro has no info on her death, it's possible that the CBs aren't the ones who did it. He's got a lot of questions about how the world got to this point, and has resolved to follow his sister's maxim of connecting the facts to build up to what the truth really is. Karen then tells him that the ship is heading for Europe: time she can use to try to sort out her own thoughts and questions.

Meanwhile in Eilland, Setsuna has caught up with a "Lyle Dilandy", Catalan agent. Setsuna informs him that Neil Dilandy was a CB Gundam Meister, and informs Lyle that he's going to be one too. Alas that Neil was killed during the Breaking, but Lyle now has the chance to change the world as his brother once did -- if he wishes. If he's prepared to fight. He gives Lyle a docket of information on the CBs, and tells him to draw his own conclusions. Setsuna isn't especially worried about Lyle misappropriating the data, as the CBs are long past the point of hiding. He gives Lyle two days to think it over, promising to wait in the same spot if Lyle means to accept his offer.

News of Zero's exploits have reached Billy Katagiri's house, where Billy asks Lisa Kujou if she's at all interested in Zero's stratagems. "No", she slurs, and Billy chastises her for always drinking too much. She's prepared to part company at once, but before Billy can apologize the doorbell rings and he hastens to answer it.

Lisa is in fact keenly aware of Zero resuming his struggle, but she herself can't muster the will to do so herself. She feels like she betrayed her promise to herself and her subordinates to never again make mistakes that cost lives. The visitor turns out to be Setsuna, who barges in uninvited and confronts "Sumeragi" by name. He informs Billy that "Sumeragi" is none other than the CBs' strategist, telling Sumeragi that she has just officially lost any hope of hiding.

Sumeragi numbly asks what he hopes to accomplish by dragging her back into things, and Setsuna deftly hands her off to Karen, waiting in a park nearby. He knows that both woman are gripped by doubts, and tells them to use this chance to get their shit together. After brief greetings, Sumeragi surprises Karen by tells her that she's been doing precisely zilch since the Breaking. See, Ioria actually foresaw that the CBs would lose, and the CBs themselves all but expected it to happen sooner or later. They also expected that their loss would be the new world's gain, but that turned out to be a total charade. Nothing, not the founding of the Federation, not all the blood split and lives lost, meant a damn thing to making Ioria's dreams come true.

Sumeragi's been trying to find solace at the bottom of a bottle, which reminds Karen all too poignantly of her mother. Her mother's despair at Japan's occupation led her to start using Refrain, a drug that submerges a person in happy memories of their past. And yet despite that all, her mother kept Karen always uppermost in her thoughts. Karen believes her mother to be a weak person, and yet cannot bring herself to hate her for it. Instead, she's chosen to fight on her mother's behalf, since she's been given that power.

She tells Sumeragi that she'll fight on her behalf too, hoping to see Sumeragi smile once more some day. With something to protect, something to regain, how can Karen go wrong? This is where Lyle and Setsuna walk over, shocking the two women with how much Lyle and Neil look alike. Lyle's evidently decided to take on the mantle of "Lockon Stratos", and the group make ready to head to the Ptolemy-2...

...when Quatro steps out of the shadows. It seems he, in his capacity as an Oz operative, has been seeking Sumeragi just as Setsuna has. He offers her a role as Oz strategist, saying that Treize and teh AEU heavies greatly value her mind. Wouldn't she like to help them change the world? Setsuna vows to fight, saying that if it's the CBs' sin for changing the world, they can only atone for it by changing it once more. Sumeragi doesn't seem to be capable of siding with either guy, and that means a fight is inevitable.

Setsuna is kick-ass enough to spirit her and Karen away from Quatro, who if

truth be told isn't in that much of a hurry to follow anyway. That would be because this whole area is under Oz control, and backup troops are probably available at any time. "Any time" means "almost instantly", an eventuality the team has prepared for. Lyle's first job will be taking Sumeragi to safety, leaving the rest of the team to face -- among other people -- Zechs and Quatro. Zechs promises to follow the orders he's given, sealing whatever doubts he holds deep inside.

Take down either Zechs or Quatro and a Dimensional Tremor occurs, ushering in a horde of DBs and some strange new buddies of theirs \_not\_ DBs but equally hostile. They've got a positional advantage over the team on the field, but luckily there's a member waiting in the wings: the new Lockon in the Keldim Gundam. With a little help from Haro, his first shot is a much-needed bullseye. And he's not the only new arrival: Sumeragi has gotten her head together and seizes tactical command of the team, having them reorganize during the bad guys' momentary confusion.

Zechs and Quatro reorient themselves to fight the bogeys too, actually carrying out Oz's principle function for once. That's no reason to let them get any of the glory though.

Even more bizarrely, Margret of all people materializes further into the battle. She seems not to recognize the team, and can probably be ignored as all she seems bent on doing is shooting down the DBs. In fact, she's too busy wondering this way of doing things is really permissible. Isn't there some other way?

In any event, her own words to the team are an ominous warning that the clouds of a new storm of war are blowing toward this world. She vanishes abruptly, not the most neighborly conduct when Esther was trying to thank her. Crow said nothing to her about any woman like this, and the "ominous clouds" bit has everyone on edge.

Word of Quatro's failure reaches Treize, who's chatting with Aslan and Kira. He sort of hopes the two SEED-bearers would join Oz's special forces, but the two of them would prefer to continue their current mission. After all, how could there be true peace without genuine fusion between the Colonies and the Earth? This means they'll be escorting Lady Une around, and Treize mildly chides her to do things "elegantly" from now on. Both the pilots are fully prepared to revolt if Oz tries to turn the Colonies into Federation tools.

Back aboard the P-2 (as I'll call it from now on), the other pilots fill Esther in on Margret, fugitive Holy Knight from Insalaum. Esther doesn't much like that Margret was an active member of the Imperium up until the final battle, but is more willing to extend some benefit of the doubt to her than she does to Carlos. If there's one thing Esther learned by hanging with Crow, it's that hatred and revenge aren't the right way to live one's life. Her focus now is to prevent any more tragedies, either by the former residents of Insalaum, or \_on\_ the current residents of this world. Certainly she's not a Hunter out of a desire for money, the way Crow (apparently) was.

And isn't it interesting that Crow never mentioned Margret to Esther? Given that the he and Margret seemed to have a bit of chemistry going on, there's little doubt that Crow kept silent out of fear of what Esther might do if she decided to get jealous. At any rate, the question is where the new bad guys came from. Probably not Insalaum proper, since if there are any survivors there it's hard to imagine them using their own fallen countrymen like this. Then again, Margret \_was\_ acting funny. The Earth forces have already proven they're stronger than Gaiou's Insalaum forces, so hopefully they can continue fending off whatever their new foe can dish out.

Lyle greets the pilots, announcing that he's the new Gundam Meister on the block. He's pleasantly cavalier outside, but inwardly he has some purpose he intends to make the team help out with. Tielia at least knows that, despite his striking similarity, this is not the same man. Sumeragi meanwhile is shut up in her room, making it quite clear to Lasse that she is not officially back as a CB. Karen is prepared to wait for Sumeragi to rediscover her sense of purpose...

Billy, meanwhile, has made his own mind up, and tells his uncle Homer so. Homer is not a donut-munching nuclear engineer in this case, but a high-ranking Oz commander with the pull to get his nephew installed as a mech engineer. He's also got someone Billy should meet at Arrows HQ. As he hangs up, Billy thinks to himself that there's no way Lisa actually deceived him all this time.

#### CHAPTER 11AB. From Beyond the Portal

The team has learned precious little from the remains of the new Unknowns that showed up last battle. They're a) unmanned and b) well-suited as shock troops or scouts, and c) likely to originate in some other dimension. Past that, further study will be needed at Dragons' Hive: a homecoming of sorts for the Nova team. Kojirou is still looking dreadfully pale, though he stoutly denies that anything is wrong. Maybe one day he'll confide in the counselor Ruu, but not today. Esther's heard that Crow consulted Ruu about his fear of women, but Ruu can't divulge anything due to doctor-patient confidentiality. Apparently Crow's kept the reason a secret from everyone else, not even cracking under Traia's concerted attempts to pry it out of him (using methods like blasting amplified versions of Esther's drum-playing into his room at night). It apparently never occurred to Esther that this might be making Crow's woman-hating even worse.

WILL's analysis is announced by Koyuri, with Commander Tanaka on hand to keep the horny pilots at bay. The sultry Seimy tells them that she'll be more than happy to date them in the shy Koyuri's stead, though even Pierre seems to fear having his life force drained by such an experience. Anyways, the Unknowns turn out to be based on Earth technology, yet are not of this Earth. Think of how familiar the ZEUTH mecha are to this world's people: similar cultures' tech tends to develop along similar lines. The likely conclusion then is that the Unknowns are from a parallel Earth, possibly a different one yet than where ZEUTH hail from.

This theory may get put to the test sooner rather than later, as alarms sound due to a Dimensional Tremor over the Pacific. The Tremor has resulted in some new, unidentified vehicles showing up, and they turn out to be more of these new unmanned assailants. Talking things over would be ideal, but since these machines won't answer hailing frequencies, combat is the only option.

The Unknowns have a serious durability problem, but reinforcements are waiting in the wings. With them come more of the DBs with man-made control units on their heads: one must presume that they're of similar origin. After these new menaces emerges Margret, intent on striking down the Unknowns and silent to the rest of the team.

If we're honest, the new troops aren't much of an upgrade. Still, the ominous truth is that someone seems to be systematically probing the Earth's defenses: somebody that is capable of bending DBs to their will. Margret will only tell the team that new war clouds are threatening this world before scarpering off, leaving Esther (like on the other path) to wonder why Crow never mentioned much about her.

And, like on the other path, Esther is less uncharitably disposed to Margret than she is to Carlos. Though Margret was involved with the Imperium, it seems exceedingly unlikely that the DBs' new master is an Imperial... after all, they didn't need weird cybermods to make the DBs do their bidding. And if the enemy is Insalaum, Kappei figures there's nothing to worry about: history has shown that Earth > Gaiou > Insalaum already. So then... what if the enemy is even greater than that...?

WILL has tried correlating the Unknowns with Margret's Insalaumian mech, yielding 77.2% correlation. That's tentatively low enough to conclude that they're not of the same origin, but WILL is reserving final judgement for later. What matters most isn't who the enemy is, but how to make sure they don't win. Sandman is on hand to help with that, prepared once again to face the Zeravia. Fudou is (abruptly) on hand as well, warning that the Dimension Warp Zone appears to be a Portal. Sandman will travel with him to the Zone and investigate the possible Zeravia connection. And along they way, they've still got some guidance to offer their respective proteges.

#### CHAPTER 11CD. The Rescue of Allelujah

OOH TEH BIG REVEAL! "Gene 1" turns out to be a Catalon agent, who Catalon always hoped to insert into the CBs at some point. That the CBs came for him first is icing on the cake, and Xielin intends to use the chance to profit Catalon's operations as much as possible. The news isn't all good however: Arrows have taken Marina Ismael captive.

Neina has arrived at a certain Federation base which, according to some second-level information she's received, has a Gundam Meister imprisoned within. It's certainly well-enough guarded. Liu Mei tells Neina that she'll take it from here, and clears her to return to base. Neina can't want to see what Liu Mei has planned. Back in her study, Liu Mei explains to a very skeptical Kuryuu why she, a CB agent, is helping the CB's greatest enemy Ribbons: Ioria's plans will mean nothing if they can't stand up to a little opposition. She wants a revolution, and sees world-wide war as the way to bring that revolution about. And for that, the Innovators must lead the world! Yikes.

Liu Mei sends word to the team about the base, and it turns out there's more than just Allelujah's life at stake: the Black Knight commanders are being held there too! The new Lockon asks who Allelujah is, momentarily derisive of Allelujah for getting himself caught. Shinn probably isn't the only one discomfited by the new Lockon's cavalier attitude, but the problem for now is how to bust people out of prison. Sumeragi agrees to help strategize, feeling that Allelujah's capture is partially her responsibility.

Everyone lines up to support her, and though she hasn't decided to don her old uniform yet, she does ask for all the tactical data to be sent to her room to ponder. The new Lockon likes this turn of events, feeling that it will make his own mission easier. He notices Felt gazing at him again, and after hearing from Haro that Felt was in love with his brother, he tells her that he's okay hooking up with her if she's okay hooking up with him. She hastily leaves the room without answering that, and Shinn gripes at Lockon for his inconsideration. Karen gets Shinn to lay off, agreeing with the new Lockon that it's not kosher for someone to fall in love with him just due to external similarities. Neither, however, does she endorse his callous treatment of women. None of this is earning Lockon any points with Tielia...

The base will be very well defended, thanks to an influx of special forces

folks under the command of Colonel Katy Mannequin. Among them is Colonel Smirnoff's estranged son, which greatly surprises a special interrogator recently arrived on base: Pieris. She'll be joined by at least one other person (from Astrageus) in questioning the prisoners in general; in particular, one of Mannequin's subordinates (a Licenser) has a personal interest in some of the Black Knight commanders.

This person is a masked weirdo calling himself "Mister Bushido", his proper name having been cast off some time ago. He interrupts the Black Knight regulars debating whether Zero abandoned them or not during the final battle of the Black Rebellion. Bushido's features (what can be seen of them) mark him as a full-blooded Britannian, so it's something of a surprise when he asks Toudou for a duel, in the interest of proceeding further down the Path of the Warrior. It was Toudou who set him on the Path, just as it is Homer Katagiri (acting director of Arrows) who arranged for him to be here now. Bushido relays an offer from Katagiri to his old friend: a position of honor with Arrows along with his freedom. Toudou is adamant that there's no valor in Arrows, and Bushido remarks that it's precisely that resolve that elevated his young soul when they first met. Truly, there is only one man Bushido wishes to defeat, and the time of their duel draws near.

He then walks off, leaving the prisoners to wonder who the hell he is. The best Toudou, still puzzled who this guy might be, can say is that no one who wields a sword out of personal emotion can ever reach the ultimate state of Warriorhood.

Pieris then goes to see Allelujah, or as she knows him, Subject E-57. Unlike their previous meetings, this time Pieris senses no disruption of her brain waves -- perhaps due to the blow to the head Allelujah suffered during capture? Allelujah meanwhile is beside himself at the sight of "Mary", insisting that he's her old friend even as Pieris gets increasingly aggravated at being called outside her name. Just as Allelujah realizes that a new personality now resides in his old friend, Gran and Aron show up with Ypsilon in tow. They tell Pieris that they're neither of Gilgamesh or of Valalant, but from the Secret Society that lurks between them. Their research concerns creating better warriors through... "psychological" means, and they're interested both in her and in her captive. Pieris rather dislikes the sound of that and stalks off, telling them they can do what they like with the prisoner.

Ypsilon hears from Allelujah that Mary is his only reason for living, a filthy concept which he nevertheless won't deny. He feels a strong sense of Sympathy with Allelujah, and means to use Allelujah's data to become an even-more Perfect Soldier. He'd better do it fast, since it seems that the base is coming under attack. The Astrageans feel perfectly safe, but Ypsilon knows better -- and wants his AT ready to roll in case his premonition is correct.

Sumeragi's plan is simple: let the Double-0 open a hole through the enemy's defenses, and let Karen and Kiriko zip around inside for the prisoners. As Marina is imprisoned here too, Setsuna will have a second job of rescuing her. Hearing this, Sumeragi alters the plan a little, requiring that the three infiltration units reach a certain spot on precisely the third turn. This trades on her expectation that the enemy are braced for a full frontal assault, and thus poorly configured to stop a pinpoint strike. She's wearing her old uniform for what may be the last time, and orders the mission to start as the Arrows forces hastily scramble. Among them are Red Shoulder units, confirming Kiriko's suspicions that the Secret Society have joined forces with Arrows.

Boy are the Black Knights glad to see Karen! Their disbelief at hearing that Zero is a) still alive and b) back to stirring up shit in Japan is

understandable, but as Toudou correctly points out, they have no time now to think of anything but escape. Setsuna finds Marina in short order as well, telling her he feels it's his duty to save her -- after all, it was his name that made her guilty by association in Arrows' eyes. Even Allelujah is easy enough to find for Kiriko, and is equally astounded to hear that the CBs are still very much alive (except for a few dead ones, but who's counting?)

Where things get interesting is when Ypsilon shows up, essentially telling Allelujah to get his ass to freedom. Ypsilon means to increase his stature as a warrior by defeating Allelujah at his full, artificially-enhanced strength... not as a wretch chained up in the gulag. He adds that Allelujah had better bring it for real if he wants to save "Mary", and with a word of "not a word of thanks", Allelujah dashes off... leaving Kiriko and Ypsilon to renew their duel. At stake is Ypsilon's promise to reveal Fiana's whereabouts if he loses. And as a PS, he isn't planning to lose.

Allelujah doesn't get far before running into Mary, who is initially as insistent as Eric Wright that that's "not her name". Then the flashbacks come flooding in, and Mary aka Pieris lowers her gun. In that moment, Allelujah's new Gundam comes crashing through the wall, and although annoying staffers separate him from her, he vows to Mary that he'll come for her one day.

The rescue seems to be a big success, with all the former prisoners ready to partake of the remaining carnage. Allelujah wouldn't have been so open about his desire to save Mary in the old days, but now it's giving him a fearsome will to win. Now all the team has to do is hang on until all the escapees are accounted for.

Ypsilon is a dangerous dude with a mech that far outclasses Kiriko's, but even the most Perfect Soldier isn't a machine. Kiriko bests him, but doesn't manage to defeat him in one fell swoop -- as such, Ypsilon doesn't feel the need to admit defeat. As he runs off, Kiriko knows that the Secret Society's links to Arrows will provide at least one trail of breadcrumbs for him to follow...

Allelujah's capabilities are limited, given that "Hallelujah" has gone, and with him, his ability to use mental waves. He does his best, but isn't able to get Mary to sit still long enough to return her to her senses. Oh well. Katy, in command of the Arrows mothership, is forced to ascribe today's defeat to a massive difference in commander skill. Reduced to collecting the survivors, she manages to escape the field without real incident: a very wise choice in Sumeragi's eyes.

Sumeragi then gets her team out of dodge, having raided the chicken coop in a mere five minutes prior to the Catalan offensive. Katy orders the base evacuated prior to the Catalan arrival, realizing there's no further strategic value left in it. Meanwhile, Mr. Bushido cackles over the thought of seeing "the boy" again -- never before has been so happy to have been born a Virgo. Which, is sounding pretty frigging creepy just at the moment.

The Black Knights have questions for Karen: namely, wtf is the deal with Zero? Wasn't he like, executed and shit? She somberly tells them to satisfy their doubts about this Zero's authenticity with their own eyes. After all, Zero's return was purchased with many precious lives... Whatever the other folks' doubts may be, Karen's eyes show that she has none left. Impressively, the Black Knights' brass haven't lost any of their spunk in the big house, and that has even Trois impressed.



Meanwhile, Allelujah and Kiriko have a newfound sense of camaraderie: both of them are chasing girlfriends who have been dicked over and/or brainwashed by The Man(tm). Allelujah, like everyone else, is momentarily floored by the sight of Lockon until Tielia informs him that this is the old Lockon's twin brother. He tells Sumeragi that he expected to pay for his sins in full in Federation custody, but now he's got a new purpose. Sumeragi tells him that when the time comes, she'll give him the best strategy possible to get Mary back. Her life as a CB was not just out of academic agreement with Ioria's plans: she hoped to atone for her previous life of sin by erasing warfare from the world. That totally went pear-shaped, so she's now all about fighting to defend her loved ones -- and she gives credit to Karen for making her come to her senses. Well, she's faring much better than Karen's biological mom in that regard (and, let's be honest: she's much younger than Karen's 40-something mom too). No longer will she fear mistakes, and no longer will she loose those important to her.

News of the jailbreak reaches C.C. and Lelouch back in the Tokyo Settlement, signalling that it's time to act. Lelouch has apparently devised an effective way of evading Rolo's watchful eyes: Sayoko is incredibly effective as a cosplaying body-double for him. Thank goodness she's a ninja, huh? Lelouch tells her he's always amazed at her makeup skills, and is eternally grateful to her as a Black Knight agent. She says that she was far more surprised when she learned his true identity, and that she's committed to Nanaly's safety and to the fate of Japan in Lelouch's hands. All the pieces in place, Lelouch need only wait for the time to strike: the time when Rolo falls into his hands.

#### CHAPTER 12AB. Beyond Malice and Lies

News of Zero's return sits uneasily with the Zexis pilots. On the one hand, Area 11 seems in serious need of liberating. On the other hand, Zero's methods have never been exactly gentle, and times have changed since the creation of the Federation. If Zero means to fight the Britannia Union, he'll have to fight the entire Federation... and knowing Zero, that fact wouldn't faze him. Takeru knows that the Black Knights, branded terrorists by the clean people of the world, might well become his official adversaries before all is said and done. Then again, nobody is sure if this is the original Zero, given the official line about him being executed.

Jun's been hacking around, but everything he's found seems to echo the party line. This is reminiscent of the Universal Network back in ZEUTH's world: an information conduit all too susceptible to manipulation by the Powers That Be. As far as this world is concerned, the only plausible chance for someone to set up such a widespread dissembling apparatus would have been right after the Great Dimensional Quake... and if such a thing exists, it would seem to serve a solidly conservative agenda given the lack of data on an anti-government operative like Zero. Are the Feds guilty of global thought control?

It's food for thought, even given the Federation's seemingly benevolent track record and the fact that Elgan is the Federation's leader. Esther can certainly testify that not everyone thinks the Federation is 100% good: the G-boys, for instance, have identified Arrows and Oz as two factions with a nasty habit of rubbing out those who disagree with their methods. The cognitive dissonance only gets worse as the discussion proceeds, and the pilots get a nasty jolt when Kenji notes that an Arrows colonel is in fact here, at the base, at this very moment chatting with Ootsuka... and Garode, of all people. Esther can't help but have a bad feeling about that.

This meeting is not a pleasant one. The Arrows officer, Lint, resorts to mockery when F.S. doesn't tell him what he wants to hear, and Dragons' Hive

commanders for their part openly ascribe this to Lint's auditory cortex being rotten -- like the rest of his brain. F.S. repeats himself: neither Dragons' Hive, nor any of its personnel, will have anything to do with Arrows. He isn't afraid to tell Lint to his face that he doubts the rationale for Arrows' very existence, and doesn't bat an eyelash when Lint intimates that F.S. doesn't understand the position he's in. Ootsuka intervenes at this point, reminding Lint that Dragons' Hive has the same level of autonomy as Arrows itself, granted by the Security Council.

What F.S. will tell Lint, who seems very scornful of Elgan's stature as Federation president, is that Dragons' Hive has no links to the Celestial Beings or Black Knights at this point in time. He will not rule out forging such times in the future however... for example, if some organization were to be arrogant enough to prey upon the weak in the name of "keeping the peace". Furious, Lint turns his attention to Garode, asking him to either join Arrows or at least sell them his Gundam. Garode refuses, knowing full well that whatever Lint has in mind for it won't be good for the world. F.S. believes (correctly) that Arrows would destroy it to shut anti-Federation critics up, and observes to Lint that the anti-Federation critics really seem to be critical not of the whole Federation, but of certain specific parts of it.

Just then a bunch of origin-unknown units assail Dragons' Hive: are they "anti-Federation" terrorists, or something else? Either way, F.S. will show Lint how those without fear of Evil fight. And despite the suspiciously high level of organization the bad guys show, Lint better not think for a second that the Dragons' Hive forces will lose. Jeffry, suspecting a rat, orders combat data to be sent to WILL for analysis in realtime.

The assailants might be well-equipped, but they don't stand a chance against the motivated Dragons' Hive troops. F.S. has WILL's conclusions put on the PA system so everyone can hear: the adversaries must come from some major organization, based on their pristine state of repair. Setting aside the Red Shoulders bad guys, that organization would have to be... probably the same place that the GN Drive-equipped mecha come from. Lint still keeps up the charade and claims that they must have been stolen from Arrows. This fact isn't lost on the pilots either, and the prospect of becoming instant outlaws from the Federation is about to throw a big bucket of water onto their enthusiasm.

Until, that is, Fudou and Sandman show up! They make it very simple for the team: what is their purpose? Keeping the peace. Who do they fight? Those who threaten the peace. Period. Jeffrey says that the GN Drives are the property of the Federation Army, and anyone who would use them for their own selfish ends is the true traitor against the Federation (hint). Lint can't really say anything at that point, forced to watch as the good guys obliterate his troops.

Fudou and Sandman clear out before the dust even settles, and as Lint is escorted to the exit, he rages that F.S. and the others will regret their decision today. F.S. reckons Lint will regret his harder, and doubts that Lint will ever get the chance to chat outside of battle with him ever again.

The pilots aren't especially sorry they won't be joining Arrows, in particular now that they've seen just how underhanded Arrows can be in matters of persuasion. Shiroda seems to know quite a bit about what Arrows is up to, but like a good soldier he refuses to break secrecy to give out details. Though, the fact that he's obviously deferring to his oath of secrecy speaks loudly enough. One can only hope that Arrows doesn't do anything even more stupid to the Crushers again...

The commanders are having a bit of a rethink about Elgan's government in the wake of today's excitement. Arrows theoretically answers to him, and the Elgan they know would by no means have authorized today's pointless skirmish. And come to think of it, none of them have met with Elgan since the Federation's founding -- all requests for an audience have been turned down on account of him being "too busy". And then there's the Federation's suspiciously effective information-laundering system, whose security even WILL can't easily penetrate. The only known mechanism capable of that would be the CB's quantum computer Veda, which the CBs failed to recover when they struck down the traitor Alejandro during the previous war. F.S. now suspects that Alejandro had a collaborator, who is now in control of Veda and centrally positioned within the Federation.

Treize would be a candidate as the ringleader, except for the fact that Oz's influence within the Federation has been steadily eroding relative to Arrows. The true ringleader seems to be using Arrows as their own personal enforcers, and since Elgan is the only one capable of writing their orders, the unpleasant implication is that Elgan himself may be compromised. What better cover for such a ruthless, cancerous presence than the general prosperity the Federation has brought the world at large?

The commanders decide specifically not to share their suspicions with the rank and file just yet, in no small part because there are plenty of external enemies that mankind still faces. Still, F.S. in particular suspects that the team will be forced to face their own species sooner rather than later...

#### CHAPTER 12CD. One Million Miracles

Marina and Setsuna have some "issues" to work through. Marina wants to know why Setsuna is still trying to fight, and he for his part can't really imagine life without fighting. Much like Conan, Setsuna doesn't cry, so she starts crying for him. He points out that Azadistan is as good as fused with the Federation, and offers to drop her off anywhere she wants to get a death certificate signed. She's not down with that, so instead he recommends she come with him to Area 11, where people are actually resisting assimilation by the Feds...

Lelouch has run into his old "friend" Suzaku in Ashford Academy's library. He knows that if Suzaku learns that his memories have returned, the jig is entirely up. Charles overwrote his memories in three ways: his memories of Nanaly, his memories of Zero, and his memories of his past. He's got to pretend to get along with Suzaku to keep up the charade, which becomes harder yet when Suzaku tells him that he means to become the Knight of One: the mightiest fighter in the service of the emperor. That position also carries the right to rule one entire Area, and Suzaku intends to ask for Japan -- a ploy to make Lelouch reveal himself? Or a sincere act of naivete? In either case, Lelouch is confident that Suzaku has no way to stop what he's been cooking up with the Chinese... even if he somehow succeeds and turns Japan into a "Class One Federate", equal in Federation stature to the Three Great Nations themselves.

Suzaku tells Lelouch to ascertain the truth of this with the person he's got on the phone: the new Viceroy of Area 11. That turns out to be none other than Nanaly, and the shock damn near makes Lelouch break his cover. He manages to tell his sister that she has him confused with someone else, and gives the phone back to Suzaku. He's inwardly livid that Suzaku would use his love for Nanaly to try to expose Zero, but the shocks don't stop there. It seems Nanaly is determined to walk in Euphemia's footsteps, and to reinstate the Special Administrative District "Japan", and Lelouch is left to ponder whether

conflict between himself (as Zero) and his sister is inevitable.

Sometime later, Lelouch is cloistered away at Black Knight HQ, staring at the TV. Karen comes in and demands to know what the deal is, only to be stunned when she sees Nanaly addressing the Area as its new viceroy. She wants the "Japan" zone to be an area of peace and equality, and Lelouch realizes that "Zero" would just be in the way of such a construct. Nanaly's safety is certainly assured by her proximity to Suzaku, at once Lelouch's most intractable and most trustworthy foe. Gripped by despair, he finds himself in the rare position of not knowing what the hell to do next, despite Karen's demand that he issue some order -- any order to the team. The best he can manage is to order her to "comfort" him in the way that womankind can.

Karen actually considers it, but then repeats that he's got to pull himself together. Karen herself has found her reason to fight, as have Sumeragi, Setsuna, and numerous others. Is Lelouch really just fighting for Nanaly's sake, making tools of all his friends in the process? That strikes a chord, as Lelouch realizes that Nanaly must be acting, and in a sense fighting, on her own: not as anyone's tool, but as a full-fledged human being. Come to think of it, the fight Lelouch has started has altered the course of many, many lives, and he has an obligation to them all. And if that means casting aside himself as "Lelouch", so be it!

He has Karen gather the Black Knights and CBs, which naturally invites the question of what became of him during the final battle of the Black Rebellion. He explains only that his disappearance was necessary for the ultimate defeat of the Britannian empire, adding that he is ever interested in results. Toudou and Ougi are willing to buy that, and to answer the doubts of the others Zero says that it will take more than blind fighting to move ahead. Let the Japanese regain their name as a first step. Does that mean actually endorsing the Special Administrative Zone, and risking a repeat of the dreadful "Bloody Euphy" episode? Certainly there are those who feel the slaughter was somehow caused by Zero, using some magical hypnosis or other, despite how obviously counter the slaughter runs to his stated objective of liberating the Japanese.

Zero does indeed have a plan that involves participating in the Zone, and it will need the CBs as well as the Black Knights. He lets the new Lockon know in no uncertain terms that it's time to prove whether he's fit to inherit his brother's nom de guerre. A proclamation is sent out to all Japan to participate in the opening ceremony, and over a million people showing up. Fully three of the Knights of the Round are on hand to ensure that nothing louses up the ceremony while the eyes of the world are watching: Gino, Anya and of course Suzaku.

Nina isn't immediately available to chat with Zero on the phone, but Lloyd is. And he can't resist asking if this is the same Zero from before. Zero replies that his identity is not constituted in internals, but in results -- and as he promised he's brought fully a million Japanese to the party. His condition: he wants a pardon for himself -- and not for the Black Knights in general. That could be considered a rather severe betrayal, which would explain why Zero is talking to them on a private line. And given that Britannia has its reputation to uphold, he won't even push for a full pardon: exile would be a nice compromise, wouldn't it? Romeier observes that such a thing is legal under the "Area" laws, and Gino reckons that the flight of their leader would dissipate Eleven resistance in an instant. Suzaku doesn't want to let an evildoer off the hook, but is rapidly realizing he's got no choice but to grit his teeth and accept.

The Black Knights and CBs have mingled with the crowd, waiting for the moment when Zero's power will either be proved or violently repudiated. Nanaly

and her aide have decided to take Zero up on his deal and exile him, and he hacks into the big screen monitors to thank them for their good judgement. Suzaku demands that he show himself, and Zero answers with a question: what does he think the Japanese people are? It it their language? Their land? Their blood ties? Suzaku retorts that it is their heart, and Zero agrees entirely. Given a heart with the right reverence for the Japanese culture, a Japanese person can be Japanese anywhere on Earth.

This is the cue for Zero's agents to spring into action, dispersing a smokescreen and using it to... dress the entire frigging crowd AS Zero! A million Zeros, and all of them now officially pardoned by way of exile... a jaw-droppingly audacious gambit that the Britannians have no choice but to accept. Zero knows that removing the Black Knights from Japan will keep Nanaly's hands clean, and prove his sincerity at the same time. And if Suzaku tries to oppose it with force, he knows that the Japanese will never believe the Britannian government again. Zero promises Suzaku that he'll take care of the million exiles, and challenges Suzaku to care for the rest of the Elevens left behind.

Things get complicated when it turns out that ships from the China Federation are stationed offshore to escort the million exiles to their new home. The Britannian forces aren't going to stand for that, and Gino and Anya resolve to go break a few heads. Guilford and his men get to deal with Karen, who's showed up in advance of the Ptolemy-2 and is out for some serious throwdown at Zero's behest.

In the confusion, Zero makes his way to Nanaly, who understandably doesn't recognize him. Thinking he means to kill her, she asks him to wait just a little longer. She tells him she thinks he's making a mistake, and he tells her that the mistake lies with the emperor and the Federation, both of whom subscribe to a blind Might Makes Right worldview. Nanaly, however, does not -- she believes, as Suzaku does, that the system can be changed from within. You can guess what Zero's plans involve by contrast: taking Manhattan, Berlin, and everywhere else that promulgates a facade of peace. Here is his new declaration of war: the entire false world is going down! That fight will also settle his score with Suzaku, and Zero leaves the two of them to ponder. He remarks on the way out that Nanaly might just be able to change Area 11 for the better, and Suzaku retorts that if Zero really means to mess with teh whole world, that makes him Suzaku's enemy for sure.

On Zero's way out of his meeting with Nanaly, he runs into Rolo. Rolo has realized that Lelouch's memory is back, but doesn't plan to kill him right away if he doesn't have to: after all, he's got questions for Lelouch too. Lelouch smirks that his "younger brother" can't beat him, even when Rolo uses his Geass to get the drop on Zero. Zero has planned for this eventuality, having stationed Lockon to cover him with sniper fire on the theory that Rolo's Geass doesn't actually stop time -- merely its victims' perception of it. As such, Zero was actually counting on Rolo coming alone to get him, as it seems he shuns contact with his other comrades.

Zero asks him what he thinks the future holds. Will capturing C.C. change anything? Of course not. Rather, Zero vows as Rolo's brother to give him a new future instead. Rolo doesn't like the sound of that, but when he attempts to attack Zero Lockon fires again, and Zero takes the bullet as an act of "brotherly" kindness. Sure the family bit may have been implanted memories, but Zero assures him that the time they spent together because of those memories was genuine. Rolo buys that, and arrives at the decision that he needs to serve Lelouch, not the emperor. Inwardly, Lelouch plans to get the maximum use out of the assassin possible before tossing him out like dirty diapers for the crime of insinuating himself in Nanaly's place into Zero's

life.

Karen meanwhile has been on the losing end of a battle with Gino: her Guren just isn't cool enough. Fortunately, Senba shows up and tells her to head for the ocean -- he has decided to sacrifice himself in thanks for all the aid Karen provided him and the Japanese people. The blast distracts Gino long enough for Lakshata to unveil new enhancements for the Guren, including a flight kit that should let her keep up with anything in the Britannian arsenal. She even gets a new flight suit, and a bevy of reinforcements from the Ikaruga.

C.C. is glad (in a deadpan way) that Rolo has finally succumbed, and Zero orders the team to take out all those standing in the way of the million exiles' departure. Lockon isn't sure what to make of his complicated assignment of covering Zero, especially since Zero seemingly forced him to open fire just so he could take the bullet meant for Rolo. At least he's proven himself an able enough sniper that he was able to go along with it and not actually kill either Zero or Rolo in the process. Suzaku means to strike down Zero's forces to prevent revolt against the Federation, but one has to wonder if that's really a good idea...

Suzaku isn't going to prevail today, though he vows to do so sooner or later. Zero only planned things this way in the first place because he trusts that Suzaku understands what Nanaly is hoping to accomplish. Suzaku just better keep his promise, and ensure the safety of all the Elevens still left behind. Gino and Anya both vow to win next time, Anya making a note to herself that the team are tougher than expected.

Just another day at the office really, if one's officemates include the engineering genius Lakshata and the master diplomat Diethart. It seems Zero's made friends at the top of the Chinese government, which he calls a merely natural step toward taking on the world at large. Clearly, nobody but Zero is qualified to be in command of this three-ring circus, and what doubts the Black Knights have are dwindling quickly. Still, there's one thing left to do before the team can make a clean break with Japan.

That would be securing Viletta's cooperation, and he brings Rolo along to help. The rest of the intelligence bureau types have all been Geassed into submission, but since he'd used his Geass on Viletta once before, alternate measures are called for. Viletta is furious that Rolo has defected, but Rolo urges her to give Lelouch's version of the future a try. Lelouch adds that Viletta really seems to have found her niche as a teacher... much like Ougi wanted to be. Zero has correctly guessed that she and Ougi had an illicit somethingorother going on in the runup to the Black Rebellion, and intimates that all the honors she's earned by figuring out his identity could be lost in an instant's full disclosure. (In all fairness, it was C.C. who helped Lelouch make the connection.) What Lelouch wants in return for her silence is for everything to continue as it's been, nice and peaceful, at least as far as her reports to the top brass go. After all, Sayoko and Rolo have already proved how well they can imitate Lelouch's presence at the Academy. Thunderstruck, and not a little afraid, Viletta agrees to help Lelouch, in return for which Lelouch promises a meet up with Ougi in the not-too-distant future.

Rolo seems to be having some reservations about hanging with C.C., and she guesses correctly that it's thanks to his past with V.V. Ooh ooh, who's that? That's the guy who gave Charles his Geass, and told Suzaku Lelouch's identity. V.V. is also the head of the Geass Order, the one who sent in Rolo, and Charles first and closest ally. This V.V. would seem to be Lelouch's true enemy, and he vows to see V.V., Charles, and the whole "new world" crap

Charles has been spouting laid low before him.

## CHAPTER 13. Another Spacetime Quake

Esther finds herself wishing for a way to contact the G-boys, who are rumored to be hanging out on the other half of the routesplit along with a lot of other supposed "terrorist" types. It seems the ZEUTH Gundam pilots left Oz while the getting was good: Oz's comparatively clean image seems headed downhill as it faces off against Arrows. Shotarou in particular finds all these underground machinations incredibly frightening: he'd never have thought that the Federation -- which demonstrably does so much good for the world -- could harbor such evil. Rooting out such a cancer is clearly an important job, but it's one this team will have to leave up to the CBs for now: they've got their own overt enemies to fight first.

And there's no time to fret about it either, as one of those overt enemies crosses into this dimension somewhere within 200km of Esther's mech. Given that the Blaster Ex isn't exactly the world's most sensitive Weird Shit Detector, that means the enemy must be something huge. It turns out to be a bunch of the parallel-Earth Unknowns from before, though this time they've not brought any of the modified DBs with them... yet, anyway. Maybe these ones are just here to test the team's might, but whatever their purpose they need a swift kick in the ass.

After a bit of carnage, a bona fide Quake occurs, and from it emerges a frigging fleet of ships. At its heart is a near-clone of the Great Axion, serving as the flagship of a timid-seeming person named Yuusar. Geraud, the "Knight of Knights", is a cautious sort who reports to Yuusar's military advisor Unblown. Unblown is less cautious and more devious, and plans a little test of the new Arcsabers: Yuusar's flagship is to stay on the battlefield while the rest of the fleet retreats.

The "new" Arcsabers apparently means more of the modified DBs, as well as a bunch of mecha similar in design to Margret's. It would seem that the Holy Insalaum Empire is behind the DB's reappearance on Earth, and the new humanoid mecha appear to have actual pilots! One says that he bears the Earthlings no grudge, yet will kill them all if his lord commands. Combat is, as usual, inevitable.

Almost immediately a new mech sorties from the flagship: it is Wayne in his Saphiarda. He's using his prerogative as a Numbered "High Knight" to defend his lord from danger, and tells Unblown to shut the fuck up and leave the fighting to him. Yuusar buys it, and having seen enough of Zexis orders the Palace Insalaum to retreat. Wayne then introduces himself to the team as Shubal's protege, Arcsaber Number Four. He's got a brand new mech, a bad-ass attitude, and could cause the Earthlings real problems.

For one thing, he's specifically targeting Crow -- making him high on Esther's shitlist. He's also got some kind of personal hangup about teaching Zexis that there are things they can't simply wallpaper over with superior motivation. The lesson gets interrupted by the sudden arrival of... Setsuko of all people, who immediately attracts Wayne's full attention for the fact that her mech uses the supposedly-forbidden "Dimensional Science". He starts blasting before the team have more than the barest reunion with her, but holds up briefly when he finds out that she's got past history with several Zexis members. If he thinks she's just going to let him destroy her mech, he's going to be extremely sadly mistaken.

Indications are that Wayne has had some kind of huge-ass disheartening

defeat in his past, and feels the pride of someone who thinks they've clawed their way back under their own power. The Earthlings, who've yet to be laid that low, seem to him deserving of special enmity. Not that they're going to take that from some random interdimensional invader. Especially one whose fancy hardware, in this case something called a "D Extractor", isn't entirely up to snuff. So much for his ability to heal all damage as fast as the team can dish it out...

Wayne makes sure the team knows that they didn't so much win as get lucky that his pit crew sucked, and disappears. There's no sign of him or the Insalaum fleet, and the team are left to ponder their newfound foes. Wayne was much more powerful than Shubal, and he's only Arcsaber number four! (Shubal was number Three, but he is theoretically dead now). At least Setsuko is around to help; as reintroductions proceed, it becomes clear that only a month has passed for her since the previous game^Wtime the team was together, whereas it's been a year for the rest of them.

The conclusion they reach is that Insalaum must have grown far stronger since their defeat at the hands of Gaiou. Nobody knows how anyone besides Margret survived that cataclysm, or why they're attacking Earth now, but the Federation has decided to hold an emergency session to discuss the matter. And while the government is doing that, the Quarter fleet will be rendezvousing with the CBs... at Zero's invitation!! Zero, after all, does hold encryption keys from when Elgan invited him to Zexis... and given the gravity of the mess between Arrows and Dragons' Hive, it seems an opportune moment for Elgan's world-peace squad to have a... peaceful conference. What happens next is anyone's guess. Jeffrey gives anyone with reservations about the Black Knights the chance to leave the ship within the next two hours, but nobody does: they're all too curious as to what Zero has planned, and too concerned about the state of world events.

Meanwhile, Wayne returns to Palace Insalaum with little to report other than that the battle ended indecisively. And the last thing Wayne wants to is the fucking science officer giving him shit about it. She reminds him that she's now Regent, and he scoffs that there's never been such a thing in all two thousand years of Insalaum's existence. She smirks at such a young man being tied up in history lessons, and points out that whatever the past may have held, this is the present, and presently... she's Regent. Yuusar doesn't seem in any hurry to contradict the old bag, so Wayne grits his teeth and walks off, promising to demonstrate his loyalty to Insalaum by taking over this world. That, and nothing else.

Margret turns up at this point, reminding Wayne of his place and greeting her lord after a long absence. Unblown wants to know why Margret skirmished with her scouts, and it's Yuusar who insists it must have been a simple communications mix-up. Yuusar's whole day gets better just from seeing Margret's fabled smile -- though given how morose she tends to be, he might not get to see it very often. Unblown tells Margret she's going to use the latest in Dimensional Science to power up her machine, making her more than equal to anyone on the battlefield, Gaiou included. With that said, Yuusar declares to his knights and to his people that the time has come to establish their kingdom anew in this new world: let Insalaum be reborn!!

#### CHAPTER 13CD. Gateway to Warclouds

The Japanese flotilla reaches their new home in exile, where High Eunuch Gao Hai greets them with his bodyguard Xingke ("Shinkuu") by his side. Xingke, known as the Tiger of the China Federation, is a man of no small repute, and Zero seemingly values him enough to leave the safekeeping of the Japanese



people in his capable hands when he's got errands to run. Xingke asks if Zero truly means to take on the whole world, and as he gives a cagey reply the diminutive-and-genki Kagura runs over to say hi. She claims to be Zero's new bride, and has been serving as an ambassador of sort to the Chinese government. She's got a new friend she wants to introduce Zero to, but that will have to wait a bit longer.

As Zero heads off on one of his "errands", Xingke wonders aloud what the High Eunuchs were thinking giving the Japanese an entire island. Gao Hai tells him he has no need to know that, and starts rhapsodizing that Zero is his one and only happiness. You can cut the nonheterosexuality with a knife, and Xingke wonders how the hell Zero got Gao Hai drooling over him so much...

Marina has a lot to think about in the wake of Zero's mass exodus. On the one hand, a million people have just been saved without a single shot being fired. On the other hand, they're now exiles from a plague that has yet to be excised from their homeland -- a plague which Setsuna reckons Zero intends to eradicate in the long run. That means war. Zero joins the two of them, introducing himself to Azadistan's princess and assuring her that she's still worthy of the title so long as she holds her country in her heart... as the Japanese here are. Knowing her to be a proponent of Cinq Kingdom's Absolute Pacifism, he expects that she won't like him much as she watches the world's chaos deepen. He assures her, however, that he's not seeking war because he's a psycho -- he simply believes that the only way to fix the world is to smash it first.

Diethart is overjoyed to see so much chaos swirling around Zero, but Setsuna wants him to understand that the CBs' objective is not the demolition of the Federation per se. Zero understands this point of view, but doesn't entirely share it. Exhibit A: China, the most precariously poised of all the Federation's first-world nations under the political weight of Britannia and the AEU. He expects that Marina is well-positioned for an informative display of world politics, and heads off to the team's planning meeting. Setsuna follows, but not before Milena asks him and Marina if they're lovers. Both calmly (and quickly) deny it.

Speaking of world politics, Camille has made an astonishing discovery: not a single word about the mass exodus has appeared in the world's media, or even its private social media. It's another example of how someone has a death-grip on public information in the Federation, and that someone seemingly wants to deny groups like Catalon the slightest excuse for hope. The thoroughness of it all raises the unpleasant specter of the Universal Network, and the team reach the same conclusion as their counterparts on the other route split: it must be the work of Veda. And from what Setsuna remembers of Alejandro's death, he had a collaborator other than Treize or even Elgan.

The real enemy, then, is centrally placed in the Federation, has a godlike computer for manipulating the world's information sources, and apparently two private armies at his disposal. Zero is the first to admit that the CBs and Black Knights are at a serious disadvantage against such odds, and explains to Esther that they can't count on help from the mighty Crushers. Barring some overarching menace like the Imperium that would force strange bedfellows together, this team will remain outlaw terrorists, and unable to seek help from what is still a Federation special forces battalion.

Zero muses aloud that if another such menace were to appear, it might well blow the Federation wide open. Karen retorts that nobody in their right mind would want another menace like that to appear, and Zero as much as apologizes for how his statement sounded. Sumeragi is sharp enough to notice that something is different between them, but figuring out what gets shelved when alarms go off: a Spacetime Quake has just been detected close to the exile

site.

Now, not all Quakes are 100% bad, given that that's how the ZEUTH folks arrived in this world in the first place. This one, on the other hand, is at least 90% bad judging by what it disgorges: a bunch of Unknowns that Sumeragi fears are merely scouts for a more sinister force to come.

That sinister force turns out to be Insalaum, and things go down pretty much the same as on the other path. Perhaps this is the menace that Zero has been looking for?

Anyway, Setsuko shows up and gets introduced back into the team. Who, find themselves wondering how these Insalaum stragglers are even mightier than the Imperium's DB armies, despite having their society supposedly destroyed. Clearly they've powered up somehow, and there won't be any answers about how until more fact-finding occurs. Zero naturally assumes that Insalaum will eventually find themselves in combat with the Federation, the greatest power in the world (and one that was theoretically founded specifically to fend off menaces like them). He meanwhile has decided to use the authority Elgan gave him, and to reassemble Zexis in its entirety: if the current Federation leadership has a shred of Elgan's will left in it, they ought to recognize Zexis' right to confront mankind's common enemy. Of course, there's the outside chance that the Crushers will decide to strike down the CBs and Black Knights instead of joining with them, but Esther at least wants to believe that's unlikely.

[See the other path for the conversation aboard the Palace Insalaum.]

#### CHAPTER 14AB. The World Begins to Move

Pieris gives Sergei a status report on Arrows' recent activities, including how Mannequin has been relieved of command after his latest failure. Assigning Lint as his replacement wouldn't have been Sergei's first choice, but he declines to elaborate lest he unfairly bias her. The new Unknowns that came from the latest Quake have the Federation in a tizzy, and he's been given a special assignment that he intimates could result in him on the front lines. He's pleased to hear that his son is doing well and is loyal to the cause, not expecting Andrei to return his paternal affection any time soon. She tells him not to be too sure, and that she intends to accept "the proposal" soon. The "Proposal" meaning, she may be able to give Sergei a grandchild in due course. Her only regret will be no longer hearing the name "Pieris", which Sergei is one of the few people to actually use. Sergei hangs up and Louise comes over to summon Pieris to the planning session. Pieris' brainwave senses assure her that Louise is crying in her heart... pining away, to be specific, for someone she feels she can never approach again.

Zero's arranged meeting place is in the middle of the desert, surrounded by countries not yet part of the Federation: perfect for outlaws like the CBs and Black Knights. This setup is very uncommon now: almost 90% of the world's nations have either joined or been dragooned into the Federation, and that percentage is climbing steadily. The Middle East, as Kamon knows from his time with Isabelle Cronkite, is basically the last bastion. Kamon passes along what info he's heard about Zero's contingent, which seemingly includes the entire other half of Zexis. Hopefully this half won't have to fight them: after all, it's not just anyone who decides to take on the Federation and its armies head-on. Akagi at least isn't worried either way: Allies of Justice fight who they have to fight, and leave alone who they can leave alone, end of story. Setsuko loves the simplicity of it all.

Just then alarms sound: a battle has broken out some thirty clicks to the Northwest. That's no where the rendezvous is supposed to be, so who on Earth would be throwing down in the middle of nowhere? It turns out to be Catalon, whose not-quite-so-secret-base has come under heavy fire from Lint's men. Lint, as usual, is enjoying the carnage, and blithely ignores the Catalon surrender. Mannequin is aghast, but in no position to stop the needless bloodshed, or to make Lint stop bringing up painful memories from her past. He's been ordered to kill all belligerents, and that makes him super happy. It makes Katy wish she never joined the military in the first place, even as she's forced to set the Automatons to Kill Mode.

Pieris now understands why Sergei didn't want her to join Arrows, but Andrei tells her she's got his dad all wrong: his father is the kind of person who would leave his own wife to die (or so Andrei thinks, anyway). Maybe, Pieris thinks, this horrible assignment is her punishment for trying to seek happiness like a normal person, when in fact she's a finely honed weapon herself.

The Macross Quarter shows up at this point and quickly realizes that Automatons have been deployed in Kill Mode, despite the fact that the battle is obviously over AND the presence of civilian refugees inside the Catalon base. Jeffrey requests an explanation, which Lint is very happy to NOT provide. Jeffrey therefore must act on his own judgement, which is that he's caught the Arrows folks flagrantly committing crimes against humanity. He therefore orders the troops to take out the Automatons, which results in Lint ordering Arrows' pilots to go after the Crushers. Jeffrey then announces that the team will have no choice to fight back -- anyone who wishes to can leave the area, without fear of reprisal from him. Nobody does, and even Saeki finds the courage to fight for what the Crushers are doing bureaucratically.

Bushido has decided not to sortie, using his "One-Man Army" Licence [no, seriously, that's what he calls it] to override Lint's command authority. That last about as long as it takes for Zero and friends to show up. Hasty introductions are made, both teams agree to target the Arrows flagship, and Bushido decides to go after the CB Gundams. Pieris has her own bone to pick with Allelujah, and it looks like the battle could get fierce after all.

Allelujah is really determined to save Mary, rushing over recklessly and glomming on to her mech when it gets immobilized. Explosions ensue, and the two of them crash nearby. Sumeragi orders the team to trust Allelujah to pull through, and to concentrate on the remaining enemies on the field. Bushido makes a much calmer exit, conceding that he has yet to reach the Summit and vowing to return. Setsuna is beginning to guess who this guy might be...

Lint is furious when he gets his ass kicked, vowing all kinds of vengeance until Katy overrides him and gets what troops remain out of danger. Another detachment of the Black Knights show up, having cleaned up a separate Arrows detachment. They're all glad to see that the Crushers did the right thing when faced with Arrows' clearly illegal behavior, but lengthy reunions get preempted when Treize shows up with "orders for Zexis". That makes it sound like Oz is formally recognizing Zexis' existence... AND that he is somehow aware of Zero's (supposedly secret) invitation to reassemble the squad.

That of course sounds like a trap, so Zechs has brought Sergei (the "Russian Grizzly") from the regular army along as confirmation. Jeffrey is inclined to accept Zechs offer of parlay, hoping to avoid alienating the entire Federation, and Zero and Sumeragi concur: one third of the team will stand guard while the rest aid the Catalon survivors and search for Allelujah.

Jeffrey hosts the parlay inside the Macross Quarter, a far less spartan setting than the military vessels Sergei is used to. Treize actually prefers such (relatively) cushy confines, but Sergei is ill at ease -- mostly due to Pieris' disappearance. Treize has found out all about Sergei's relation to her, and tells him to go join the search: he shares Sergei's doubts about Oz and Arrows, and has decided to personally side with Zexis. He tells Sergei on his way out that he doesn't favor sending Pieris into battle: humans should never be treated as tools of war.

Treize hopes that Sergei turns out like Quatro: if so, there's hope that the Federation can yet be salvaged. But reality is seldom pleasant, and thus he's forced to turn to Zexis once more...

Allelujah in fact found Pieris, and pulled her unconscious from her wrecked mech. He make no attempt to tie her up, so the first thing she does upon regaining consciousness is try to arrest him. That lasts until the memories start flooding back, recalling the time when both she and Allelujah were in the same hospital. At the time, she was blind and mute, able only to speak psychically. He in turn was amnesiac and able to hear her voice, letting them strike up a conversation and a friendship. In fact, it was her that gave him his name, meaning "praise be to God". Praise for what? For being alive.

Mary finally re-regains consciousness as herself, apologizing to Allelujah for everything he's gone through for her sake. She reckons that Pieris was a personality implanted in her to help restore her use of her five normal senses: a gambit by the Super-Human Institute to keep funding flowing from the military. Cruel, yes, but at least it led to the two of them seeing each other again. A very happy reunion, in fact, until Sergei shows up...

Treize gets fairly straight to the point: as of 1400 local Japan time, the old Zexis squad has been officially recognized as an independent Federation Army Expeditionary Force, with full jurisdiction over its own personnel decisions. Any with full approval of the Federation, any investigation into criminal activities of Zexis' members will be frozen effective immediately. That sounds waaay too convenient to Zero, and in fact to Treize himself. All the paperwork has apparently been percolating for a very long time, as though someone forecast its necessity a long time ago. And the name atop the letterhead is none other than Elgan Roddick's.

From what Treize has been able to uncover, everything was set in motion by the transmission of some kind of secret code, which would probably be the code Zero used to reassemble Zexis. In short: Elgan apparently predicted that all this would be necessary, and that Oz and Arrows would go awry, long before the Federation's founding... Zero, master strategist that he is, isn't sure how to feel that Elgan had that much greater foresight than his. Elgan even included explicit provisions that Zexis has the right of oversight, and correction over the rest of the Federation army to be used in the interest of mankind's peace and welfare. Even Arrows must abide by this edict, which effectively justifies the actions Zexis just took in battle.

The commanders greet this with clearly skeptical silence, and Treize says frankly that there is a long list of people, himself included, with doubts about the wisdom of an order that puts recognized terrorists in de facto charge of the world's military. Treize acknowledges what they're all thinking: that this move makes Zexis as a whole the enemy of both Arrows and of his Oz forces, even as it incorporates them into the tangled web that is the Federation army. Zero accepts this, and vows to act -- as Federation forces -- to crush Oz. Treize accepts this, and says he'll tell Schneider that Zero is the same man he's always been. He doubts they'll be able to actually meet Elgan face to face, as he's heard that Elgan is extremely busy these days... and Sumeragi

let him know that she isn't at all happy with the sensation of being made to dance for his and Elgan's pleasure. She's already lost more than a few irreplaceable comrades that way. Recognizing the threat in her tone, Treize asks only that they treat him as a friendly until he's left their ship.

Now back to Mary, who's busy explaining her tale of woe to Sergei. Aggrieved though he is over her treatment, he's unwilling to simply leave her in the care of the Celestial Beings, killers of so many of his comrades. Allelujah offers Sergei the chance to shoot him dead on the spot, so long as he also promises to never make Mary have to fight again. Sergei agrees, and Mary rushes to protect Allelujah as Sergei draws his gun. Fortunately for all concerned, he fires into the sky, declaring that Soma Pieris has just died an honorable death in battle. That's how the official report will read anyway. He then thanks Allelujah for helping save the shuttle that Mary was on waaay back when. Mary can only leave him with a final message from Pieris inside her, who would have been honored to become his daughter-in-law. He leaves her in Allelujah's hands, and they all give thanks each other are still alive...

Word of Allelujah's impending safe return reaches the pilots, who are busy catching up on each other's path through the route split. When Allelujah shows up with his new girlfriend, Zero initially wants her to use her piloting skills on the team's behalf. The rest of the pilots, however, don't want to see her forced into battle again after all she's been through -- and when even Sumeragi endorses Allelujah's promise to fight doubly hard on her behalf, there's little he can say. Allelujah psychically thanks Kiriko for sticking up for him, knowing that Kiriko is in a similar position, and Kiriko says aloud that there's no need for thanks. That's the first time the kids have seen Kiriko apparently talking to himself, a rare display of "humanity" from the stoic warrior. Setsuko assures them that beneath his exterior Kiriko experiences every inch as much emotion as the rest of the team.

The newly reborn Zexis' mission is sort of a mashup of the two halves' activities: battle mankind's common threats, kick Oz and Arrows' ass when they step out of line (not "if"), and generally act in the best interests of mankind. At least they won't be branded terrorists while doing it anymore. Trois isn't having it though: he's got his own ideas of how to battle Oz on the Colonies' behalf. Hiiro tells him to leave things here to him and go off to do as he sees fit -- Hiiro, like so many Zexis members, seems to have changed a bit for the better (even though he won't admit it).

Meanwhile, Ribbons is understandably un-thrilled with the little trap Elgan set for Veda. Could it be that Elgan has a collaborator, maybe one he's linked to psychically the same way the Innovators work? Ribbons of course doesn't expect an answer, given how Elgan is totally paralyzed and incapable of speech at present. Ribbons decides to let Elgan's little gambit stand, figuring that irregular elements like Zexis are good for accelerating the world... and maybe getting rid of those pesky Insalaum doods in the process. He assures Elgan that he and Amuro Rei will lead the world to the future that Elgan and Ioria wished for, and that he will indeed gain possession of the Black Knowledge...

#### CHAPTER 14. What Power Is Granted

[see the other path for Pieris' conversation with Sergei and Louise.]

Marina has decided to return to her homeland, scarcely recognizable though it's become. She got a chance to see firsthand the effort the exiled Japanese are putting in to keeping the concept of their homeland alive, and she feels she can do nothing less for her own country. Setsuna points out that the Japanese

had the advantage of Zero showing up and breaking them out of their eight-year period of despair. Marina hopes to become a leader like Zero, albeit an Absolutely Pacifistic one, and although she and Setsuna aren't likely to grasp each others' *modi operandi* any time soon, she would like to believe that both of them are aiming at the same result: peace. She can only hope that she's got the courage to walk the path that Rilina and Euphemia lit before her feet.

Outside, the other pilots are totally gossiping behind their back. Marina's background as a music major before restoration as crown princess comes up, as does her favorable relationship with Setsuna: they support each other quite well despite having diametrically-opposed ways of getting things done. Duo knows at least one other couple like that, and Asahina tells Esther that this is how love always begins: seeking something in another that you're missing yourself. This touches off a round of "who's-the-secret-crush" guessing, ending with Karen explaining that Saji is just a friend of hers from school, nothing more.

Tielia then explains all the intelligence Liu Mei has gathered on the Crushers, and it's plain to see that open warfare with them would be bad. Shinn is convinced they can be brought around to the Black Knights' point of view, but Ougi isn't so sure -- Esther's admonishment that he should give his all in business and "love" only gets him more flustered. Will he ever see "Chigusa" again, now that she's regained her memories as a Britannian soldier?

Lakshata comes over the intercom just then, notifying the pilots of a skirmish nearby between Arrows and... somebody or other, possibly Catalon. Time to get everyone's guns on! This is basically the same battle as on the other path, though told from the Black Knights' viewpoint. Bushidou wants to take on the CB Gundams, and Allelujah has Pieris' recapture to worry about. Zero, upon seeing the Arrows' atrocities in action, declares that the world will never change so long as they exist.

The Crushers show up on turn 2, and realize quite quickly that the Arrows forces have made a hash of things. As on the other path, this rapidly leads to an out-and-out dogfight. See the other path for Allelujah and Mary's travails.

[Refer to the other path for the complete reunification of Zexis, and Allelujah and Mary's reunion.]

## CHAPTER 15. Man As Before

[I kept the CD route]

The surviving Catalon folks are quite grateful to the CBs, if only for buying them the time to get the civilians from their base to safety. Marina is kind of hanging around and surveying the damage when she notices that Xielin is among the Catalon heavies. Sumeragi quickly gets Catalon to agree to convey Marina back to her (currently trashed) kingdom, but is unable to grant their request for full-on cooperation in the fight against the Federation. After all, the CBs aren't a huge organization like Catalon, and they aren't actually out for the Federation's downfall per-se. The CBs, and indeed most of Zexis, are hunting for Arrows, back to their usual do-gooding ways. Setsuna and Marina part ways, possibly never to see each other again, without even one quality roll in the (proverbial) hay: a pretty sad state of affair by 21st century Gundam series standards, but indicative of how screwed up the world is.

And just for a little added rancor, Saji informs Setsuna that he will be sticking around longer. The red Haro's database has convinced him that the CBs weren't directly responsible for Louise's injuries, but he's still a long way from agreeing with the CBs' methods. Setsuna tells Shouji he doesn't expect him to agree, and could care less if he hates him for it. Just then, a Catalan dude called Ikeda comes over and introduces himself to Kinue's little brother. He was a JNN foreign office staffer before the Breaking, and is quite surprised to see Kinue's flesh and blood carrying on her credo of following the facts to the truth. He does admonish Saji not to sacrifice his own dreams in the process, adding that it takes more than a sense of duty to survive the horrors of the battlefield. The question is, what has become of Saji's dreams...?

Esther has a lot to report to Traia about Zexis' reconstitution. It's an odd setup, to at once be part of the Federation army and to be on its shitlist: ZEUTH had to deal with something like that back in its homeworld. One can only hope that Oz and Arrows will be swept away as decisively as the Titans were. Under the circumstances, Traia wants Esther to get busy piling up combat data like Crow once did... since Crow himself seems to have buried himself in white-collar living and isn't interested in dangerous stuff anymore. Traia is in fact so stressed that she's turned to using Esther's drums, kind of wishing that Crow's head was the cymbals. She assures Esther that Crow's gone even softer, even more lecherous, and that his face is about 1.5X worth slapping... which would be quite a sight if he were on hand to say hi. Instead, Traia will relay Esther's greetings while Esther and Zexis flee Arrows' lands... to Limonecia!

The oceanside nation is recovering from Gaiou's ravages at an impressive rate, back in business with fishing and tourism already. The surviving citizens are unified in their desire to undo the ravages of the past ten years, and odds look good they'll succeed. However, the tranquility of the beach belies the devastation that still lingers in pockets deeper inland. Esther has made a point of going to gaze upon them, reminded of her own hometown's demolition.

Setsuko comes over to join Esther, busy with her own thoughts and still quite anxious after finding herself in another dimension. However, what the Maiden of Sorrow(tm) has really come to do is give Esther a chance to vent, and Esther assures her she'll make use of her shoulder to cry on when the time is right. Setsuko gives her some candy and heads back to the ship, and Esther sighs and hopes she's as awesome as her in another few years. Maybe Crow would go for that?

Her reverie [more like "fantasizing"] is interrupted by the arrival of an EGL named Marilyn. All the black lace makes Esther ask if she's going to a funeral ["Maybe ah amm..."], and the overall effect is fetching enough that Esther is starting to wonder if she should start batting from both sides of the plate [so to speak]. Marilyn seems quite knowledgeable about Esther's robot and the Scott Lab that built it, and it turns out Crow once did her a good turn in the days before he became a test pilot. However, he was also a shit-brained coward who refused her orders in a moment of remembering his humanity... Sort of like a shit-eating fly suddenly getting finicky about the manner in which it flies.

Either EGLs have gotten a lot fouler-tongued since my last trip to Japan, or something is seriously fuxored with Marilyn. It turns out to be the latter: Marilyn Cat is none other than the commander of the dreaded Firebug squadron. She's read about Ordis' only survivor, and isn't at all surprised that Crow would take a liking to her. Marilyn then summons her servants, who are a) stealthy and b) extraordinarily arsonistic in Marilyn's words. It would appear that Marilyn wants Crow back, and wouldn't you know it:

Esther would seem to make the perfect bait.

Somehow she manages to dash to her mech and start fleeing, but the Firebug dudes are in, umm, hot pursuit. Marilyn's first impulse would be to messily slaughter the fleeing girl, and has to remind herself aloud that she's got to use Esther as bait first. Esther retorts that Crow isn't the sort to come rescue her, and normally Marilyn would agree. However, given that Esther is the only survivor of the Prometheus Experiment, he's sure to come. She explains that the Prometheus Experiment was part of Britannia's program to harness the infinite power of the Dimension Energy Crystals, and its failure let loose the DB that destroyed Esther's town.

The Firebugs were Britannia's dirty-deeds squad, and were dispatched to Ordis to salvage what they could of the experimental data and obliterate the rest. Despite all the people they'd killed before, all the coups they'd helped to arrange and the anti-Britannian rebels they'd helped betray, something about seeing Esther lying there unconscious made Crow -- long a malcontent among the ranks -- snap. What Marilyn calls "cowardice", Esther calls Crow simply being... Crow! And anyone who badmouths Crow is subject to a bitch-slapping by her drummer's hands. Marilyn orders her sycophantically-loyal troops to torment Esther a bit, which is sure to turn out badly for \_somebody\_.

Esther is actually doing pretty well for herself, which makes Marilyn just a tad angry. Her troops scramble to placate her, and she leads them in a formation attack that leaves Esther at the brink of defeat. That's when Crow charges in, and puts the skills he picked up in two years as their comrade to VERY good use. He leads Esther a little distance away so she can catch her breath, and trades a few insults with his former commander (who, for the record, he never once called "princess" like the rest of her lackeys do). Said lackeys are beside themselves with rage, and proclaim jihad upon the insolent Crow.

Crow had been told the Firebugs were disbanded after he left the army, but it sort of figures that there are people even more shameless than him still eager to serve Marilyn's whims. Apparently Marilyn took her operation independent, becoming mercenaries and continuing their life of mischief. Their current employer wants Crow's mech, and wouldn't mind some data about the rest of Zexis (who happen to show up as if on cue). Since Marilyn is quick to fire on the Zexis force, they've got no choice but to respond in kind. The good news is that Crow seems the same as ever, and quickly reintegrates with the team.

Crow also well remembers Marilyn, whose ever desires stealing what others hold dear. Crow reckons he owed her plenty of payback from before, not to mention for what she's just been doing to Esther. She gets genuinely peeved when he defeats her with his fancy-pants mech, but it was \_she\_ that taught Crow that a winner's a winner regardless of methods.

Their sparring is rudely interrupted by the arrival of Insalaum forces: they are Marilyn's "sponsor". Crow is \_pissed\_ when he hears that Marilyn has somehow shackled up with Margret's countrymen, but quickly regains his composure when the Arcsaber forces insist on bringing the fight to Zexis.

Geraud shows up shortly and assumes command of the Insalaum forces. He's here on his own and not under orders, so he couldn't bring his Diamed. Instead, he's come in a Dim Lee that also has a D-Extractor: the Knight of Knights will not play second fiddle to anyone! The Arcsaber #1 cuts a fearsome figure, and after Zexis' exploits versus Shubal and Gaiou, he wants to test his might against them. He'll get his wish.



As it happens, more than just his personal strength will be needed to take Zexis down. He promises to come back with his proper "sword" from his master the next time they fight. For now, he withdraws the rest of his troops and leaves Zexis to wonder just what the hell is going on. After a few brief pleasantries with the team, Esther asks to have a word with Crow about this "Prometheus somethingorother" business.

What Marilyn said is all true. The Firebugs are the worst of the worst, and Crow makes no attempt to deny that he was one of them during a particularly dark period in his life. He'd just graduated high school and more or less fled home to get away from his father, and the army was a way to keep himself fed. He found himself a Firebug after two years in the regulars, and he literally threw up after ever horrendous mission in the early days. But the human animal can become accustomed to many things, and by the time the Ordis mission rolled around, his heart was effectively dead in the service of carrying out his orders. Seeing Esther lying there awoke something in him, and he saved her even though he knew from the outset that doing so did nothing to atone for his previous crimes.

Esther counters that he should never underestimate what he's done for her: hell, she wouldn't be talking to him if not for the action he took back then. If he's got stuff on his mind, get it out; if he's got debts to repay, repay them! But she never wants him to stop being "him" around her, and he tells her that she's an excuse as any to lead the kind of life he hopes for. Even though he secretly knows that things aren't that simple.

Crow tells the rest of the team, busily eavesdropping in the bushes nearby, they can come out now. It seems like open season on true confessions time, and Esther wants to make it very clear that she doesn't care about Crow's past now that he's put it so far behind him. Hell, her own past (which is shorter than his by a lot) still haunts her -- like how she still says "meow" at times thanks to her Jr. High fantasy of being a cat fairy. Yeah. A, um, cat fairy. That's her "black history", and she doesn't want to have to say it more than once. Of course, "Black History" is a lot weightier of a phrase where ZEUTH comes from.

Crow figures he's not in any position to critique Oz or Arrows, and promises the team he'll be supporting them from afar in other ways. That is, until a bunch of civilians come up with a bill for the damage caused by the sonic boom he left in his wake when arriving. Cutting to the chase, he now owes a million quid... which he borrows forthwith from his drinking buddy (and professional loan operator) Zenitory. He has, abruptly, become a debtor once more, and ruefully rejoins Zexis to earn his way free. Then again, maybe this is how he's meant to live.

Meanwhile, Geraud escorts Marilyn to meet Yuusar. The unhinged loli doesn't make many friends with her blunt-kawaii speech, but promises to be a big help in the war effort (which it appears is mostly Unblown's to coordinate). She requests a strong mech in return, which makes Wayne even more irate but doesn't faze Unblown anyway. She gives Marilyn the Black Pearl, which is going to result in unwarranted levels of PotC jokes if I'm not careful. Apparently black pearls are unknown on this Earth (which is odd), and Margret has some sort of right of refusal over the deal (which she declines to exercise). With this, Insalaum's warpower is complete, and all preparations for deploying the ZONE are ready. Time for Insalaum to set foot onto this world for realz!

FLASHBACK TIEMZ! Here we find Shubal apologizing profusely to Yuusar for Wayne's ongoing incompetence, including a humiliating (for Wayne) loss to Geraud. Yuusar is used to such things from Wayne, and Geraud notes that Wayne's pride reminds him very much of Shubal himself in his younger days. Even Margret has to smirk at that, and as in the previous game Shubal berates her loud and long for disrespecting him. Yuusar cuts the hilarity short, telling Shubal to let Wayne off with an admonition to concentrate harder in the future. Wayne rushes in at this point, sodding protocol in the interest of reporting that there is a Quake enveloping the entire northern hemisphere...

This turns out to be Yuusar's recurring dream, hearkening back to the day Insalaum was ravaged by forces from another dimension. Unblown calls into his bedchamber to remind him that today is the day of Insalaum's first step into their new world and to get his shit together, and he ponders that it will be, at the same time, their first step OUT of their old world.

So anyways, Crow is back! Contrived as hell, and abrupt on top of it, but back nonetheless. Hope you poured beau coup dinero into the Blaster Ex, so that the regular Blaster is all buff as well. Crow phones up Traia to relate his latest travails, and hears that she's secured all the loans needed to pay off the grasping townfolk. But it's the source of the dough that's a shocker: it wasn't Zenitory, but Carlos who coughed up the dough. Whereas Crow has a talent for losing money, Carlos seems to have a talent for piling it up. Crow is starting to wish he'd gotten rid of Carlos when he had the chance, but that would have meant being at the mercy of Zenitory's people... who, it turns out, have a lot of shady military connections.

Crow, as we know, hates shady military connections. Fortunately, Traia has ways of converting Crow's combat data into revenue, and fortunately, Crow is ideally situated to get into combat on a regular basis (and well-accustomed to pinching pennies). Lockon then comes up, sneaking up on Crow and revealing himself by dropping a coin. Crow has seamlessly adapted to the whole Lockon Mk.II thing, explaining that he expects good things from the sniper not because of his genetics, but because of whatever determination impelled him to take up his brother's nom de guerre. He had to know that everyone would compare him to the original, and yet did it anyway -- and Crow respects that. If nothing else, he and Lockon Mk.II have a love for the original in common.

The meet'n'greet is interrupted by the bad guys, who have just invaded the west coast of North America and installed a giant... thingie of some kind. Yuusar Insalaum is live from the scene, announcing himself as the prince in charge of the Holy Insalaum Empire and declaring that his people are about to colonize this parallel Earth. If these Earthlings surrender, cool. If not, they should expect UNRELENTING BEATDOWN at the hands of the Arcsabers, and the ZONE thingie his people have just installed. He hopes for their sake that the Earthlings aren't so stupid as to object.

The sight of the gigantic ZONE, glowing menacingly, has some of the pilots worried: the Arcsabers were bad enough, not to mention whatever new devilry the Insalaum survivors have cooked up. The Federation regular army is "keeping a close eye" on the ZONE, which is a fancy way of saying "quaking in their boots" and "not lifting a goddamn finger" against the pan-dimensional refugees. Oz is asking Arrows for help, but Arrows seems content for now to hide behind their "peacekeeping only" charter. Gee, guess who gets to go save the day by default? Yeah. As the pilots head for their cockpits, it seems that Michelle has not lost his distrust of Lockon, even if Crow and the rest of the team have accepted him. Setsuko too is worried, having a guess as to what the ZONE is and knowing that the team has to hurry if she's right...

The ZONE turns out to be in Sacramento, probably raising property values in

the area immensely. Unblown has taken charge of military operations, sending the better half of the fleet out to deal with adversaries on their perimeter. Even Geraud and Wayne have been dispatched, leaving Margret to hold the fort with Marilyn. Marilyn claims to see Margret as an older-sister figure, in part due to the relation between their mecha, though Margret largely ignores her. Despite glib assurances from Unblown that everything will be just fine, Margret is worried that all Unblown's Dimensional Science might not be enough to fend off Zexis.

Guess we'll get to find out, huh? Unblown has Yuusar sortie the Arcsaber forces to meet the Zexis threat, and the question on everyone's mind is: what is the ZONE doing? Just sitting there for now, but the Zexis pilots have been doing this long enough to expect something to happen once the bad guys start to lose. Setsuko is getting very bad vibes from the ZONE, but Crow feels nothing out of the ordinary -- proof to Setsuko that Crow hasn't awakened his Sphere yet. She advises everyone to hurry, but Zero has one final question for Yuusar: does he really intend to fight, seeing arrayed before him Earth's finest guardians? Yuusar is in fact quite worried, but Unblown assures him that there's no turning back now. He declares that as the Insalaum emperor, every word from his mouth is truth: and the truth is that the Earthlings are going *\*down\**.

The prince seems to lack even the most basic grasp of strategy, but his troops are well-motivated and well-armed. They also are nowhere near mastering the Dimensional Science Unblown slaved so hard over, and fearing a second collapse of Insalaum Unblown twists Yuusar's arm into activating the "Sei-Ou-Ki: The Insa", his personal mech. And you thought Banpresto's naming schemes were fuxored before! Margret is at his side as he sorties, vowing to protect her lord and unwilling to parlay with Zexis -- much like the first time Crow met her. Crow tells a flustered Esther that they've got no choice but to fight, and he's suddenly starting to feel some kind of weight on his chest, as though something really really bad is about to happen...

Margret seems to know full well that she's not fighting for the best of reasons, but her loyalty to her country seems to come first. That gives Crow no choice but to kick her ass, showing her enough respect to do it with full force.

Now about mister Prince Noncommittal, whose mech's unabridged title is "Sei-Ou-Ki The Insalias Arch-Rheinas". It's ginormous as hell and STILL can't live up to its outsize billing. Dealing 4500+ damage in a single strike -- even on the first play-through -- is totally doable if your strategy and resource allocation is right. A single strike is all you'll get, because Prince Noncommittal is easily frightened and flees to the safety of his flagship as soon as a single bug hits the windshield.

At his panicked orders, Unblown announces herself to Zexis and unleashes her new science project: artificial Dimensional Beasts! She figures these to be the easiest explanation of her Dimensional Science for simpletons like the Earthlings: the product of some sort of selective breeding(?) program she is only too happy to gloat about. She has it that since her former countrymen can't be returned to normal anyway, the least she can do is put them to some good use.

She refers to her creations as "Adamons", and it should come as no real surprise that you gotta catch 'em all. She withdraws to watch the carnage from a distance, and insofar as she named herself the Steward of Gondor^W Insalaum one must assume that she's got a lot of pull within the Insalaum nation. Lakshata reserves judgement about Unblown's scientific prowess, but she dislikes her wrinkled old hag act on sight.

The Adamons are solid, but still no match for Zexis -- which of course means, it's time for the ZONE to do something interesting. In this case, "interesting" means turning everything near it into sand... dead sand, as opposed to some theoretically not-quite-dead-but-still-deserving-the-name sand. Asakim (remember him?) pops up to help explain what Setsuko felt: this gadget is sucking up all Life from all matter nearby. That's Life(tm) with a capital L, aka the Power to Exist(tm), the Original Power(tm), Origin Row, and so on. Dimension Power is the simplest term, and it turns out that the ZONE's massive central lens is ALL made out of DEC. With a sardonic smirk, Asakim intones that the Insalaumians have bloodied their hands with majorly taboo shit, sans any conception of the consequences.

As the ZONE's physical form resides in another dimension, physical attacks from this one stand no chance of damaging it. That's bad, because with a DEC that large, a good quarter of the entire continent could well be killed off. Asakim observes that Setsuko, who still seems to hate his guts, has an idea how to stop the thing... and no real choice but to go through with it. She hates it when he's right, and explains to Crow that she too is a Sphere-Bearer. That Crow didn't realize it is another proof of how far he is from complete.

Setsuko's plan is to feed the ZONE a continuous stream of Dimension Power from her Sphere, preventing it from draining any more of its surroundings. It's anybody's guess what that will do to her, but the odds of something Sorrowful seem high. Even Crow can't help share such a burden, given his immaturity as a Sphere-Bearer, and despite the frantic cries of the other pilots to reconsider, Setsuko does what she must while there's still time. It actually turns out decently: though she's now effectively sealed inside the ZONE, she isn't actually dead.

That's more than the poor environs of Sacramento can say: everything, and I mean EVERYTHING, has been reduced to dust... even the steel skeleton of the skyscrapers. The Insalaum fleet have scarpered off to some other dimension, and until the team can beat out of them a way to turn the ZONE off, Setsuko will remain out of reach. Even Asakim has vanished, after satisfying himself that Setsuko was truly entrenched inside the ZONE.

Crow tells Esther that the team has to go, even though it means leaving Setsuko behind (for now). He muses that the team underestimated Insalaum, so sure that past results Zexis > Gaiou > Insalaum transitively guaranteed future victory. But this ZONE thingie, the Adamons, and even the powered-up Arcsabers are no joke, and the team needs to go regroup and rebuild. Zexis is to head to the Japanese exiles for this strategizing, and as they do so Crow will be pondering what in him isn't yet up to snuff for the Sphere. When he sees Asakim next, he's got ever so much to ask him...

Tielia too has a lot to think about, having witnessed yet another sacrifice for the greater good. He vows to do the same with as much grace if the time comes, but just then Rijeene shows up and breaks his concentration. They look so very much alike, don't they? That's because they share the same DNA: the DNA of an Innovator. Brainwave communication, nanomachine-moderated aging slowdown... all qualities necessary for Ioria's master plan. That Tielia was unaware of his comrades indicates that the Gundam Meisters' access to Veda was limited. So Rijeene fills in the blanks for him:

Step One: the Celestial Beings' military intervention leads to world unity.  
Step Two: Arrows unifies mankind's collective will.  
Step Three: Mankind ventures to outer space to prepare for the upcoming Dialog.

The Innovators are a new strain of humanity, suited to life in space and

groomed to be at the vanguard of the order Ioria foresaw. Sound at all familiar?

Meanwhile, Geraud and Wayne have returned from their sorties, both easily crushing the conventionally-armed Earth forces. Wayne is far from happy though: victory on the flank means nothing if the center folds, and it seems pretty clear that the fabled ZONE folded like an origami academy. Oh, and don't call it a "temporary suspension of operational capability" either. Geraud replies shortly that Unblown has another ZONE or two ready, and reacts badly when Wayne points out the obvious -- that Yuusar is totally not ready to go into battle. Geraud tells Wayne to consider his punch the punch of his master Shubal, walking off and leaving Wayne cursing violently in his wake.

## CHAPTER 17. Bride of the Forbidden City

Things have stabilized around the ZONE, which is both good and bad depending on -- like Setsuko -- you're trapped inside it or not. The Insalaum dudes who installed the damn thing are nowhere to be found, hidden beyond dimensional boundaries Earth's science has no immediate way to penetrate. With Oz and Arrows inactive, the responsibility for battling the Insalaum will fall directly on Zexis' shoulders... and insofar as Setsuko's life is on the line, Jeffrey wouldn't have it any other way.

In the hangar, Karen finds Saji helping Ian with mech maintenance: his space science qualifications are coming in handy for something after all. He's not somehow come around to the CBs' way of thinking, but neither does he want to be totally passive in heading towards his future. Karen approves, as do Setsuna and Crow. It seems time has changed all the pilots, even the seemingly unflappable Crow... who is very well aware that Zero probably means to pit Zexis against the Chinese Federation. Given how calm the other pilots seem in the wake of Setsuko's disappearance, that's fine with him.

Speaking of Zero, we find him in audience with China's young Empress, a rather timid creature whose actual power has been essentially usurped by the High Eunuchs. "Tianzi", the Son [i.e. Daughter] of Heaven, has high hopes that a Certain Someone will one day take her beyond the walls of the Forbidden City... hopes that take a sudden turn for the worse when Gao Hai bursts in to report that Britannia's crown prince Odysseus has decided to take her hand in marriage. Zero is furious behind his mask that Britannia would attempt to coopt an entire superpower in their battle against the Black Knights, and there's only one person in all Britannia devious and audacious enough to pull it off...

Elsewhere in China, battle has been raging in miniature between Wufei and some ruffians or other. By beating them off, Wufei has once again saved Sally Po's life. Wufei's return to his Colony's roots has hardly been a pleasant one: the ravages wrought by the High Eunuch's greed are everywhere to be seen. The guerillas (Sally included) have been fighting a decidedly uphill battle to try to effect change, but they're committed despite the long odds. Wufei is still emo over his loss to Treize, calling himself "unfair" for only being able to fight those weaker than himself. She counters that he did manage to save her, and if it's a sign of weakness to need comrades, maybe Wufei should resolve himself to get a few of his own. To wit: Zexis is in town, and she persuades him to go see what they can do to repair this rotten land with his own eyes. Surely something will happen when the Tiger bears its fangs.

Back aboard the Ptolemy-2, news of the impending political marriage hasn't gone over well. This Odysseus dude seems the typical strong-king's-weak-son flatulent type, and is possibly four times Tianzi's age to boot. Neither

Zexis' special oversight powers, nor its pilots various combat skills, apply in a political arena like this; and yet, they can't steer entirely clear of the scene either. It seems some Arrows brass will be attending the reception, or rather... someone who controls the Arrows brass according to Liu Mei's info.

Tielia thinks back to his run-in with Rijeene, who spoke of a great Wave needed to push mankind to the next stage in its evolution. That Wave, revolution, is no pleasant process, and given the CBs' many sins, Tielia wasn't in the best position to cast aspersions on Rijeene's people and their control of Arrows. In fact, given that the Innovators were born of Ioria's plans, it would seem (to Rijeene) that Tielia is opposing the very reason for his existence by fighting Arrows.

Serious stuff for Tielia to ponder, and if not for the old Lockon's influence, Tielia might have bought into the hype by now. But it's been the CB way to fight by their own recognizance, not according to any other person's interpretation of what's right and wrong. Tielia volunteers to accompany Sumeragi and Zero to the party, and Sumeragi agrees on the condition that he follow her orders to the letter. She's also summoning Bobby from the Quarter to join them, which is an odd combo to say the least.

Suzaku, too, is having doubts that Tianzi is really desirous of the marriage. But as Cecil points out, it is a way to help cement (a sort of) peace. If so, isn't it odd that fully three of the Knights of the Round have been summoned to the party? It's as though someone expects a melee, perhaps involving Zexis? After all, several Zexis pilots are (covertly) on the wait staff, and between serving drinks they've been keeping a sharp eye on Tianzi. Far from enjoying the pre-wedding banquet, she looks ready to burst into tears at any second. If only Xingke could whisk her away from all this!

It seems Bobby has done wonders with Tielia, cross-dressing him to an almost scarily pretty extent. There's only one person in Zexis who could do better, and it's not Gainer. Crow is less interested in the crossplay and more in what Zero has planned, but this time around even Karen has been kept out of the loop. The hushed banter among the pilots quickly stills when Ribbons introduces himself to Tielia. Rijeene's voice sounds in Tielia's head, telling him that this is the real target. Unfortunately for Tielia, Ribbons seems very well aware of his true identity, "inviting" him to the dance floor so they can talk uninterrupted.

Elsewhere, Setsuna has run into Louise, who remembers him from their time in Area Eleven. He says he's in the area as a guard, and she in turn claims a friend of hers summoned her to the party. Setsuna wonders inwardly if her presence here is somehow connected to Arrows, as she inquires after the wellbeing of the kid that used to sit next to him in class. That would be Saji, who Setsuna claims to have last seen working aboard a Space Colony.

Ribbons professes to Tielia that their meeting is not his doing, but rather a little prank by Rijeene. He offers, as a sort of showing of good faith, to restore Tielia's access to Veda. Just how he came to be Veda's sysadmin is a tale long in the telling, and he's about to recommend they go elsewhere when Zero walks in, escorted by Kagura. They present themselves as the formal representatives of the Japanese exiles, and when Xingke tries to tell Zero he's not welcome, Zero smoothly says that he's here as Kagura's date, she having a formal invitation and all. He adds that if anyone is likely unwelcome here, it would be Xingke himself -- after all, isn't this a gathering of people who rejoice at Tianzi's impending marriage? Zero, it turns out, is fully aware of Xingke's personal allegiance, affection really, for the young empress after she saved him from execution. He's the one who's promised to take her from this place, and Zero has discerned that Xingke has actually put in motion a

plan to make that promise a reality.

The fuming Suzaku can do nothing but watch the exchange from the sidelines, but Zero's opposition isn't limited to Xingke. Schneider himself steps on the scene, suggesting that Zero engage in something a bit less disruptive than grandstand in the foyer. Schneider is effectively Britannia's top politician given Charles' frequent absences, and worryingly he's the one opponent Zero's never managed to beat at anything. Zero tells him he had actually meant to leave after discharging his escort duty, but requests a game of chess first.

He offers up Kagura if he loses, requesting Suzaku should he win: this is his big chance to legally remove Suzaku as the single greatest obstacle to his plans. Schneider agrees to the match, requesting instead that Zero remove his mask if he loses -- as sort of wedding present for Tianzi. Tianzi is understandably puzzled by this, but Odysseus smiles blandly and says that he can't even imagine Schneider losing. It's Zero's job, of course, to do many things people can't imagine.

As the creme de la creme of the chess world get the show underway, we jump back to Louise and Setsuna. Louise is glad Saji seems to be living his dream -- the implication being that her own dreams have gone considerably awry. That might be connected to the scar on her arm, reminder of the damage wrought by the Thrones' Gundams. Setsuna starts to tell her that when he met Saji, Saji told him he still loves her, but she doubles over in pain just then. She frantically asks Setsuna to help retrieve her pills from her bag. Given her by Ribbons, they seem to help what ails her... and to Setsuna's eyes, what ails her is the cellular damage wrought by a Pseudo-GN Reactor. Just then Billy runs over, drawn by Louise's cries, and recognizes Setsuna as a CB. Setsuna starts to flee, as Billy yells out for him to give "Kujou" back. Billy desperately wants to believe that it's Setsuna's fault that Kujou thinks she's a spy, but before Setsuna can either vamoose or set the record straight, an explosion rings out from the direction of the banquet.

...But first, we deal with Tielia and Ribbons' little tete a tete in an antechamber away from the chess action. Tielia is pretty sure he's talking to the man who's withdrawn his access to the Trial System, not to mention seized control of all the world's information streams, leaked details of the Pseudo-GN drive to the Federation, and probably raised airline baggage fees while he was at it. The question is: why? Ribbons claims that the CBs were, according to Ioria's plans, supposed to be destroyed during the Breaking. Tielia by this point isn't having any of that: his Gundam, and his comrades, have shown him how wrong Ribbons and company are. Ribbons ridicules Tielia's devotion to Lockon's memory, then says that their little philosophical differences shouldn't be settled by a one-on-one brawl. The showdown should involve all humanity, who -- if China is any indication -- are very easy to nudge into action. Once again, the conversation is interrupted by a nearby explosion, which Ribbons thinks is Zero's doing. He's probably thanking God he's only watching the game... controlling it, as it were.

Zero, meanwhile, has been battling his ass off against Schneider. The two manage to get into a 3-4 Repetition, essentially bringing the match to a draw. It's not the best outcome Zero could have hoped for, but with all eyes on him and Schneider, conditions are still ripe for him to stage his main gambit. All he needs now is an opening. Schneider has other ideas however, and deliberately moves his king into check: will Zero take it and accept victory, even though doing so would be a consummate disgrace? Seeing him hesitate, Schneider tells him that the emperor would have taken his king without hesitation: he now has proof that Zero is the sort of man his friend Treize took him to be.

At this point, an uninvited guest barges in: it's Wufei, who readily frightens away the Chinese soldiers supposedly guarding the door. He tells Zero that his adversaries are coming later, and confronts Tianzi. Her illustrious husband-to-be ran off at the first sign of disturbance, and Wufei asks if Tianzi really wants to pledge herself eternally to a coward like that. Xingke runs over at that point and attempts to slice Wufei in half... only to have his sword thrust stopped by Wufei's own blade.

Zero marvels that his chance should come in such unexpected fashion, and he signals Gao Hai to let the Black Knights in. Xingke kills Gao Hai for his treachery (not realizing that Zero's Geass was to blame), and Wufei shouts to him that this is the state his nation has sunk to. The question is, what does Xingke himself stand for? He considers dramatically, and announces that as representative of the common people he opposes Tianzi's marriage. The remaining Eunuchs order the guards to shoot him dead along with the Black Knights, and he actually welcomes the prospect: his death will trigger other right-thinking people into revolt. He thinks this is the best he can do to keep his promise to take Tianzi outside, but Zero has other ideas.

Like Xingke and Wufei, Zero's come to break up the marriage. The difference is that Zero means to actually abduct(?) Tianzi, which to say the least is not the world's most obvious strategy. Technically, this is in keeping with Zero's promise to the team to disrupt what they all felt was an unjust marriage -- the question becomes how he means to keep the second half of his promise: to root out the evil infesting China. The commanders were certainly convinced, so all the pilots can do is sit, wait, and hope that Tianzi isn't too rattled by her unorthodox escape from the Forbidden City.

Oh, and in Tielia's case, wonder if Ribbons was right about mankind needing someone to lead them: after all, war seems to have broken out here despite the Innovators not (according to Ribbons) lifting a finger. Pondering that will have to wait, as Xingke and a horde of Chinese troops storm onto the field. Xingke's fellow conspirators have been rounded up by loyalist troops, and the High Eunuchs make it clear that if he wants to save any of them, he's to personally kill Zero off. Lakshata recognizes his mech, the Shen Hu: a sibling of the Guren whose specs exceeded what any pilot could control. Zero calls on Xingke to withdraw his support for the corrupt Eunuchs, but Wufei shows up to challenge that Zero isn't any better. Crow and Akagi tell Wufei that while they've got their doubts about Zero, the whole team has decided to bet on whatever he's got planned... and if Zero does ever betray them, that'll be the time for them to strike back. Wufei accepts that, but says that his time for fighting Zero is now. Xingke orders the troops forward, telling Zero that he's got his own reasons for not withdrawing. Seeing Xingke siding with the Eunuchs, Wufei declares him to be an enemy too, and the battle royale gets underway!

Xingke puts up a damn good fight, and when his mech begins to fail him Zero graciously acknowledges him both as an intellectual peer and a comparably skilled warrior to Suzaku. Speaking of whom: the Knights of the Round head up the second wave of bad guys, bolstering a Chinese contingent that actually includes the High Eunuchs aboard their flagship. Also present is Schneider aboard his flagship the Avalon, and Xingke shouts out that the Eunuchs are apparently selling their nation to one of the most ambitious people in the Federation.

Their response is to open fire in the direction of Zero's own flagship, despite the fact that the empress is aboard it. The Eunuchs openly tell Xingke that they've got a new empress waiting in the wings: a nice pliant little doll perfect for consummating the deal with Odysseus. When Zero adds his voice to pleas for a cease-fire, they sneer that the emperorship is just



a governmental system -- and their influence is secure, even if a different system (such as Britannian rule) is destined to overtake their people. Who, by their estimation, are worth no more consideration than used toilet paper as it's being cast away.

If the Zexis pilots (and Wufei) are aghast at this flagrant disregard for human life, Zero is positively fit to be tied. Haven't these fuckers ever heard of the Noble Obligation of ruler toward the ruled? At this point, Tianzi rushes out onto the flight deck, pleading for everyone to stop fighting... which of course is the Eunuchs' cue to open fire. Xingke and Wufei both rush over to defend her: an unlikely collaboration between Tiger and Dragon that is quickly reinforced by all the Zexis pilots.

And yet, it might not be enough to keep the Chinese flagship from carrying the day. Xingke pleads to someone, anyone to do what he can't and protect the empress, and someone indeed answers: it's Zero himself, at the controls of a brand new mech with a brand new kind of Barrier. Lloyd can tell at a glance that the tech is descended from the Gawain's Druid System, and Lakshata adds that the "Shinkirou"'s talents aren't limited to defense: a pilot capable of processing enough information can use both its Absolute Protection Zone and its Phase Change Cannon to devastating effect. Yeah, that would be Zero.

Zero tells Xingke that there's but one course for him to take: ally with him, and in so doing save his empress and indeed all his needy countrymen. Wufei growls that it'll take more than Zero's fancy mech to do that, and Zero sighs that some day these morons will really have to learn the difference between tactics and strategy. Meanwhile, reports have started streaming in of nation-wide revolt: the realtime broadcast of the battle that Zexis has been running has ignited the undercurrent of resentment that Xingke has been quietly stoking prior to his coup d'etat attempt. Xingke is justifiably astounded that Zero both forecast the Eunuchs' hateful actions and his own coup machinations, turning them all to his own advantage. Wufei doesn't like being manipulated, even if the outcome is what he would have sought himself, but he does grant that Zero is one kick-ass dude for actually pulling it off.

The target is clear then: the Eunuchs, and whoever else Schneizer leaves behind as he makes his sneaky retreat. That would be the Knights of the Round, who have an outside chance of keeping Zexis from growing any more dangerous. And I do mean outside.

The Eunuchs meet a suitably miserable end, clearing the decks for a renewal for the Chinese state and its citizens. Wufei may still have that loss to Treize on the books, but he too has rediscovered his belief in his own brand of justice, and that gives him the strength to be worthy of his Gundam (which bears his deceased wife's name).

After all, Wufei knows better than most people the sanctity of marriage: the last thing he was going to do is see his ancestral empress forced to marry for the wrong reasons. He, like Hiiro, has a deep seated distrust of Zero, and intends to watch the guy from as close range as possible. Zero thanks Diethart for setting up the covert streaming system that led to today's broadcast, but things take a turn for the worse when Diethart recommends that someone from Japan take Tianzi to wife to seal the Sino-Japanese alliance in the eyes of the world. Damn near every pilot in Zexis is opposed to forcing marriage anew on her, and even Kiriko lambastes Diethart's cold-hearted plan. Zero had actually intended to go that route, but the sight of the chorus of dissenters makes him question his own grasp of female emotions. In fact, that's a subject Shirley and Milly hammered him on constantly back at Ashford Academy, and it suddenly

dawns on him that this is his chance to fix one of his few weaknesses.

Result: he grandly declares that Tianzi's future is hers alone to decide. The heart is the source of all power, and she is to follow hers wherever it leads! That would be the right choice on the dialog-o-meter, cementing Xingke's willingness to follow Zero's quest as the means to his own country's total liberation. Wufei leaves a message with him for Sally Po, that her strength saved Wufei in turn. Zero leaves both China and the Japanese exiles in Xingke's keeping while Zexis moves on to his next task, but he fully plans to call on Xingke's strength again when the time is ripe to realize his dreams of a truly United Nations.

Tielia too seems to have gotten his head at least a bit straighter, faith in mankind renewed by the whole heartwarming scene. He's still got a lot to think about after his runin with Ribbons, and Setsuna wisely decides not to push him for answers just yet. The question is whether it is the Innovators who have truly inherited Ioria's plan, or whether it's Zexis. The more immediate question is what the upheaval in Northern Europe is that Ribbons casually mentioned before vanishing.

Well, for starters, Cinq Kingdom has been reconstituted under Rilina's leadership. It's going to have a hell of a time staying independent from the Feds, especially with Absolute Pacifism as its guiding principle, but Rilina believes that she's got enough supporters to carry the day. Dorothy is counting on it in fact: the warmongering little bitch is supporting Rilina not out of belief in Absolute Pacifism, but rather in the opposite. She pledges to follow Rilina wherever she goes, which in the short term means Area Eleven -- the land where Rilina met Hiroyuki. She can only hope to see him again someday, grateful in the meanwhile for all the inspiration their meeting gave her.

## CHAPTER 18. Ashford Rhapsody

Schneizer pays Treize a visit, filling him in on the mess in China. He seems unusually chipper despite the failure, and says that it's the first time in a good long while a contest got his heart pumping. He's also pleased to report that Treize's supposition about Zero's "youthfulness" has proven correct. Unfortunately, the larger current of world events is deteriorating, as Delmeier seems to be chatting more and more with Arrows these days: surely the handiwork of the Innovators. Though the Innovators probably don't realize Treize and Schneizer are on to them, there's very little bright side to Delmeier's increasing use of warfare as a problem solving tool; even the prospect of new Romfellar mecha for Oz isn't a happy one. Delmeier, in fact, has the diametrically opposite view to Zechs regarding the proper use of war. The question is what kind of mischief Zero will stir up now, given his plans for "liberation" seem to extend beyond Area Eleven. In any case, Zexis is the only real hope the two have, especially with Insalaum hanging out somewhere...

Zexis' return to Area Eleven proves to be an eventful one... at least for Lelouch. In his absence, Sayoko has somehow embroiled him in promises for dates... 108 of them to be precise. Insert witty Suikoden joke here. Sayoko is a master of disguise and skilled enough as a ninja that Britannia hasn't caught on yet to Lelouch's "field trips", but her carefree acting is more than Lelouch had planned on. Still, Lelouch is willing to face the music and do all those dates when Villetta pipes up: Milly has set up a little school event that could solve everything. It's called "Cupid Day", and that twinge of trepidation Lelouch feels is very well founded.

But first we find the rest of the pilots shopping, and musing about how this

Tokyo is almost identical to the one in the other Japan. Karen notes that the so-called Elevens seldom come here, though Nanaly's influence seems to have made the place subtly less discriminatory than it used to be. She's just happy that the folks from the better-known Tokyo are able to see and appreciate her own nation.

Back at Ashford, the Cupid Day is about to begin. Lelouch runs into Shirley, who is none too thrilled about all the romance he's been up to. It looks like an argument is in the works until a young man walks over -- none other than the Knight of Three, Gino! What the hell is he doing here?? It turns out he's not alone either: both he and Anya (Knight of Six) are on hand. Anya takes a picture of him with her PDA, announcing that she's now got Lelouch's "data". Milly then gets on the PA to explain the rules of this event: it's a school wide game of tag, and whoever gets tagged will forcibly become "lovers" with whoever tags them. People from off campus are more than welcome to participate too! Seeing that Gino and Anya seem to be at the school for the sheer pleasure of its wacky confines, and not to arrest him, he resolves to get busy quashing the rumors about him: how can he revolutionize the world if he can't even keep his own high school under control?

From the sidelines, the visiting Zexis pilots are noting the gaggle of people around Lelouch. Saji's pieced together that Lelouch is the brother of Regent Nanaly, which makes him some kind of Britannian royalty. Karen has warned him sternly not to approach Lelouch lest he get into hot water, and the pilots all marvel that someone as good-looking and smart as him seems to have all kinds of secret worries. If they oooooonly knew. Neither Saji nor Hiroyuki and Duo know too many of the students here any more, thanks to the wholesale changes in society of late. The Student Council still remember them though, and as Milly and friends welcome the Zexis pilots into the game, Lelouch makes a run for it to avoid any complications from having them around.

What the Zexis pilots find out is that there are some ravenous students out there, some of whom don't even care the gender of whomever they're about to tag. Bedlam ensues. Lelouch meanwhile has an ace up his sleeve to elude all those women targeting him: Rolo and his sort-of-time-stopping Geass. The other pilots will just have to get by on martial arts prowess, which in Crow's case is more than enough to elude Esther. His women-fearing ways are as solid as ever, but at least having seen Marilyn in action one can understand a bit better where they came from.

Cue the romantic interludes, which vary considerably by pilot. When Allelujah and Mary decide on some friendly tag, it's like watching ninja and kunoichi at play for instance. Things get interesting when Gino walks over and introduces himself. For his part, he doesn't intend to disrupt the frolic and start a fight (unless Zexis intends to do so first) -- after all, Zexis is part of the same Federation that he's in. Gino's a bit sorry that Karen isn't on hand: he'd hoped to introduce himself to the Black Knights' ace. Esther asks why all the Rounds have "Sir" in front of their name, apparently ignorant of courtly honorifics due to just how remote the town she grew up in was (and despite the fact that it was part of Britannia). Setsuna and Saji meet next, and Setsuna mentions his meeting with Louise...

There's one other visitor to Ashford who isn't participating in the merriment: Nina Einstein. Milly asks how Lloyd, theoretically her fiancée, is doing, and says she's relieved Nina seems to be doing well as a Federation scientist. Nina doesn't like Milly's elderly-sister affect, stiffly declaring that Euphemia is the only one who's ever actually gone out of their way to protect Nina. She's working on weapons for Schneizer now, weapons to defeat Zero, and DEMANDS with increasing vehemence that Milly acknowledge her. Milly, understandably, is rather speechless at her outburst...

Rolo's Geass has allowed Lelouch to successfully switch places with Sayoko and head down to the underground control room. That Rolo is willing to strain his own heart just to make life more convenient for Lelouch is an indication of just how starved for affection the guy was. Not that Lelouch is terribly sympathetic to the person who attempted to displace his sister in his life. Viletta asks why Lelouch didn't just let Shirley catch him: the girl is enough in love with him that she \*shot\* Viletta once. Lelouch doesn't want to get her mixed up in things any further for precisely that reason. He isn't going to go the route that the Emperor has, with how many lives he's played with.

Sayoko meanwhile isn't doing a very good job impersonating Lelouch, and Lelouch has to rush back to the surface. As he does, some sort of intruders appear on the scene. The problem is that Sayoko took Lelouch literally when he said to "avoid getting caught", and as a result she's been using her ninja skills out in plain sight of everyone -- including Zexis. Lelouch trades places back with her just in time for Hiiro to walk over. Lelouch has to watch what he says, as he's still publically supposed to have his memories altered.

Hiiro is very suspicious about how every trace of his previous time here seems to have been erased deliberately. He clearly suspects something is up with Lelouch, but their conversation is interrupted by Rilina's arrival. Lelouch makes good his escape. Rilina apologizes for somehow obstructing Hiiro, but he tells her not to worry about it... and when he does so, there's far more warmth in his voice than there once was. Lelouch doesn't get far though until he runs into Shirley again -- and THEY don't get far before terrorists from the Fangs of the Dawn strike!

These are former mercenaries who are so hard up for work that they seem to have turned to terrorism, taking over Ashford and demanding a ransom from the government. Their plan is fairly sophisticated, involving diversionary raids elsewhere to keep Guilford and the troops busy. With three of the Rounds in the school, Guilford doesn't want to take any military action just yet, and Nanaly hopes that Suzaku and the others can save the day.

Among the hostages, Lelouch can well imagine his sister's dilemma: she badly wants to save the hostages, and knows that Britannia will never negotiate with terrorists. Lelouch knows that the Rounds and Zexis are around, and presumes that Rolo will be on hand shortly with his Geass to let him easily bring the hostage crisis to a halt. However, Rolo is not showing up promptly, and with the initial deadline for ransom payment passed, the terrorists are about to make an example of somebody. What's going on? What's going on is that Suzaku is outside, and Rolo dare not act lest it become impossible to hide the return of Lelouch's memory from the emperor.

As Shirley gets selected, Lelouch wonders why the hell Suzaku isn't putting a stop to this. It dawns on him that Suzaku is testing him, and the thought that Suzaku cares not for Shirley's life fills him with rage. He may not be able to use his Geass, but he can still act physically. He bumrushes the terrorist, yelling at all the other students to flee. He himself isn't able to flee, but at least this means not losing anything or anyone else ever again.

That's the point when several of Zexis' martial artists bust in, having subdued the terrorists outside. Lelouch gave them the perfect opening to steal a march on the final goons here, and at least said goons are smart enough to flee to their mecha. They plan an assault on the school, and the Zexis pilots rush off to meet them. Hiiro however stays behind, and once and for all confronts Lelouch about his being Zero.

Lelouch won't forget Suzaku's dangerous stunt, and Suzaku himself finds himself

wondering what the hell he was thinking. Both of them are going to have to struggle to concentrate on the battle versus the terrorists; Zexis and the Knights are agreed that today is not the day to settle their differences.

Things go quite smoothly in fact, and the Knights and Zexis indeed manage to avoid starting a brawl on this day. There's little doubt that such a rumble is inevitable in the future however. Rilina and Hiroyuki are both glad they saw each other, if only briefly. Suzaku meanwhile has been checking for Lelouch sightings during the battle, and has apparently satisfied himself that Zero can't be Lelouch. After all, Lelouch was spotted sticking his neck out for Shirley AND not using his Geass in the process.

All's well that ends well? That seems to be Milly's conclusion at least, and she shouts out to Lelouch for manning up against the gun-toting terrorist. Shirley pulls Lelouch aside and says that she understands he must have had his reasons for not turning down all those girls' requests for dates. She cautions him that humoring people to avoid hurting them can sometimes have the opposite effect. She tells him it's time for punishment, and has him close his eyes. Rather than kiss him, she lightly slaps him on the cheek -- and thereby "tags" him and wins the Cupid Day challenge. She promises that she will make him love her some day. This, of course, turns out to be Milly's whole reason for running the Cupid Day event in the first place. It's also the last thing Milly had wanted to do before graduating and making her own way in the world. She intends to prove that she can do more than just offer words of comfort to others, and that maybe Nina will come to understand her too.

As the team gets on the move again, Lelouch introduces Hiroyuki as a formal collaborator to C.C. and Karen. He explains that Hiroyuki figured out his identity on his own, and has pledged his support. Hiroyuki corrects him and declares that what he's done is acknowledge "Zero"'s abilities. He knows that Lelouch will need help if he's to keep the Zero gig going, and intends to do what he can in that regard. Lelouch asks when Hiroyuki figured it out, and Hiroyuki says it was when Lelouch ordered him to save Nanaly prior to the Breaking. C.C. deadpans that Lelouch always gets careless where Nanaly is concerned, but Lelouch isn't interested in trading barbs with her. He wants to know why Hiroyuki is interested in Zero. It's Zero's abilities, plain and simple -- Hiroyuki openly distrusts the motives Lelouch uses those abilities for, and the words that come out of his mouth in the process. Why else would a Britannian prince wear a mask and lead a revolt, if not for the sake of some deeper agenda? All the more reason, Lelouch retorts, for Hiroyuki to spill the beans. He's not done so for two reasons: one, the "Zero" charade means nothing personally to Hiroyuki, and two, Lelouch has always seemed sincere when fighting for the sake of his sister.

Correction: today he saw a glimpse of Lelouch fighting for someone besides his sister -- maybe "Zero" isn't trustworthy, but "Lelouch" is. The opposite conclusion, in fact, to what Karen drew before. C.C. observes that Lelouch must have trusted Hiroyuki considerably to bring him this far without Geassing him, and Lelouch proceeds to tell Hiroyuki the whole truth... though if Hiroyuki doesn't like what he hears, Lelouch reserves the right to "steal everything from him". Fine by Hiroyuki, who cautions that Lelouch might not get the chance to do any stealing if Hiroyuki opts to kill him first.

## CHAPTER 19. Various Battlefields

Rilina has been granted an audience with Nanaly, and both of them have the "OMG you're a princess too??" thing going on. The difference is that Rilina's past is still a matter of public record, while Nanaly's past at Ashford

Academy has been erased... quite thoroughly from what Hiiro told Rilina. Fond as she is of the blind princess, Rilina knows she must guard what she says to her. Nanaly's main hope is that Rilina can tutor her in the Absolute Pacifism that Euphemia subscribed to, and as Rilina gets to it she hopes that both she and Hiiro can succeed on the battlefields they've chosen.

Meanwhile, ominous things are afoot in the form of a new kind of mech autopilot being demoed for Delmeier. The "Mobile Doll System" is eerily effective after years of fine-tuning and prototyping. Chief engineer Tsubarof isn't just planning to supplement the Federation army: he means to replace the army's pilots wholesale. Unfortunately for him, Treize has also come to spectate, intending to challenge the Mobile Dolls to a duel and ready to stake his life (for realz) on the proposition that no steenking autopilot can replace human pilots.

Treize handily dispatches the Mobile Dolls, and tells Tsubarof that he could dispatch him too if he so chose. Point being: both Mobile Suits and Mobile Dolls are ultimately controlled by humans: would that Tsubarof value them a bit more highly in the future. His day would be made if Delmeier takes the opportunity to reconsider the true meaning of war -- the Innovators' vision for mankind isn't the only one. Delmeier is scandalized by this, but Treize is already on his way out, longing for Zechs to come back and help keep Oz from descending into idiocy.

Tsubarof scrambles for excuses, saying that these old Leos are far inferior to the Torases the Mobile Doll system is intended for (not to mention the new mecha the Innovators have provided). Delmeier sniffs at this, more concerned about the fact that Treize knows of the Innovators at all: as Ribbons said, Treize is one dangerous dude.

China has just weathered a considerable storm, but there's no rest in sight yet. Arrows forces are massing on their borders, poised to prevent China from possibly defecting from the Federation (and thereby becoming the standard bearer for all the other rogue nations). Even with Xingke calling the shots for the Chinese military, this is the sort of standoff that could readily spark a world war. Zexis of course will take on the Arrows forces before things get that far, utilizing their license to ill to the fullest. It takes some explaining to get it through to Esther, but this prospect can only work to Zexis' ultimate advantage -- assuming they win the inevitable showdown of course.

Hiiro notices Tielia fretting over the coming battle (really, the battle over whether the Innovators will control the future or not). Hiiro observes that Tielia's hesitation reminds him of right after Tielia lost access to Veda, which really draws Tielia up short. Karen is watching the exchange from the shadows, having been ordered by Zero to keep an eye on their latest comrade. Karen herself figures Hiiro for a truthful sort. Saji meanwhile is watching Karen from the sidelines, trying and failing to find an opening to ask her about Louise. A bunch of the non-combatant ladies come over to comfort the guy, pointing out to him that everyone has their own battles to fight. Just, not all of them occur on an explicit battlefield. Mary and the others exhort him to do whatever it is he can for the person he loves, and he resolves to pitch in with the rest of Zexis until the day he can meet Louise once more.

Elsewhere, Zechs finds himself posted to Lint's squadron, demoted but unbowed. Lint tries his usual tactic of belittling Zechs for his insubordination and, most of all, getting called on it, but given that Treize helped Zechs avoid a court martial, Zechs claims to have no complaints. His goal is to fight Gundams, and they're all just across the border with China: if he's got to submit to Lint's authority to get his shot, that's what he'll do. Lint figures

that Treize would have only cast aside his personal minion if Oz itself was about to collapse, realizing perhaps that the Mobile Doll system is about to make soldiers obsolete.

Katy has an interesting dilemma on her hands. The CB's tactics have all the earmarks of Lisa Kujou, her closest friend during her time at the International University. What would she make of the "Dolls", Katy wonders. Her reverie is interrupted by Zechs' greeting, he as newly-demoted enlisted man to her as an officer. He tells her that his exile by Treize was on account of his distaste for the Romfellar Conglomerate -- read: on account of his personal crusade against the Gundams. Zechs' beef seems to be that the Gundam pilots fight according to personal emotion, which according to him (and many others) is verboten during time of war. Katy, plainly, is skeptical.

Zechs knows that his dismissal from Oz is its death knell, and that Arrows is poised to assume control of the Federation military. Then might explain why Koorasawar is here, despite Katy's best efforts to dissuade him. In typical annoying fashion, he declares that he's here to keep her safe, fearing nothing the dreaded Gundams can try to do to him. Zechs is actually envious of the guy, for one reason: unlike Zechs, Koorasawar actually has something he believes in. Mr. Bushido seems to have that too, and is immensely grateful for being able to fight alongside Zechs again.

This scene strikes Healing as more than a little absurd, given that all of them are on the verge of becoming obsolete. Revive takes a brighter view of the levity, but is concerned about the whereabouts of their new weaponry. Late as usual, meaning this base will probably have to fend off Zexis with the Dolls alone. Still, with two Innovators on the scene, how bad could things get?

...Is that a rhetorical question? Is it a meta-rhetorical question if the narrator poses it to himself? Anyway, Jeffrey opens by telling the Arrows forces that Zexis requests permission to "observe" them. Sumeragi is quite shocked to learn that her old friend is among the Arrows, but the main question is which side's will is stronger. It's hard to find a stronger will than Zero's, as he tells Katy in no uncertain terms that Zexis operates on the side of Justice. Of course, everyone has their own view of what is Just, and if Arrows can't come to an agreement with Zexis, well... Zero doesn't get to finish his sentence though, as someone from inside the base starts shooting. Lint says that this was inevitable anyway with Zexis obstructing the mission, and Katy is forced to order the troops into battle. This isn't exactly what most of the Zexis folks wanted, but they're certainly not going to back away.

Zechs gets his ass handed to him, or rather his heart's ass handed to him, given that his mech is still sort of in one piece. The Arrows cannon fodder have bought enough time for Healing and Revive to take the field in their new mecha. As they scan the Zexis troops, they're displeased to find at least one pilot (Camille) who can sense their unnatural powers. Tielia murmurs that they're Innovators, and before he can explain they sortie a horde of Torases.

Katy is shocked to see the Mobile Dolls on the field, and when Lint snidely tells her not to worry her pretty little head over them, she gets on the horn and warns "Kujou" about what they are: weapons that shouldn't exist. Sumeragi hastily explains about these unmanned mecha's prowess, and an incensed Zechs shouts that these unmanned weapons are "weapons" no longer, but rather tools of murder! Lint asks if he, like Katy, is betraying him, and Zechs bellows that these machines are a betrayal of all mankind.

Mr. Bushido is relieved to see that rage has finally cleared Zechs' conscience, seemingly uncaring that Zechs is now temporarily on the other

team. The Mobile Dolls aren't all that threatening, but someone unexpected shows up who is: Sarches, still alive despite having half his body burned to ash. As the new Lockon gets to meet the old Lockon's killer, Sarches unveils yet another surprise: vintage mecha from ZEUTH's world! He's proud of his new master's deviousness in procuring them, and warns the team that they too are part of the Mobile Doll system. Sumeragi tells Zero that this battle has to end fast when faced with so many of these, and Zero orders the troops in turn to make it snappy.

Sarches' forces aren't that big an irritant either, but the stress of battle is starting to pile up a bit. Things get worse yet when another wave of Mobile Dolls appear. Zechs now realizes in full what Treize wanted him to see: the machinations of madmen who build machines to do their killing for them, and do it with brute, overwhelming force. He rushes into the midst of the enemy in fury, crying out to his former friend Treize that he's with him till his mask crumbles... which is quite soon actually. Still, he managed to punch a hole through the enemy lines, and Zero has everyone make good their escape...

...Everybody but Hiiro, who's concluded that the whole team will be lost unless someone destroys this base. He braves enemy fire to reach the main reactor, intending to self-destruct and take it with him, but Trois shows up and tells him he's not allowed to die yet.

The other pilots panic when they realize Hiiro didn't make it out, but Duo tells them to take the chill. Hiiro is nothing if not the kind of guy who gets things done. Had those things involved a flashy self-destruct sequence, the base would be visible as a mushroom cloud by now -- and since it isn't, Hiiro must have had some other errand to run instead. Not that self-destructing would be enough to kill him, but hey.

The main issue now is the Mobile Doll system, and its providers the Innovators. Sumeragi isn't willing to talk about her relationship with the Arrows commander, but she's forthcoming about the Mobile Doll's concept -- which she herself proposed in her thesis: "Tactical Theory and Estimated Damage Magnitude for Autonomous Mechanized Combat". As a strategist with the AEU, she enlisted Oz's help to make her theories reality... but the engineering proved much harder than the theory, and only after years of effort was the AEU able to run a real test. And in that real test... the Mobile Dolls misidentified their target, and virtually annihilated their friendly forces -- among whom was someone very precious to her. In the aftermath, the Mobile Doll system was shelved, and she herself left and joined the CBs.

Her original proposal was an attempt to reduce the human cost of war, which turns out to be an incoherent idea. To the extent that war is by the people, for the people, it must be "the people" who conduct -- and conclude -- it. What she saw today was entirely in line with her thesis, and all that's required is installing the system in the ultimate mech for the plan to be complete. The infusion of mecha from another world is troubling, and the quantity involved precludes simply recreating a few of them from ZEUTH's battle records. Somehow they got their hands on the genuine article, and the real question is how Zexis can take down someone capable of such a feat.

That's where the Innovators come in. Tielia has finally gathered the courage to relate what he found out at the party, from actually meeting an Innovator face to face. They are essentially biological terminals for Veda, and have been pulling strings behind Alejandro and those like him for some time. It is they who made the Thrones, and they who leaked the Pseudo-GN Drive to the Feds. Tielia had kept silent this long because the Innovators claimed to be the true inheritors of Ioria's plans, which would make Zexis in the wrong if true.



Of course, it's false.

For now, the team needs to go into hiding and plot their next move against the Innovators. With perfect timing, a message comes in from Banjou about some newly-acquired information. Though Arrows won't be invading China any time soon, the odds seem to be on them devouring Oz, becoming stronger in the process. At least, as Lockon points out, one enemy is easier to aim at than two. Sumeragi has to wonder what's keeping Katy, who should well know the terror of the Mobile Dolls, allied with Arrows...

Delmeier is painting the battle as a victory for the Mobile Doll system, and a chance to join with Arrows to create a lasting peace. Treize isn't trying to hear that, insistent that mankind doesn't need victory so much as fighting itself. Romfellar's heartless killing machines will go down as a shameful chapter in Earth's history, but at least there are a few warriors out there who meet and even exceed Treize's high hopes for humanity. Without any hope of reward, these "Losers" [his wording, not mine] soldier on, and he wishes to be one of them. Delmeier announces that Treize is to be stripped of all authority and imprisoned in Romfellar HQ, which is just fine with him. Let the stalwarts of Zexis carry out the flame, free to act as their hearts dictate.

Back at Oz HQ, it appears that everything has gone as Schneider has planned. Kanon is on hand to play explicator: it was Schneider who leaked Delmeier's Innovator contacts to Treize, as well as the state of the Mobile Doll program. Schneider pretty much expected that Treize would freak, and though he claims to still be Treize's "friend", he says that the defenders of world order have to keep higher principles in mind. And Delmeier seems to have it right: what this world wants right now is an overwhelming "Victor" -- none of this "Loser" business. Kanon moves to redouble the efforts of Invorg and Toromo, as both she and Schneider know their position isn't exactly immune to the encroaching influence of the Innovators either. For now though, Schneider is off to deepen Delmeier's trust in him by soothing the tumult caused by Treize's seeming defection.

We next find Treize cleaning out his office and chatting with Quatro. He expected Schneider to pull something sneaky, and is pretty confident that Schneider doesn't realize how he arranged for Zechs' escape from Oz' demise. Treize also has a parting gift for Quatro: information on where Amuro was transferred to. He's with the Innovators for reasons unknown, and at precise location Treize hasn't been able to pin down yet, but Quatro won't be going hunting empty-handed. Treize has arranged for Quatro to become a "Licenser" like the Knights of the Round or Mr. Bushido, guaranteed at least enough freedoms to get from point to point. Quatro asks why Treize, who seems aware of the world's peril, didn't do more to avert it. Answer: Treize's hands are already too dirty. Quatro will certainly do whatever he can to see that Treize's wishes come true.

## CHAPTER 20. Black and White

Zechs wakes up in a strange bed, making the understandable [from the cast list] mistake that Xingke is Hiroyuki when he hears his voice from the shadows. Xingke found Zech's mech crashed near China's borders, and decided to take him into personal custody in light of the events of the previous battle. Zechs wants to know if his mech is a total writeoff, and luckily for him it's not. He's not surprised to hear that Zechs has been relieved of command, having more or less expected as much for some time.

He is surprised to hear that Zexis is headed for the Dark Continent, whose fringes are still outside the dimensional distortion and (barely) habitable.

It's a good place to lay low from the newly-emboldened Arrows, and Zechs might be well advised to follow. He does indeed intend to leave, but he's not decided a direction yet. Xingke therefore introduces him to a man named Howard, who is responsible for both healing his injuries and fixing his Tallgeese. Amazingly, he's one of the same people who developed the Colonial Gundams in the first place -- and if Zechs is going to make anything of himself he's going to need some of his knowhow. Correction: "Zechs" died along with that ridiculous mask: now it's the Milliard Peacecraft show!

By \*SHEER COINCIDENCE\*, Northern Africa is where the Heim farm is located, and the army is coming for a little friendly "chat" upon the morrow. Of course, the army folks in question are a bunch of bandits, and the natural thing to do for the Yapanese folks would be to shoot them all. This would have the unfortunate side effect of mixing all the migrant workers up in a full-scale war, but Princess Ana is determined to meet force with force. She should probably have been leading this circus from the start, but when it comes to agriculture Rolan seems to have the greenest thumb. At any rate, Gain knows that the worst possible thing they could do is to resist the army halfway and piss them off.

Either the bad guys need to be trounced so thoroughly that their masters lose any taste for revenge, or the bad guys have to get deflected in such a way that their masters can still save face. Given that Rolan doesn't want to unseal the Turn A (which he still insists on calling the "White Doll"), and that Harry and the others aren't here, it seems like Plan B is it. Even Gain doesn't know what to do concretely, and this is where a Negotiator might come in handy. If only there was one around!

Two guesses which bad guys reenter the narrative at this point, and if you get either of them wrong you haven't been paying attention. It is of course Beck and Timp, up to their usual no-good stuff. Beck is actually rather disgusted with his hired help, a bunch of degenerates from the army who seemed all too eager to go pillage a helpless farm. Timp has a bad feeling that the farm might not be all that helpless, but Beck is sure that the troops can squish anyone who resists (or, doesn't resist for that matter).

Timp's worried enough that he wants a cigarette, and that has Kan Yur furious: doesn't he know how flammable the Polymering Gel used in the mecha is?! Timp and Beck could care less how many friends Kan Yur's lost to Gel accidents, telling him to piss off and find himself a real job -- if anyone would take his stuck-up ass in, that is.

Banter ends abruptly when the farm representatives show up: an exotic woman and a spunky kid sidekick. Beck has to tell Kan Yur to keep it in his pants, and he and Timp try asking nicely for the farm to be handed over. Nothing doing: "Lola-Lola" isn't about to relinquish what it took so many people so much blood, sweat and tears to build. Things rapidly break down when Kan Yur directly threatens direct military action, triggering Roger's intervention to even the odds. Translation: Big O time.

Roger drops Ana and Lola-Lola safely back at the farm, glad in a way that the enemy were so easy to provoke into showing their true colors. To be sure he trashed their base on the way out, but only in the "interest of protecting the farm's representatives". Yeah right. He also made sure to get a tape recording of the negotiations, for use in a court of law in case it becomes relevant. In fact, he didn't even get a real chance to do any Negotiation, but even Dorothy agrees that the punks they're dealing with wouldn't have appreciated it anyway.

So much for living the quiet life in North Africa, huh? On the other hand,

for Roger this is both a paying gig and a chance to exercise his brand of justice. Gain and friends are ready to back him up, but a new menace appears: Marilyn Cat, with a full complement of Insalaum troops at her back. Timp and Beck aren't exactly thrilled to see her again, which might have something to do with how she introduces herself: with her D-Extractor. Dorothy recognizes this as something very dangerous.

Things get weirder yet when the Turn A starts up on its own and flies onto the scene from the nearby mountains. Is the Executor System somehow operative again? Whatever's responsible, Rolan and friends rush over to stop the Turn A rampaging around... but not before Marilyn pouts about having her fun battle interrupted. It turns out she's been pursuing Roger all this time (as Banjou had warned him) in the hopes of acquiring his all-black mech to match her outfit. Roger isn't even trying to hear that noise, so Marilyn vows to crush both the black and white mecha. Beck and Timp are more or less forced to helping her out.

It seems the Turn-A Gundam is destined to fight another war, and fortunately it won't have to do it alone. Zexis shows up to fulfill their contract with Banjou to find Roger, kind of unthrilled that he's gotten himself in trouble already. They're also not pleased to see Marilyn and her new mech the Pallfang, sort of a recolored version of Margret's Pallnail. Still, the recording Roger made is good for convincing the regular Federation troops to flee, lest they be punished for outright lawlessness... leaving the three commanders to face the music alone. Of course, if they actually beat Zexis all will be forgiven... but that seems somehow unlikely.

Timp is immensely grateful a certain round-headed ruffian isn't on hand, but as it turns out he still gets the short end of the stick. Beck too falls afoul of the last person he expected to see here (Roger), and is left with no choice but a strategic advance to the rear. Even Marilyn has to leave in a huff after her shiny new mech gets scratched.

However, Marilyn's efforts were merely part of a larger Insalaum strategy, which entails getting rid of that troublesome dimensional distortion that's been walling off much of the continent. Presumably this is a prologue to invading it, emplacing a ZONE in it, or God knows what else. The positive spin is that this is the team's big chance to hunt down the Insalaum folks and extract information to help get Setsuko back.

That will require a bit more firepower than the team has at present, and with the Dark Continent now unsealed, maybe the team can re-recruit the Great Gurren Gang? Roger doesn't know much about what the Insalaum folks are up to, but he recalls how interested Eim was in the Big O: something about it must be related to his missing memories. Unfortunately for Crow, Roger isn't likely to be of much help in lessening his debts -- but at least there's a whole continent full of money-making opportunities just opened up!

Now how's this for a coincidence: Tifa has just gone on a trip with Harry, Wits and Roaby. Apparently they're off on some business for Sandman and Fudou, and Tifa deliberately wanted to go without Garode in order to, in her words, be the one to save him for a change. Garode decides to trust in her, continuing his journeys with Zexis instead. Rolan and several of the others join up too, leaving the farm in Shakko's capable hands. Potalia and friends are still fighting the Feds to a stalemate in Kumen, but according to Shakko Goat and the others have vanished somewhere along the line. Kiriko is sure they'll resurface again somewhere, and Shakko tells Karen not to fret over Potalia: he, like her, has something to fight for. Something for which he won't die easily...

## CHAPTER 21. [Route Split]

Yup, time to divide the team up again, in light of recent world events. The CBs and Crushers (including the SMS) are going to check things out in space, drawing some of Arrows' attention away from the team remaining on the Surface. Zero will continue to lead said forces into the heart of the Dark Continent, counting on Saeki as vice commander for those occasions when Zero will be on the front lines. Hopefully the next time they see each other, both sides will have garnered some additional firepower with which to withstand the fierce battles to come.

Crow gets the unenviable task of choosing which battlefield to fight on -- made all the more unenviable thanks to Esther skipping around and promising to go with him to whatever end. Crow manages to get a bit of money from all the combat data he's gathered, but Traia tells him it'll take vastly more data than that to get him entirely debt-free. If he wants to concentrate on anyone, it should be the Insalaum forces: their mecha isn't of Earth origin and hence is very fascinating to whoever buys all this data.

[Crow can choose to go on either route. For the Dark Continent, go to 21D. For space, go to 21S.)

Back in his throne room, Yuusar is getting some bad news from Unblown: the ZONE they planned to plant in North Africa is going to take a while longer to be ready. Maybe he should focus on the older ones? Inwardly, Unblown wonders why her mystery collaborator wanted Africa free. For now, the team will shift emphasis to other ZONE sites. Yuusar reckons (incorrectly) that his Arcsabers are strong enough even without the ZONE to defeat Earth's armies, but Unblown disabuses him of that notion right quickly. She wishes him pleasant dreams as she takes her leave, and Yuusar wonders if any of them are entitled to pleasant dreams after getting elbow-deep in forbidden science.

Margret then comes in at his invitation, and he asks her to tell him more about Zexis. She looks very sad, and says that while she swears to defend him in battle, she's not a woman worthy of his affections. SHUT DOWN!

## CHAPTER 21D. Within the Flow of Time

Let's review who's been stuck inside the Dark Continent all this time: the Great Gurren Gang, and the Getter team. The last Gain heard, they were busy battling someone or other near Tepperin. Supposedly the Beastmen made pax with the humans after the Spiral Lord was killed, but it's anybody's guess whether that really happened. Hell, if the humans can't even maintain peaceful relations among themselves, how much harder yet to achieve interspecies peace? Ask Simon and Nia, maybe? Setting aside the merits of Kirkian Diplomacy for the moment, Shotarou and Ana are both glad to see how much leadership each other has developed... though it's a question whether this admiration will get Shotarou in trouble with Mackie when he gets home.

As the fleet advance into the Dark Continent, the sight of the badlands out the window seems somehow badder than before. Getter Rays or whatnot? Nobody knows yet, but Kappai wants to go investigate with just Watta at his side. Boyish fun, or MANish fun?!? OH TEH SCANDALZ. ...Or not: apparently they just don't want Shotarou's seriousness spoiling the mood. The mood kind of spoils itself though when the pilots finally get a close-up glimpse of the dessicated landscape.

Lakshata's advanced the theory that the whole area was irradiated by a Getter Ray burst around ten years ago, and although the background count seems low

enough that no acute effects are felt by humanity, SOMETHING is out of place still. That's interesting, because ten years ago would be before the Breaking, and indeed before Zexis last visited this place. How could that be? Well, that's why the fleet has stopped to investigate, and why the pilots get a serious talking-to by Ana for trying to have a picnic in the middle of what might be a second Chernobyl.

And guess what, there are Beastmen lurking around too! They shout out that the "government army" isn't going to have their way with them, and the Zexis pilots have no choice but to defend themselves. The Beastmen sound desperate, and waste no time hauling out their Gunmen and commencing bombardment. But new allies are on hand, in mecha somehow resembling the Gurren Lagann. They seem to know Ana, and help cover her escape with a barrage of their own. The mecha are piloted by Dalie and Gimie, with Hayato and Shikijima backing them up in their mothership. They remember Ana from their earliest childhood memories, and can't understand why she hasn't aged a day. Hayato orders them to save it for later.

Hayato figures that time is running short for everyone, now that the Dimensional Walls have been breached. He's got to hurry, even if things must be sacrificed along the way...

The Zexis armada shows up in short order, amazed to find Viral leading a group of guerillas a year after the Spiral Lord's defeat. He scoffs at the notion of a single year's fighting, but neither he nor Hayato elaborate on the interesting trick the dimensions seem to have played on everyone. Viral is focused on buying enough time for the transport loaded with materiel to escape, so the rebels can fight another day.

Toudou can tell that Viral is fighting for a higher purpose. What that purpose is is something Shikijima hopes to find out when Viral's mech is shot down: hopefully the ground troops can capture the guy for questioning. Whatever is going on around here does not seem to be the typical interspecies rivalry...

If you're a competent player, Viral's heroics won't stop the team from intercepting all the transports. The ground forces do indeed nab all the fleeing Beastmen, and though Hayato promises to tell Zexis everything they need to know once he's done, he recommends that they don't watch what he's got to do next.

Hayato confronts Viral after the battle, and it's clear Viral has a lot on his mind. Though on opposite sides, he once respected Hayato and his teammates as noble warriors. But what he'd doing now is no different from Lowgenome, who Zexis worked so hard to kill. He asks if Hayato means to kill him, not caring if he does as his immortal body has lost its meaning now that the Spiral Lord is gone. Hayato would kill him readily, if by taking a single life he could solve this mess. Instead, Shikijima means to put him to good use after all, and orders him taken to "Kamina City", formerly known as Tepperin.

The Zexis pilots have in fact watched the exchange, vaguely aghast at how scary Hayato has gotten. It seems the folks inside the Dark Continent have been through a lot in the last ten years, which to the outside world have gone past as only one...

## CHAPTER 21S. The Legendary Voice

As the team heads to space, Ian takes the time to gather several different people's views on the CB Gundams versus the Colonial ones. The result is the

same in all cases: though they're all MobileSuits, they have major differences at all levels. Ian had thought there'd be more in common, and it's now up to him to go back to the drawing board and come up with a new theory. He asks Saji to keep his part in the investigation secret, and tells him he's free to head to the Quarter to catch the Twinkle Project show. Saji isn't really up for such levity, and Ian grimaces as he notes that Saji is turning out just like Setsuna and the other Meisters -- unlike the Colonial pilots, the CBS always find it hard to relax with the ever-present weight of their pasts on their shoulders. They are all of them human, and ought to have joy in their life to balance out the grief. Ian's fondest wish for his protege is that he not lose that part of his life, as what Ian and Setsuna themselves have. Tricky a bit, since Saji's life used to feature Louise prominently...

Most of the pilots are seriously star-struck as the Twinkle Project folks come aboard, but Alto watches the scene from a distance with a distinctly furrowed brow. Esther bags on him for always being awkward around the two idol stars, and he retorts that the crew's level of laxity is, under the circumstances, insane. Grace apologizes to them all for using the Macross Quarter in lieu of a normal shuttle, citing concerns over terrorist attack as the reason she wanted aboard. It seems that even the sturdiest of bodyguards (such as Brela, whose presence isn't making Alto any less edgy) aren't enough to stem the constant threats on the idols' lives. Nanase can't quite fathom why Alto and Michelle wanted to become soldiers, and Klan tells her to chat about it with Luka when she sees him again. Klan's very good at playing Cupid, but less able to express her own feelings...

Ironically, Zexis is actually safer with the Twinkle Project aboard, at least insofar as Arrows will have a harder time coming up with excuses to attack the biggest cultural phenomenon this decade. Grace figures it's a good arrangement for all concerned, letting everyone recharge their batteries somewhat. That flusters Alto a bit, which Sheryl finds extremely sexy. Of all the pilots on the scene, Quatre is about the only one who isn't benefitting from the power of song. Oh, he's trying to, but the absence of Trois and Hiroyuki, the new weaponry for Arrows, and all that other gloomy stuff are just weighing him down. Wufei tells him to grow a pair and make himself useful, unless he really thinks Crow and the others are merely airheadedly enjoying having celebrities in their midst.

Newsflash though: if Grace's plan was to decrease the likelihood of Arrows intervention, it seems not to have worked all that well. The Arrows forces wait about as long as it takes for Jeffrey to tell them that they've got the Twinkle Project aboard before opening fire for "anti-government actions". They score a lucky(?) shot that damages the Quarter's information systems, preventing them from just flying out of danger. That forces Jeffrey to have Sumeragi sortie the fighters.

Ranka and Sheryl are confident in Alto and the others' protection, even if some aboard the Quarter (read: Nanase) aren't at first. Ranka starts singing, bringing a strange sense of calm to the scene... presumably bolstered by her meeting Alto. Grace has been planning this all along, and seemingly had Brela sabotage the ship's controls. Now it's just a matter of waiting till they show up.

They are the Vajra, and they're quite punctual. The Arrows commander gets his forces out of the area quick, satisfied that he's carried out his orders to ensure that the Quarter gets attacked. Let Zexis fend off this menace to mankind, if they can. Not only can they, but Alto is determined to protect the singers completely.

Analysis shows that this batch of Vajra were stronger than the previous

set, almost as though they were learning and improving on the fly. It seems impossible to refer to these as mere "stray" Vajra: they're part of some kind of organized force that seems intent, once again, on menacing the Earth. Is it good luck or bad luck that the team ran into them so soon after coming to space? Touga says in his usual brainless way that maybe the Vajra are fans of the Twinkle Project, and that actually starts Alto thinking... is there some connection with Ranka?

Meanwhile, a new sight greets the team: a "Galactic Whale", or "Barlaena" as the residents of Michelle's homeworld Zora call it. Nobody really knows if these masses of energy are actually sentient or not, but they're quite a sight nonetheless, especially in a large group. They depart quickly, but not before Crow gets a huge amount of valuable footage. It's unclear if they appeared due to all the interdimensional instability, but there's no greater sight to make one realize how space really is an ocean.

Another Fold begins, as more Vajra pour in to spoil the moment. But hot on their tail is none other than Nekki Basara, whose songs drive the things away. The team vaguely remember how he was the source of the Song Energy so vital to winning the previous war, and it would seem that this is the genuine article, arriving across space and time when the world needs him most.

But he's not the only one to arrive uninvited-like: a large contingent of Gishin are next to appear, wreathed in scary dark energy. Their leader names himself "Metarl" of the Gestalt, declaring that they all exist for two purposes only: killing Mars and taking over the Earth. All his servants, survivors of the Gishin and Zeravia, have all been lured by the Dark Power, the ultimate Force in the universe according to this guy. According to Basara, he's a fuckhead blowhard who's about to get his clock cleaned, and although it seems the height of recklessness for a mere singer to charge the enemy, the team has to admit that his songs are making their hearts lighter. If Metarl is a servant of the Dark Power, Basara is a servant of Life Power, and therefore on Metarl's kill list.

Metarl in fact doesn't kill anyone today, but he vows to sooner or later: as long as there is Darkness, he's INVINCIBLE! Mu ah ha ha ha ha. Ha.

No word on what this Dark Power actually is, or what the hell Basara is doing here either as the guy flies off somewhere. This is a bit of a disappointment to the idol singers, for whom Basara is a sort of eternal idol among idols. Crow's got plenty of gunsight footage that will serve as a nice present to Ozuma, one of Basara's biggest fans. Alto, on the other hand, seems fit to be tied -- the idea of a heavy metal dude appearing out of nowhere and flying a fighter plane is, to say the least, a major shock. It would certainly explain a lot if this was the genuine article: his abrupt "hiatus" back home would be due to his being teleported to this spacetime-line. News of the legendary Voice is sure to cause a stir among the Frontier fleet's people.

Alto, it turns out, feels that he some how lost to Basara's piloting prowess, and vows to exceed him the next time they share the skies. A tall order perhaps, but if Basara is a genius pilot, Alto may be an even bigger genius... or at least a more determined, harder-working one. Plus, he's got two mega-idol singers pulling for him, which everyone except Esther finds pretty kick-ass. Esther wanted Alto to hug Ranka and apologize for not sharing her enthusiasm about meeting Basara, and Klan stammers that she shouldn't force her standards on others. A new mystery arises at this point: where is Grace gone off to? And that hotshot bodyguard too, for that matter. Is Grace thinking of scouting Basara for her concert?

In fact, she's busy chatting with Ribbons. He's an enthusiastic supporter of the Twinkle Project, which somehow suits his purposes well. He promises to help bring Basara into the fold, further increasing the concentration of idol power that history tells us is the perfect tool for influencing the masses. And yet, Ribbons doesn't see himself as a Ruler per se. As Grace hangs up, Amuro walks in for his regularly-scheduled chat with Ribbons. He's obviously an unhappy camper, kept a virtual prisoner in this facility and very displeased with what Arrows is up to. Ribbons says that Arrows is just a tool, and that his ultimate objective lies beyond them. But today's conversation isn't about the revolutionizing of mankind; rather, it's about how best to communicate with that which is totally foreign...

## CHAPTER 22D. Sortie, New Warriors!

Something is badly fucked in the Dark Continent, as evidenced by the fact that Benkei and several cohorts have been cowering in an underground village whose existence Viral has been instrumental in protecting. They're on the surface now, and headed to Kamina City to get their answers. Some of Benkei's companions' parents once met the legendary first leader of the Gurren Gang, which he'd just as soon they'd not heard of from Viral. It seems he knows more than he's willing to let on about why a bunch of humans have gone back to living underground, and though he intends to tell his companions when they reach Kamina City, he even more wants to ask Hayato what he's thinking...

Speaking of Hayato, he's cloistered with the Zexis brass discussing what's been going on for the past decade. It's pointless to try to identify which time stream is "correct", which reminds the ZEUTH folks of the Multidimensional World they came from. Hayato acknowledges that he and his teammates were fighting against Shin Dragon at the time of the Quake, which Hayato suspects of actually causing said Quake.

Shikijima, busy talking with the pilots, shares this theory. He believes that Shin Dragon caused the Quake to avoid getting hit by Getter's Graviton Missiles. This Shikijima is the father of the scientist who took Shotarou in, or so he tells the gullible kid: in fact, there's no relation at all. Nobody knows what became of Shin Dragon, as all the pilots and mecha present that day were tossed all over the Dark Continent in the aftermath of the Quake. Apart from the temporary dimensional isolation and the elevated Getter Ray count, the continent hasn't fared so poorly, and Shikijima has been roaming around trying to figure out why. It's taken a good ten years, and during that time Simon and the other Gurren Gang members have formed the nucleus of the government that's kept everybody safe. What of Ryouma, Benkei and Musashi, then?

The young pilots hesitate at this point, so Shikijima fills in: Musashi died fighting Shin Dragon. Ryouma and Shin Getter are both missing in the aftermath of the Graviton blast, and Benkei and Genki have both been living in the badlands... perhaps due to opposition to the way the government's been doing things. Viral was in fact the leader of the resistance, though with his capture they're presumably going to settle down.

The Zexis pilots are frowning pretty seriously by this point, vexed by many questions from the previous showdown with Lowgenome. What seemed at the time like a battle between human and Beastman is clearly something else, especially given that Benkei and friends are clearly living in harmony with said Beasts. That makes it an ideological clash, and even Shikijima doesn't have a concise summary of the issue at hand. Is that just an excuse for not being willing to discuss them? Not if Gimie, an avowed Roshu apologist, is to be believed. The Zexis pilots are understandably still dubious, but full disclosure will



have to wait till the team gets to talk to Simon personally, but that will have to wait until at least one more enemy raid is dealt with. These enemies are almost certainly Invaders, who haven't been heard from since the Dark Continent became isolated -- which raises interesting questions about their relation to the people and items on said continent all this time. Shikijima seems to relish the fact that the Invaders' presence heralds the approaching End of the World...

The enemy are indeed Invaders, and the two young warriors are determined to show they're up to the challenge. Hayato and Shikijima agree that their presence on this Continent must mean there's a Marker somewhere nearby -- could "it" still be alive?

In short order, a detachment from the regular Federation army shows up, equipped with the latest in prototype super robots. It seems like a good thing that they're making themselves useful, but Roger has to wonder precisely what they're doing here, and with such perfect timing to boot. Unfortunately, the Invaders seem to have fused with the very machines that were brought in to defeat them: somehow they've evolved since the last time they were present. This is as Ashura, who shows up with some troops too, has foreseen. Hayato plans to interrogate Ashura thoroughly to find out what (s)he knows about the Invaders, but plans change when Benkei and friends are spotted in the war zone.

Benkei tells his friends to flee these abnormal Invaders, but there's no way to get clear in time. No way, except when the real Getter Robo shows up, piloted by Gou. Benkei and Kei have no choice but to get aboard, seeing as how Getter needs three pilots for full potency. Hayato and Shikijima are amazed to see Shin Getter looking just as it did ten years ago. Ashura declares that this apostle of Destruction must be eliminated, and it seems that a three-way battle is brewing...

The battle is big, fierce, and actually not all that threatening. Ashura gets sent packing as always, this time with a bit of help from the mysterious Gou. Schwartz has little choice but to hang out with the Zexis folks, who like his (now destroyed) squadron are intent on surveying the Dark Continent. Schwartz isn't precisely thrilled at hanging out with the supposedly anti-Federation forces, but Zero falls back on his usual standard of proof: Schwartz should judge with his own eyes the kind of results Zexis produces. Fair enough, and in return for having free run of the ship Schwartz says that Arrows is on the move. He hates them about as much as he hates Zexis, and in some sense that makes him an ideal Zexis participant.

Benkei walks in at this point, intent on having Hayato explain what the government is up to. Hayato asks if Benkei left Kamina City for Genki's sake, and Benkei replies that Genki's died in an accident. Kei comes in to find out what her father Benkei is up to, and Hayato realizes that she must be why Gou sprung into action. He remains cagey about the government's actions, letting it suffice to say that they're necessary and that, in the days to come, the weak will be unfit to live. That understandably enrages Benkei, but it turns out he's been wounded ever since the first Invader attacked and barely keeping the bleeding in check. Hayato can only shake his head at how this tough guy was able to pilot Getter in that condition. He tells Benkei, who's fading fast, to rest his ass in bed for now and vent his grievances to Him when they reach Kamina City.

Gou has been sitting in perfect silence since reaching the hangar, vastly more insular than even Kiriko in his finest moments. None of Benkei's followers have heard from him anything more than Gou's name and that Benkei somehow met him before. Gou perks right up when he sees Kei, declaring that he will

defend her with Getter. ...Uh, okay? So.... why's he here protecting her? Because she is being protected by him, here, now. Protecting her with circular logic, from the return of the Invaders. This will be a bit of a feat, since Getter requires three pilots, and Gou tells Benkei's protege Gai to step up to the plate. Gai was a mechanic for Gou after all, and there really isn't anything better to do, especially if he doesn't like what the government has been up to of late. Gai mans up, and a new Getter Team is born.

From the sidelines, Gimie and Dalie think they recognize Kei from somewhere. Shikijima tells them to keep a lid on it: everything will be solved in time. And that time isn't far off, if his guess is right...

## CHAPTER 22S. Ranka Attack!

Lady Une has decided to pay Mishima a visit: two peas in an extremely poisonous pod. She's got Kira and Aslan in tow, both as bodyguards and as proteges at combatless diplomacy. The boys dislike him on sight, recognizing how prone he is to looking down on others from what he thinks is a position of safety. Lady won't be staying long, as there is some suspicious activity around the L4 Colonies that needs investigating. Mishima smirks, expressing puzzlement why Lady Une doesn't take it easier now that Treize is out of office.

The L4 Colonies are the Winner House's stomping grounds, and Quatre too is interested in checking out the rumors of suspicious activity. He isn't sure his peace-loving father has yet forgiven him for becoming a Gundam pilot, and doesn't know if his father will ask for Zexis' help, but there's no way the guy will sit entirely idle once he hears what's really going on in the world. Quatre means to slip away without making Esther worry over him; he's happy that Setsuna gets in a proper goodbye though. He hopes when he returns that he'll be at least a bit more equal Setsuna and Hihiro's level of resolve. Setsuna tells Saji that he's firmly convinced that if Quatre can manage to convey his gentleness to the world, peace will surely be the result.

Mishima's got a busy calendar today, entertaining Ranka next. He believes her songs are the key to fending off the Vajra, and has some scientists from the L.A.I. Institute in attendance for the Twinkle Project. Among them is Luka, who's been hard at work on a "Fold Wave Amplifier". The Twinkle Project is indeed a legitimate concert series, but it's also a top-secret research project that even Sheryl hasn't been filled in on.

Grace intends to add "Aimo" to the set list, knowing that it's the nearest and dearest to Ranka's heart. That gives it a power that Grace is counting on very much to help save the world from the Vajra. Mishima has Grace hire Zexis to watch over the experiment, knowing that this will put Ranka somewhat more at ease. Let Operation Twinkle begin!

When Alto hears about all this, he wants to talk things over with Ranka. Grace isn't inclined to let him, making the excuse that Ranka's a little nervous just now. Ranka will be singing from the Destroid Monster, and Eiyda assures Alto that she'll be around to protect her. This should theoretically allow him to concentrate on the Vajra, but there's one important missing detail: Sheryl. Where exactly is she, and does she really agree with this project? For that matter, where the hell is Ozuma, who you'd expect to be breaking his ass to keep his beloved "sister" out of harm's way. Nothing for it, sighs Bobby, but to wait and to keep Ranka safe and sound in the meantime.

Brela tells Ranka he'll be out there guarding her, and tells her to pull out if she's afraid. She is afraid, but more than that she's determined to see this thing through. He's sure that if she sings like she always does, everything

will be just fine. He says that her songs make him physically sense the universe, as though it was manifest and hugging him close. Awkward as a metaphor, but still encouraging thankfully...

It seems a bit silly, fending off ravenous space monsters with a bit of pop singing. Then again, songs were what defeated both the Zentraedi and Proto-Devlin menaces -- and at least among the Macross folks, the concept of a "Minmei Attack" feels very plausible. To be sure, Basara was just trying to get through to everybody's heart with his songs: the Proto-Devlin defeat was kind of a side-effect. Nevertheless, Ranka is going along with this of her own free will, and Luka is sure that if there is a way to communicate with the Vajra (which, after all, are living beings), she can find it. Hell, even if Operation Twinkle ultimately fails, it's still a gamble worth trying once given the potential payoff. Alto still isn't convinced that singing should be used in battle, but the team is facing odds long enough that they may have no choice.

Apparently this whole thing got started when someone noticed that Ranka's singing somehow produces very faint Fold Wave -- and as anyone aboard the Frontier fleet knows, where there's a little Folding, there's more waiting in the wings. Mishima orders the Ranka Attack to begin, and it begins to have an effect almost immediately. Unfortunately, that effect is to draw all the Vajra toward Ranka! This is the result Mishima was hoping for, and even he wasn't at all sure about it. Ranka was the only survivor of the 117th Fleet, but all blood tests on her came back negative. Mishima figured Ranka would be somehow useful even in her amnesiac state, but never in his wildest dreams did he figure she'd be this useful.

Zexis rushes to her aid, having the Vajra (sort of) right where they want them. Alto is back to his usual rivalry with Brela. Reinforcements are everywhere.

Eventually the bad guys tire of losing cannon fodder and send in the big guns. Along with them comes Basara, who's pissed off immensely that Ranka doesn't seem to be having fun. Though Ranka hadn't let on to Alto, she's been forcing herself through this, and it shows. She can't deny it to Basara, and as she falls silent the Vajra return to normal. He refuses Alto's order to buzz off, saying that if they want to hear a song so much he's got one for them! The results speak for themselves: his singing is faaar more effective than Ranka's was.

In fact, it's so effective he manages to Gate the rest of his band in. Fire Bomber may be back together, but unfortunately they also bring some of Moon WILL's lackeys along too. Jeffrey quickly organizes the stray Macross 7 pilots under his command, pleased to find that ace pilot Gamlin is among them.

Despite this ingenious(??) way of prolonging the battle, Zexis prevails anyway. Though his bandmates persuade him to come under Zexis protection, Basara is pretty unhappy. Sheryl is also plenty unhappy, and sick as a dog to boot: when she confronts Grace in the hall, she nearly collapses. Grace tells her to concentrate on getting better for now, and though she has to hand it to Sheryl for lasting this long, she deems "Project Fairy" a failure. Fairy 9 will henceforth serve as reserve for Queen, and her next priority is laying hands on the King who's just appeared (that being Basara, natch).

Ranka herself is pretty down in the dumps, despite everyone telling her that the operation was a huge success. Second coming of Lynn Minmei and whatnot. The fact of the matter is that Basara's question was dead on target -- she's not exactly enjoying singing just at present. Surely she'll feel better

tomorrow, right?

The Fire Bomber band gets introduced to President Howard and Mishima. Mishima tells them not to sweat their unexpected arrival in a cloud of pan-dimensional dust. At the rate his team's research is going (including autopsies on the Vajra), he'll have them home in no time at all! Basara isn't interested in that just now; rather, he's got a message for Chief Scientist Mishima: what Ranka was being forced to do was not singing! Gamlin chimes in, pointing out that when the Proto-Devlin were fended off, it's not because Basara was somehow attacking them. Mishima tries his best to weasel Basara and friends into joining the anti-Vajra effort, and Basara does his level best to tell him to fuck off. Maybe Grace will have better luck? She'd better, if her dreams of a duet between Basara and "Queen" are to come to fruition...

The Zexis pilots face a complex new reality: certain songs seem effective against the Vajra... but Ranka seems a bit fragile and Basara definitely not the type to sing for the government's pleasure. Maybe the fact that the Vajra could be affected at all is good news? If so, the bad news is the apparent revival of Moon WILL's servants, and in the presence of their arch enemy Dancougar Nova no less. That means there's probably more where they came from, and the team can only hope they're not part of this whole Dark Power zombie pandemic that's been going on.

More bad news comes in just then: an explosion has rocked the L4 Colonies, claiming the life of their owner, Quatre's dad Zyeed...

Meanwhile, Sheryl has staggered her way to Griffith Park, still fuming over what Grace is making Ranka do. Ranka's real songs are gentler, funner... Her reverie is broken by a song borne on the wind, mournful yet soothing. She lacks the strength to seek its source, but she's in luck: the singer comes her way instead. It's none other than Lacus Clyne, who just happens to be a fan of hers...

#### CHAPTER 23D. You Understand Nothing

Homer, chief of the Federation peace keeping forces, has contacted the Dark Continental government with a recommendation that they join the program. Is the fact that a military man is delivering this message to be taken as the Federation's judgement that Kamina City is somehow in rebellion? Homer can't answer that question for Roshui, which is in itself answer enough. Roshui will deliver an answer tomorrow, hanging up and sighing over the time difference that makes their lands still seem backward to the outsiders. As a matter of fact, the people are somewhat backward, having toggled over from a base existence underground to petty squabbling over taxes, water rights, and other trivia. Simon doesn't much mind, given that the setup is essentially peaceful, and is willing to take on these Arrows dudes if they mean to threaten that peace.

Roshui cautions him politely but firmly against carelessly turning the entire rest of the Earth against them. And resorting to the executive Council isn't going to be much help in his estimation: just because people were well suited as Gurren Gang members doesn't automatically mean they were suited for the governmental roles thrust upon them. If anything, the Gurren Gang members who've left the scene (such as Youko) seem far more suited to government.

Speaking of which, what the heck is Hayato up to? This tower was built for him to run his Getter Ray experiments, yet he seems to be suspiciously absent of late, to the point of not officially reporting Viral's capture to Simon. Roshui sniffs that Hayato judged the capture of a common rebel to be unworthy

of reporting to the fearless leader. Simon still wants to actually find out from the rebels why they're rebelling, but Roshui says that he's already explained that: the rebels are people who couldn't adapt to their new lifestyle. May be, but is it really worth the government forcing the former hole-dwellers out into the open? It is, Roshui states, if the Beast is still somewhere on this continent -- especially since even the rebels seem to turn to the government for help whenever something goes wrong. Does that not give the government the right in turn to restrict a few of the people's freedoms, in order to better do its job?

Simon suspects that Roshui is actually just worried about Lowgenome's last words, but before the point can be settled, Nia comes in with some homemade cooking(!). Kitan also brings in a couple old friends: Jiron and Elchi. They're overjoyed that the Dark Continent is open again and have come to hang out, and have brought the entire Xabungle contingent with them. Elchi is impressed at how much culture has risen in the past ten years. This sours a bit when Kitan and Roshui start arguing about the proper protocol (or proper lack thereof) for scheduling some of Simon's time. Jiron smoothly apologizes for rocking the boat and says that they'll just hang out until he's done with his work. They also manage to avoid eating Nia's food, which as history has shown can be terrifyingly bad.

Plans for a tour are abruptly shelved when Lee Long calls in to report that some Mobile Suits are approaching Kamina City. They belong to Arrows, and claim to be on a mission to investigate anyone and anything capable of defying the Federation. Roshui gets on the radio, declaring that his people have no intent to fight and ordering them to cease threatening the residents of the city at once. Arrows responds that they'll do just that once their mission is done: a clear provocation that Roshui does not intend to rise to. Emboldened, the soldier decides to frighten the residents a bit more.

That means Kiyaru and the pregnant Kiyou, who are forced to flee indoors. Some of the nearby Beastmen start yelling at the Feds to go home, and the Feds respond by opening fire on the city. This sparks a general flight to the shelters, and Roshui seems grimly determined to ride the storm out without responding. Kitan is fit to be tied, wishing he had his Gunmen to fight back with. Kinbley reminds him that all Gunmen were abandoned as symbols of Lowgenome's rein, and Kinon adds that meeting fire with fire would make all Roshui's negotiations be for naught.

What Roshui wasn't counting on was Jiron and the others springing into action. Jiron is very careful to tell the Arrows forces that he has nothing to do with this city. The Arrows forces doubt a bunch of hicks pose any threat, which will make it all the more satisfying when they go down in flames. Before battle begins though, Simon shows up himself to defend the city (in defiance of Roshui's wishes). Simon yells at Roshui to stuff his wishes: how has he forgotten that protecting the citizens is the government's single biggest responsibility?! He's still the kick-butt dude who helped found all this, and Jiron is honored to fight at his side against these lowlife evildoers.

Send Simon to Kamina's statue and he'll find a pair of Kamina's iconic sunglasses, left there by someone who still remembers the Gurren Gang's founder fondly. These even further enforce Simon's desire to protect his city.

The Arrows forces are easily rebuffed, but on their heels comes a large batch of Invaders. Simon may be undaunted, but the rest of the government fear they lack the warpower to fend off such a menace. Luckily help is at hand in the form of Zexis, who are impressed to see how grown-up Simon's become. Hayato is drily surprised that Roshui allowed Simon to sortie, and

tells him to make this quick so he can fill him in on recent world events. With the new Getter team ready to give it a go, the defense of Kamina City is on!

The Getter team are still learning the ropes, but even their first battle is far better than Esther's initial outing. It's the veterans' job to give the rookies time to learn.

The Invaders are readily dealt with, but Roshuu is now seriously emo over the fact that Simon fought against Arrows. That gets postponed however for the reunion between Simon and Zexis. Crow tells Simon that he looks like a man now, and Gai thanks Simon for proving not to be some suit who merely looks down at his people suffering from on high. If the Getter team are friends with Zexis (including the distinctly poker-faced Gou), they're friends with Simon.

Roshuu shows up at length, directing Simon's attention to a bunch of disgruntled citizens whose whose homes have been messed up during the melee. They blame Simon for rising to meet the Arrows' provocation, not really grasping that, like any bully, Arrows would have only come back emboldened if someone didn't stand up to them. Still, there's an angry mob and a pissed-off Arrows to think about, and Roshuu tells Simon that someone's got to be responsible to the government. What the hell good is a government that doesn't protect its people, Simon shouts, and Roshuu shouts back that he understands nothing. Oh, and that he's under arrest.

Rumbles from all the unrest reach into Lee Long's laboratory, where Hayato is debriefing him(?) on what he's learned outside. Hayato remarks that Simon did the right thing just now -- but the right thing doesn't always carry the day. That certainly applies to Roshuu in reverse, who is doing what will carry the day but isn't necessarily right. As for questioning Viral, it seems even the commanders had never been told what the "Starving Demon of Destruction" might be. Certainly Shin Dragon hasn't shown up anywhere Hayato's looked, though now that the Invaders are back the game might have changed.

Lee Long recommends changing his search methodology, and with the newly appeared Getter Robo hanging around that seems easy enough to manage. What they really need is to get "It" online already, especially if Lowgenome's last words are to be believed. "When ten billion Monkeys fill the land, the Moon shall become the Emissary of Hell and smite the Planet of the Spiral." Roshuu figures the "Monkeys" are mankind, though it's difficult to imagine that many humans existing at once given the Earth's finite resources. Still, the guy can't have just been talking out of his ass, and that's why the scientists are so bent on resurrecting the Spiral Lord(!)...

## CHAPTER 23S. Sorrowful Quatre

Quatre blames his father's death on the egos of the residents both of the Colonies and of Earth itself. Yes his father shunned weapons, but he still fought for his beliefs. Why, oh why does nobody understand the tears of the gentle-hearted? Maybe Quatre should just... destroy everything! This sounds like a great plan, and it involves this new Gundam that he happens to have stumbled across.

The L4 Colonies play an essential role in the world economy due to their mineral-rich satellites. That would explain why the Federation wanted to forcibly assimilate them rather than let them keep their independence. Duo explains that the Colonies by the very nature are an extremely unstable place for people to live -- even the smallest breach in their structure could result

in all their inhabitants dying. As such, the residents are quite violence-averse... easy prey for the Federation bullies. The first defeat of the Colonial Gundams and CBs, and the death of Minister Dorian, have only made that aversion deeper.

Lest the oppression become too much for even such frightened people to bear, the Federation has recently changed its tactics: couching all overtures as "diplomatic" even though their expansionist agenda is as strong as ever. If they can make the Colonists think their Colonies are being reborn free, they win: a sneaky way to bring about "peace" whose focal point is St. Lady Une. That's right -- why try to govern a country, when you can become a saint? Her saintly-ass visage is quite a change from the Lady Une the former Oz officers knew, but her poisonous ways are apparently unchanged.

Quatre's father was about the only Colonial voice speaking out against her, supported by a lifeline from the newly resurrected Cinq Kingdom, and by resistance factions within Azadistan. The final straw was when he withheld the Winner Family's resources from the Feds, probably leading his own people to bump him off. Esther wants to rush right in and set things to rights, but nobody knows an effective way to do that. Yes, Arrows and Oz must be stricken down, but just taking out Lady Une will not itself resolve anything and could just provoke open war between the Colonies and the Surface. Still, Esther longs to catch up to Quatre and give him a hug or something.

Upon hearing reports of the mess in L4, Lady Une is disgusted both with Zyeed and with the Colonists who did them in. Why the hell don't these people understand Treize's intentions? Kira says it's because they're human, though he doesn't necessarily believe that all humans innately crave fighting. Lady Une heard that he signed up for this mission because he supported the idea of peaceful coexistence between Earth and the Colonies: is he now disappointed that the Colonies have chosen war? He answers her question with a question: why is she still spearheading the negotiation process, despite Treize being out of office. The last thing she wants is the violent Innovators being in charge of everything, so she's busied herself at making the world the sort of place she thinks Treize could govern.

Kira thinks such a world is highly unnatural, and unlikely to be what Treize wants. Treize, in his estimation, loves mankind deeply and expresses it through his impeccable elegant manners -- quite the opposite, one might say, from what the Federation is currently like. Subjugating people with violence and brainwashing seems the opposite of respecting them. He observes that everyone wants peace, but it's a mistake for there to be no fighting, or for people to voluntarily abstain from fighting. Ultimately, mind-fucking the Colonists is just a way to turn them into something other than humans, just like the Mobile Dolls Treize hates so much are. The problem with the Mobile Dolls is that they tend to make humans forget the visceral pain of conflict, and such forgetfulness is not compatible with actually making people want to expunge that conflict.

Lady Une must now face the uncomfortable truth that Treize actually wants fighting, with buckets of blood and all, in the interest of reaching something that lies beyond. And what the hell is that? Weeeell, with Treize absent, that's what they'll have to work out for themselves, now isn't it? Maybe Lady Une can change her ways, can inherit Treize's wishes instead of trying to contort herself to serve them. She certainly seems interested in trying.

Meanwhile, Chief Scientist Tsubarof has decided to pay Oz's lunar base a little visit, informing the five Gundam scientists that they're working for him now. The five have been kept alive despite their role in the Colonial Gundam rampage due to their talents at mech-building, and with Zechs Marquis supposedly dead

in battle, they're doubtful that a pilot can be found for their latest creations. As it happens, Tsubarof has already taken care of that, having brought along Trois and Hiiro. Trois comes with Lady Une's seal of approval, but Hiiro -- known terrorist -- is normally the last person he'd want piloting a prototype weapon of war. Lady Une however overrode his objections, and Trois claims to be prepared to execute Hiiro at any moment if he tries anything fishy. Tsubarof doesn't trust this, and gives Trois a gun with orders to shoot Hiiro on the spot. Trois unhesitatingly aims and pulls the trigger, though no shot is heard because Tsubarof removed the bullets ahead of time.

Loyalty apparently proved, Tsubarof puts Trois in the Vayeate and relegates Hiiro to the Mercurius. Dr. J claims to have no qualms about almost seeing his (former?) subordinate murdered, claiming to have no use for a failed warrior. This touching scene is interrupted by reports that someone in a Gundam is about to destroy one of the mining satellites as a show of force. Tsubarof has a message sent back to Lady Une that his forces will take care of it, and orders Trois and Hiiro to get up to speed on their new mecha: he may need them in the upcoming battle.

With Tsubarof gone, Trois explains his unhesitating stunt with the gun by noting that there was no way Tsubarof would actually kill a soldier Lady Une told him to use. Besides, he could tell instantly from the weight of the gun that it wasn't loaded. And just in case he was mistaken on both counts, he also made sure not to aim at any of Hiiro's vitals. He's infiltrated Oz to settle his own doubts, and is prepared to sacrifice plenty to see his plan through. The more immediate concern is this Gundam attacking a Colony -- while it could be one of the CBs, it's more likely to be someone the G-boys know. That someone might be trying to send a message, given that they've opted to assail Professor H's home base. Professor H suddenly has the nasty feeling that, given the recent mess in L4, Quatre might be involved...

Yup, it's Quatre alright. He has the good grace to warn the residents of Colony 04E1B that they ought to get out pronto, prior to actually blasting the place. The Oz frontline commander doesn't give a damn about evacuating the civilians (who fortunately have in fact skedaddled), but he is more than ready to answer the Gundam's challenge. They unleash a barrage that does absolutely nothing to the Gundam at all, and Quatre mutters that they shouldn't fight if they're afraid of dying.

He pulls the trigger, and blows both the soldiers and the colony to smithereens. A tear escapes his eye, despite him not feeling an ounce of grief. Kira and Aslan and friends show up slightly too late, confronted with a repetition of the tragedy of Heliopolis. Kira had intended to change the Federation from within so such things would never happen again, but it seems to have been for nought. He knows that Oz is about finished, and suspects that Treize gave them their mecha back to allow them the chance to escape and continue opposing Arrows. Aslan was thinking the same thing, and announces to the other Oz soldiers that he and Kia are quitting, effective immediately. If they truly value peace, the Oz soldiers need to rethink their lives, and to let Kira and Aslan handle the rogue Gundam.

Of course, the soldiers aren't buying it, and the order is given to destroy both the traitors and the rogue Gundam. Quatre observes that these buffoons lack both the right and the power to do any such thing.

After a brief amount of gunfire, two new forces show up: the forces from the Oz moon base, and Zexis. Trois calmly explains that Zexis should consider him and Hiiro the enemy for now: if they can't defeat Oz's latest creation, they certainly won't be able to face anything scarier. That also goes for the newly-arrived Gundam, who Trois deliberately provokes. Quatre actually



fires upon his good friend, babbling about how he's going to destroy everything that distorts the universe (that is, all weapons). And since the Colonies are now part of the Federation, they're weapons and in need of being destroyed too.

This is clearly going nowhere, and Hiiro means to kick Quatre and his "Wing Zero"'s ass. Sumeragi sees no way to avoid fighting, including tussling with Hiiro and Trois if that's really what they want.

The battle is surprisingly fierce, but in due course all the bad guys are demolished... including Trois in the Wing Zero. He somehow finds a second wind, and some of the more psychically-endowed pilots start feeling psychic pain as his sorrow expands. Hiiro and Trois return at this point, and Hiiro has gotten fed up with Trois' bullshit. He goes over to kill the guy, and when Trois shields Hiiro from Quatre's counterattack, he gets thoroughly blasted. His mech is on the verge of exploding, but Trois still lectures Quatre that this battle is needless. For whatever reason, the Colonies have joined the Federation, meaning that their mission is over, and anything they do from this point forward they do entirely on their own. And unfortunately, all the training they've done to be perfect warriors has misled them into thinking they can change the world by themselves.

All of them must fight within their hearts to figure out what they must truly fight for, even if it means invalidating everything they've achieved up till now. The path they seek must be one they can all walk together, and Trois' final plea is for Quatre to return to his gentle self. Quatre must stand by and watch as his friend blows up due to his own actions. He starts to lose it completely, and Hiiro is on the verge of losing consciousness as a new wave of Oz forces arrive. Duo and Wufei both resolve to charge in, determined to do everything short of dying themselves in order to rescue Hiiro at least. The rest of Zexis have no choice but to retreat.

The Oz forces plan to retrieve the immobilized Gundams and head back to the lunar base, and Duo and Wufei will be among them as they're not yet dead. Perhaps they'll even get the chance to reunite with the Gundam-building scientists they've not seen in so long. But the fun isn't over yet: Milliard "Unsafe Zechs" Peacecraft appears and asks to see Lady Une. He feels that space warps people, that the Earth's gravity somehow helps to pull the errors of the people back towards equilibrium.

Perhaps unwisely, the Oz forces have imprisoned all the Gundam pilots together, except for Hiiro who has presumably required hospitalization. Quatre is totally down in the dumps, but Duo and Wufei are as determined as ever to do the right thing. Their respective scientists presumably recognize why they would allow themselves to be "captured", and will help them in due course. And of course Zexis is still out there too.

Rijeene reports to Ribbons that he's finally found the "other Zero" Gundam. It seems there is a fork in the road of Ioria's plans, and unless they can get their hands on it, further progress might be impossible. Further study is required, since even Veda has no information about what the other Zero's role is supposed to be. Ribbons will send a suitable scientist to the lunar base to check it out, prepared to destroy the thing if need be. Mankind, he figures, isn't yet mature enough to walk the road to revolution. And yes, he feels that he's been granted the right to judge that all by his little self.

CHAPTER 24D. You're No Longer Needed!

Roshiu has actually gone so far as to put Simon on trial for endangering

the country. After the charges have been read, he asks if Simon has anything to say. Yes: what's the point of this trial? Roshu states that this is a lawful nation, and military matters fall within the law's purview. Simon remarks that between "God's decrees" and the "law", Roshu certainly seems to love his non-freedom. He's referring to the religious sect that ran Roshu's underground village, but Roshu actually generalizes and says that it's taken the deaths of many people to advance this far, Kamina included. Simon gets angry at this point, asking if Roshu is saying that it's better that Kamina's dead. In hindsight, yes. Roshu and Simon seem to have a fundamental disagreement about what it was that Kamina, Lockon and all the other deaths bought the survivors... and Simon tells Roshu that his eyes look precisely like the priest of his old village.

Roshu then decrees that Kamina is to receive life in prison, which now has Kitan up in arms. This "trial" was in fact a farce from the outset, but Roshu says it's necessary for this country to be "reborn", and all the old remnants swept away if there's to be any hope of quieting Arrows' anger. In fact, Roshu has more or less just made himself the new ruler of the nation, and Kitan demands to know if Hayato is okay with all of this. Hayato refuses to take sides, saying only that Roshu's decision and his promotion represent no procedural misstep. Kitan spits that Hayato must have gone crazy from all the Getter Rays, and with a vague, cryptic smirk Hayato half agrees. Simon asks himself what Kamina would have done at a time like this

There's plenty for the Zexis folks to be surprised at from the last ten years' worth of doings. Kiyou and Dayakka's marriage is first on the list, which might serve as inspiration for some of the other men in the team to actually get serious with their girlfriends. There's such a thing as moving too quickly though, as Gain cautions despite his own baby-daddy drama issues in the past. Kiyou tells Kei to believe in Benkei, and when Kei asks if she's seen Kiyou somewhere before, Kiyou tells her that if she doesn't remember clearly maybe it's best not to force herself to try to remember.

Dayakka, a father-to-be according to his wife, comes home from the trial at this point. The Zexis pilots are shocked to hear of Simon's fate, and many want to march right into Roshu's office and make him change his mind. Dayakka asks them to leave well enough alone: the rule of the court is the only law this country's got. He suspects that Roshu might be having the hardest time of anyone with his own decision, but all the people in this city are there because they've chosen this way of life -- and all the responsibilities that carries. He believes that Roshu will do something or other once things calm down a little; till then, Simon is to be imprisoned in the maximum-security Rincarne Prison.

Kei's heard of that before. Simon is greeted (if that's the word) by a lot of Beastmen, who've been incarcerated over the years for defying the government. Some of them have even fought Simon and friends directly before, in the service of Lowgenome's generals. The Beastmen are definitely out for some payback, grimly amused at the dramatic reversal of fortune for the nation (if not the continent)'s greatest hero.

The lynching gets postponed, however, when Timp and Beck walk over to have words with their newest fellow prisoner. They got caught almost immediately upon coming to the Dark Continent, all thanks to Kan Yur's usual incompetence, and ended up in the slammer. They want to get out of the slammer, and think Simon is their ticket to freedom. Sadly for them, Simon isn't inclined to break the rules -- even if he believes they were applied unfairly to him. The last thing he wants to see is all the government's efforts to date go to waste. He intends to wait until Roshu comes around and then walk out with his head held high.

This rather pisses off his would-be co-conspirators, and they're prepared to rough him up a bit to get their point across. That is, until Viral steps up. He lambasts Simon for not having the testicular fortitude to get rid of a few punks, especially compared to Kamina -- who was able to stand up to Viral bare-handed. He's also quite unimpressed at Timp and Beck and their piddling little attempts to break out of jail using someone else's strength. He has no interest in busting out, having nowhere in particular he'd go anyway.

His one desire is to settle the score with Simon, and he attacks with a fury few can match. Simon dodges the first strike, which raises him slightly in Viral's estimation... but only slightly. Viral is in fact furious that the Spiral Lord gave him an immortal body for the express purpose of "continuing to watch". Continuing to watch what, Simon behaving like an ass? Simon shouts back that he's doing what he must do, that is, not doing anything at the moment. Viral spits back that that makes him just like Lowgenome, and if this is the future that Simon was willing to destroy the Beastmen to grasp, he's going to tear it to shreds!

Just then an explosion rocks the prison, as though someone is attacking it from the outside. Timp and friends seize their chance to flee, as it turns out that Marilyn is responsible for the barrage. Unblown's specific orders were to cause trouble on the Dark Continent, and breaking open a penitentiary is a pretty troublesome act. With Timp and friends reunited with their mecha and a herd of DBs wandering around, she decides to head for the hills. That leaves the newly-freed folks to face Zexis, and Gurren Lagann which the twins have gotten permission from Roshu to bring. Viral hops into his Gunmen, intending to finish the duel with Simon once and for all.

Viral is interested to see Kei as one of the Getter pilots: is this fate? Kei now suspects that her parents are hiding something from her, and though Viral would like to fill her in he's too busy concentrating on his own duel. Hayato tells Zero to focus Zexis' efforts on taking out the Insalaum forces, and let Simon and Viral duke it out to their hearts' content. Oh, and the escaped prisoners need recapture too.

Timp and the other escapees aren't the sort to let themselves be easily recaptured. Viral meanwhile will really appreciate it if Simon is the only one fighting him. He thanks Simon for playing along with his selfish request. His Gunmen explodes, quite possibly taking him along with it, and it would seem that at least one battle has ended.

Another battle begins however, when the Getter Army shows up, mingled with an assortment of monsters. Shikijima seems to have been expecting something like this for some time, telling Simon that they probably don't like him personally very much. No sweat though: Simon should go on living as he sees fit. It's not really a question of lifestyle though: it's a matter of extreme menace, which arrives in a burst of Getter Rays. It is the long-dormant Shin Dragon, accompanied by Corwen and Stinger.

It's a minor miracle that any of them are still alive. The same goes for Benkei, who's dragged himself out of bed and onto the bridge to watch the battle unfold. The two rogue scientists say they're happy to see Zexis again, though the feeling is definitely not mutual. Hayato has no patience for those "parasitized" by the Invaders, a talent that the highest-level Invaders seem to possess. This explains a lot about the workings of the UN's anti-ET council, at least.

The scientists explain to Esther that the Invaders are the epitome of evolution, and the only beings fit to govern the universe. They've got

friends in a lot of places, and among them is none other than Professor Saotome himself! The bombastic genius sounds as fit as ever, declaring that he won't die till he sees mankind destroyed and the Earth obliterated. Hayato immediately orders him to be shelled, but his body seems to regenerate as fast as it's damaged: proof that he's become one of the monsters.

Let there be no unnecessary fighting, Saotome bellows: he's only come to see his son: Genki! That is, Kei! Uhh what now? Benkei finally comes clean: "Genki" was in fact Saotome's \_daughter\_ all along, and as the name implies was a bright, cheerful child. But when Michiru died and Saotome turned to the dark side, and the world was warped by the Breaking, Genki herself had a nervous breakdown and became a total amnesiac. Benkei left Kamina City to raise her in peace in the countryside, trying to make a clean break with the past. The last thing he wanted was for her to be blamed for her father's misdeeds in creating Shin Dragon, so he raised her as his own daughter instead. Dalie and Gimie suspected as much for some time, having played with Genki frequently as little kids.

Is Kei going to leap joyfully into her real father's arms? No, actually she wants to tear him to shreds, and where she goes, Gou goes too to protect her. The team's only chance is to focus their firepower on Shin Dragon, lest its Getter Ray generators poison the entire world.

Shin Dragon isn't quite as horrifying as one might expect, and when it stops moving Kei seizes her chance to go in for the kill. Shin Getter starts malfunctioning somehow and Saotome thinks his daughter is coming to him as previously requested, but Kei has other ideas. As her emotions peak, Shin Getter actually \_teleports\_ inside Shin Dragon: it seems that its, and Gou's, evolution is about to begin!

Shin Dragon's external energy output falls rapidly, concentrated within for the intense task of evolution. Hayato thinks that it's now or never to blow it away, but Benkei yells at him not to fire while Kei is inside. And anyway, who's this Gou dude and what's his connection to Saotome? Well, he bears Saotome's blood first of all.

Inside Shin Dragon, Kei recalls from the depths of her memory her sister promising to protect her. It would appear that her sister (which should mean Michiru), is none other than Gou! That makes things very confusing, and Shikijima helps explain. Gou is actually a sort of super-clone made from Michiru and Saotome's cells, irradiated by Getter Rays to produce a new breed of humanity. Saotome's last act before being taken over by the Invaders was to create mankind's last hope: Shin Dragon. Bringing Gou, the key to Shin Dragon's activation, to maturity was the task Saotome entrusted to Shikijima.

Oh, and by the way, you know those lizard and ogre monsters out there? Those are clones of Hayato and Ryouma, who were originally supposed to be Gou's copilots. The whole project fell into the Invaders' hands along with Saotome himself right before completion, and as such Hayato figures that it's better off destroyed. The "evolution" Shikijima spoke of is Shin Dragon reading Gou's genetic code, as the key to bringing its powers to their peak.

Simon leads a spirited plea to Gou to \_not\_ make Shin Dragon a demon turned against mankind. If evolution is the way forward, let that way not be bent by the ambitions of others! Let those who need to be protected, be protected! Simon has the power of the Spiral on his side: evolution, but not as the Invaders know it. Shin Getter emerges with its pilots intact, and they unite in kicking Shin Dragon's ass. Evolution averted, Shin Dragon warps spacetime and vanishes God knows where, pissing Saotome off immensely. He means to punish his disobedient child, but Kei yells that he's not her father anymore.

Of course Saotome gets his butt handed back to him in a sling, and he vows to treat Kei like all the other fools who fail to comprehend the meaning of evolution. Let her tremble till their next meeting. Yeah, fat chance. Getter must battle on until they see Saotome again, and that day will probably be the so-called final day of the Earth.

For now, however, there's some breaking news from the local government. Roshiu has officially joined the Federation as of 1600 hours, and he promises all the citizens even greater peace and prosperity. Peace is generally a good thing, but in this case it means that Arrows has sort of won. Simon isn't sure what he makes of this turn of events, and in short order Roshiu's fleet arrives at the battlefield.

Simon and Roshiu have a 1:1 (that's "one-on-one", for those of you not down with business lingo). Roshiu asks if Simon is going to berate him for joining the Federation, trading rather unfavorable governance conditions for avoiding open warfare between Arrows and the common people. Simon tells him that he honestly doesn't know if this was right or wrong, and as such he wants to see more of the world to learn. Roshiu observes again that Simon understands nothing, and that nothing about him has changed. He then issues an executive order for Simon to be "exiled" from the Dark Continent, and for that "ancient relic" Gurren Lagann to be written off from the national treasury at the same time. The official word is: Simon is no longer needed by his country. That means he's free to travel with Zexis, and Gimie and Dalie with him. Kitan is still irate that Roshiu hasn't just come correct, but he really had no other choice.

Simon vows to come back some day (assuming Nia's boxed lunches don't kill everybody first), intending to toast the birth of the next generation and maybe even propose to the love of his life. As Zexis flies off, Hayato decides to follow -- keeping his research tower here would just be an invitation for the Feds to annex it too. There will be plenty of enemies to fight beside Shin Dragon, and although Hayato has firmly relinquished his pilot's seat to the next generation, he intends to do what he can to help make the world a better place. As Zexis is being reunified again, it seems certain this will involve a showdown with Arrows (since they hate the CBs and all so much). Lee Long promises to let Shikijima know when (s)he has "it" going properly.

Roshiu meanwhile is in fact seriously in doubt over whether he's doing the right thing or not. Kinon of course assures him he is, and that's something. But the real trick is to extract some useful information about the end of the world from the one person who seems to have a clue: Lowgenome!

#### CHAPTER 24S. The "G" Called Zero

Zexis' pilots have some time to consider how Lady Une thinks she's advancing Treize's good work, likely in contravention to Treize's actual wishes. It seems unlikely that anything will change on the diplomacy front so long as Lady Une still has a job, and unlikely that she'll do anything to cost herself (and Treize) her job lest she end up like him. Four of the five G-boys are now in Oz's hands, and Kira says that even Trois may yet be alive, and within range of the trade routes criss-crossing Earth's orbit. If he does somehow get rescued, and if the CBs' information networks can find him, they will.

Meanwhile, the Ptolemy's new helmsman shows up: Anille Returner, scouted by Liu Mei for her rather amazing abilities. Some among Zexis might be surprised to learn that the CBs have operations all over the place, including secret bases where Gundam development is still actively underway. Speaking of Gundams, the

biggest concern facing the team now is the Wing Gundam Zero, whose name almost suggests that it's the prototype for Hiiro's own Wing Gundam. Which, if you think about it, is very odd. Ian seems willing to try his own hand at Gundam upgrades, and having received Quatre's Sandrock from someone calling herself his sister, has just the mech to work with. Despite Ian's apparent enthusiasm, Saji knows he's still fretting over the relationship between the two Gundam lineages in Zexis.

All they'll need after the upgrades is Quatre himself, and all the pilots choose to believe he'll come home safe and sound, and sane again. Setsuna however has been struck by a new thought: it is a Gundam that twisted Quatre's gentle heart... and those who build and maintain the damn things are partly to blame. Just what do the Gundams really signify, anyway? Ian must be thinking the same thing, since he insists on joining the mission to infiltrate the Oz base... He's hoping to unlock the mystery of the Gundams before the next shipment of Gundam support equipment arrives.

Inside said base, Milliard is catching up with Lady Une. His legendary resolve survived the destruction of his mask, but despite claiming his rightful name of Peacecraft, he has no inclination to return to Cinq. His homeland already has a more-than capable ruler in residence, so he's set his mind to wandering around in space till the path ahead becomes clear. Hanging out with one of Treize's closest confidants has partially illuminated the way, and both of them agree that humans must reclaim their penchant for fighting with their own hands. She gives him free run of the base, and tells him to study as much as he can.

Tsubarof is busy analyzing the captured Colonial Gundams, and in the Zero he finds some kind of mental modification system. He can't figure out readily how it works or what it's for, and is badly surprised when a couple of dudes walk into the hangar. One is Billy Katagiri, the engineer Arrows has dispatched to oversee the analysis of the Gundams. The other is his friend Mr. Bushido, who doesn't like Tsubarof's insinuation that the only reason Billy has any standing is his father's position. Apparently deciding not to fight this particular fight, Tsubarof sniffs that Billy can do as he pleases with the Zero, even including summoning its creators for input. Billy intends to let his own imagination guide him to start with, and Tsubarof sneers on his way out that he doubts that'll achieve much.

It turns out that Tsubarof is a long-standing rival of Billy's mentor Rafe Eifmann, and given Oz's rapid deterioration it's not surprising that some animosity would occur. Bushido lets it slip that he isn't entirely fond of his nom de guerre, though his determination to make a break with his past is keeping him from going back to his real name. He's come with Billy to get a good look at the faces of his adversaries, while both his and their mecha are down for repairs.

It's a fortunate break in the action in a way, as Billy has hit a bit of a wall in his efforts to power Bushido's mech up. Just increasing power output isn't enough to defeat the CB's twin-reactor units: he needs something to counter the GN Drive's explosive power output. And he's certainly motivated to keep up the search, feeling rather betrayed by one of the CBs he formerly called a friend. He can't bring himself to hate her either, and hence research is the only solace he can turn to.

From the sidelines, Bring and Healing find themselves wondering if Billy can really come through. Their mission is to keep the Zero, which Ribbons has taken such a liking to, safe. Things get more interesting when Milliard, sans mask, comes to say hi to Bushido, who's still wearing his.

Back at the Oz slammer, Hilde has just brought food for the G-boys. Duo is on hand to accept it, and says that the other two aren't in a mood to be disturbed just now. One's deep in thought, and the other one is doing some kind of meditation and has issued strict orders not to be disturbed. Even without seeing her face, Duo can tell from her accent that she's from the colonies -- he asks why a Colonist would join Oz. Lady Une, Hilde replies, has given the Colonies both freedom and pride. Seeing as how that's what Duo was fighting for, that ought to put them on the same side, shouldn't it? Hilde doesn't fall for Duo's wiles right away, but he puts the bee in her bonnet to consider who her real enemy is. The L4 folks, fellow Colonists, got blown up for disagreeing with the Federation. Is it really such a good idea to trust the very government who made conditions bad enough that regular girls like her would enlist in the army? It seems that a friendship has begun, and Duo looks forward to seeing her again tomorrow, assuming he's still alive.

Milliard and Bushido have found many similarities between them, but Milliard's eyes show that he's finally found his path (unlike Bushido). Their heart-to-heart talk is interrupted by a scream from inside the Zero, where Billy has insisted on experiencing its special mental modification system firsthand. What a STUPID IDEA. When they drag him out, he's raving about Kujou using him all this time, trampling his trust in her into the mud. Bushido asks what the hell he saw in there, and he slurs to "Graham" not to worry, he's not gone crazy or anything! It's that wonderful Zero System that's expanded his consciousness infinitely, and he thinks he understands both Kujou and the Trans-Am system perfectly now. He craves more data, more knowledge about the Wing Zero, and tells Graham to rejoice. What they need to do now is put "them" into the cockpit and start recording... Watching this, Bushido laments that Billy seems to have fallen even farther from grace than he has.

Setsuna shows up with a dual mission: decoying attention away from Tielia's infiltration of the base, and probing its defenses. Billy sends Duo out in the Wing Gundam with orders to win... else all his friends get executed. Not exactly what Duo calls "maintaining proper order", and all the cords he's got plastered all over his body don't exactly make piloting any easier. Billy intends to catch every nuance of what the Zero System does to him, and about the last thing Duo wants to be is a guinea pig in a fight against Setsuna. From the sidelines, the Gundam scientists watch with a mixture of fascination and dismay as the GN Drive and Zero System prepare to face off. This was probably fated to happen from the moment they left the CBs.

Setsuna gets no reply from the Zero, so he has no idea who's piloting it. Duo apologizes for what he's about to do to him, promising to take responsibility if he actually wins.

Duo quickly finds out that he won't be able to beat Setsuna by half measures. With Quatre and Wufei's lives at stake, he redoubles his efforts. Setsuna in turn kicks in the Trans-Am system, giving Billy an even greater data gathering opportunity than he expected. The menace is enough to cause the Wing Zero to activate its Zero System, and the scientists wonder if Setsuna will prove worthy of his mighty Twin Drive mobile suit. In fact, the whole point of the Zero system is to ascertain exactly that, at least according to Dr. J.

As the Zero System powers up, Setsuna senses the same sorrow that he felt when battling Quatre. He now recognizes Duo to be the Zero's pilot, and finds himself quickly on the defensive. The Zero System, according to Billy, responds to the pilot's brainwaves and enhances their combat abilities, or rather... expands their consciousness on all matters. It even, Billy babbles, shows the pilot their future! Of course, all this is incredibly stressful, and if anyone exists who could somehow withstand such punishment

for long, that person would be inhuman. HINT HINT.

Duo is firing in all directions, desperately seeking his enemy. Setsuna has no choice but to cut the Trans-Am's limiter, but when he does so, the grief radiating from the Zero abruptly changes. The two pilots feel their consciousnesses mingle, and Setsuna is able to lucidly tell Duo to get a hold of himself and his famous courage. Don't let the machine win!

Duo's mind is strong enough to forcibly evict the Zero System's influence. Billy is astonished, and Dr. J is elated. Both pilots have passed the Zero System's test, and the fact that Veda's piloting choice has actually panned out gives the scientists renewed hope. Duo meanwhile finds himself agreeing with Billy: if there's anyone who could actually master this beast, they'd have to be super-human.

He heads back to base on Billy's orders, promising Setsuna he'll be right back, right as a horde of Oz forces show up. The Innovators think they've got Setsuna dead to rights, but they're not the only ones with reinforcements waiting in the wings. Sumeragi orders the troops to shoot down as many Mobile Dolls as they can, as they're all going to be pulling out in four turns. And if they can take out some of the Innovators, so much the better.

As Zexis starts plowing through the ranks, Tsubarof panics and gets ready to use the Mobile Doll system. Lady Une protests that that will only make this war even more meaningless, finally understanding why Treize hated the thing so much. Treize loved everything about people, including how their deaths made all their emotions immeasurably more vivid. It is in the facing of death that warriors achieve their true form, and that form lights the path to the Ultimate. And the Mobile Dolls have not somehow surpassed death; they're merely a cowardly expedient for shifting it from its rightful bearer.

Tsubarof protests that she sounds like she wants to lose this battle, but she states that losing or winning matters not. It's the fighting, the striving that matters -- that purifies body and soul, and makes recompense in due course to all the souls lost along the way. This is beyond Tsubarof's comprehension, and Lady Une tells him to kill her, as one warrior to another, given that they're now ideological enemies.

Tsubarof storms off to sortie his "devil Gundam", and as she lays dying Lady Une ponders how the uncertainties of this world drive the pure-hearted to despair. But to those who can maintain their hearts, she gives a final plea to go on fighting, and to let her continue loving them...

Duo and Hilde spring Quatre and Wufei, having received directions to their mecha from the scientists. That's a good thing, since the "devil" turns out to be the Destroy, fully linked into the Mobile Doll system. Hilde's seen enough of Zexis just now to have changed her allegiances, becoming an insta-comrade for Duo. Quatre gets his improved mech back, standing alongside the Gundams the scientists have upgraded (using the base's funding to do so no less).

Pummeling Bring makes him very upset, and though he doesn't like attacking a comrade, he's got no choice but to go after Tielia. Tielia's got his own resolve down pat though, and manages to spiffily dispatch the Innovator. They can be killed!

The battle becomes a total shooting gallery (for both sides!) as the Mobile Doll slave units flood the field. At the appointed time, Tielia rushes over to pick Ian up. Ian, it turns out, is stunned to find that the Colonial Gundam engineers are none other than his old comrades-in-science. Well,



sort of: Ian was recruited from the AEU to fill void left when the five scientists departed the CBs. The five of them spent some time there after developing the Tallgeese, and after they left they made the Wing Zero, master prototype for all their other Colonial Gundams. They see themselves as a counter to Ioria's plans, imagining that the CBs might be in the way in the event the Three Great Nations would ever have to be laid low.

What is for certain is that none of them wanted the CBs to have the Zero System back then. The scientists, who really do have a plan to catch, tell Ian that he'll have to figure out for himself what the Zero System has to do with Ioria's plans. As a hint, they ask him to think about the Double-0, and note that any "ruler of the world" needs not hesitate, lest those around him lose heart and start fighting each other. As such, the GN Drive and Zero Systems needed to be kept apart.

Poor Ian is going to give himself a headache pondering all he's heard, but at least he'll have a long time to think as the team beats a well-deserved retreat. As they fade into the distance, Milliard says he now understands what Treize was thinking, and vows to not force Zexis to shoulder the burden of history alone. That he swears by the Peacecraft name.

Things feel pretty fucked up to Tsubarof, but Billy notes that a) the plans for the new Mobile Dolls are done, and b) they still have both the Wing Zero and another pilot to stick in it. Tsubarof finds himself somewhat scared by Billy's newfound calm, and hastily agrees to leave the Wing Zero program to him while he concentrates on the mass-production Dolls. Billy, of course, intends to avenge himself on Kujou with it.

Quatre's reunion with the team is a bittersweet one at best. He recounts how his anger at the L4 incident drove him to break the seal on the Wing Zero (placed there by Professor H) and try to take revenge. He and Duo both know that the visions the Zero System shows aren't generally good for the pilot, and he also knows that nothing he can do will ever fully make up for his error. Still, he intends to do what he can as a member of Zexis, and he finds that all the pilots are indeed prepared to accept him back into the fold. After all, many of them have things at least as dark in their pasts already.

Reassurances past, things get back to business. Oz has just lost a vast amount of warpower, and their complete assimilation into Arrows seems only a matter of time. Zexis too is going to be put back together on the surface, bolstered by some new friends the other half found in the Dark Continent. That's a lot of firepower, and one imagines that there's going to be a need for it before all is said and done...

## CHAPTER 25. Unending Promise

[Despite the obscene number of kills on the Space route, resulting in Esther earning the coveted Bronze Emblem, I kept the Dark Continent route cause I'm biased toward Getter and Gurren Lagann and Code Geass. Full Disclosure(tm), as they say on the Street.]

All is not in Warusawa, where Renton and Eureka's peace has been abruptly shattered by Marilyn and goons showing up. Her orders are for Eureka's capture, though she claims not to know what for, and she tells Renton that he ought to take the chill if he doesn't want to get hurt. Fearing for his safety, Eureka submits and gets hauled off, leaving Renton screaming for her in her wake.

Crow catches up with Traia on what everybody's been doing from both of the

past two paths. There seems to be a shortage of percussionists to ring in Crow's latest earnings, but at least Esther is thinking of him when she drops a few coins together as accompaniment. Crow's actually earned a sizeable chunk of change, largely thanks to all his documentary footage, but he'd best not think about quitting his day job for a life in cinema. The rest of the pilots are in the midst of making their reintroductions when a "Holland Novak" radios in with something about a "Eureka" being in trouble. OH NOES!

It would seem that Insalaum wants Eureka, probably because she's a data terminal for the pan-dimensional Emerge. Holland knows a bit about the Firebugs from his run-ins with the Federation military, and laments that he wasn't there to stop the kidnapping. He found out about it after the fact during a regularly-scheduled check-in with Renton, who he's been trying to help out as penance for all the bad things he's done.

Renton is headed to the Vodalak Shrine to consult with Anemone, who like Eureka is a link to the Emerge. Holland, like Zero, believes the Firebugs will be heading there next, and is trying to make his way there too despite his body's rapid aging. He implores Zexis to save Renton and Eureka, and Zero is plenty happy to go gain some insight into what Insalaum is really up to.

What Unblown's told Margret is that the Vodalak shrine contains a new key to unlocking Dimensional Science. She clearly has her doubts, but she's doing a fair job at suppressing them in the service of her duty as knight. Inside, Renton needs a reminder that he's actually got the ability to do shit, which Anemone thoughtfully provides while the Nirvashes squabble. It's really as simple as believing in himself, and when Holland shows up to snap Renton out of a little introspective trance, Nirvash springs into action.

Nirvash has gone from mascot mode into full-grown mecha in a miraculous instant, and Holland's brought all of its armaments. Now it's up to Renton to ensure that all this wasn't in vain.

Salvation is at hand when Zexis shows up, Crow tells Margret that if she means to live as an Arcsaber, he'll just have to fend her off on Earth's behalf. That is the kind of thing Margret wants to hear, the sort of thing that distracts her from her doubts. ...It's not distraction enough though: those doubts are interfering with the D Extractor, and the results are inevitable.

Geraud shows up next, berating Margret for not getting her act together. Crow respects the sight of the Arcsaber #1, enough to even remember his name, but tells him to give Margret a break -- she is after all risking her life for this fight. This displeases Geraud even more, and he orders Margret to retreat. Crow doesn't like Geraud's holier-than-thou act, but Geraud actually admits that he was weak once. But he now swears on the scars on his cheek that he'll never lose again. He's focused on Crow, and it's apparent to everyone that his mech is as fearsome as he is. Crow not only doesn't need the warning, he's fired up of his own accord over Geraud's poor treatment of Margret. Geraud vows to finish this in three rounds, and that's more time that Crow will need.

In fact, Geraud and his retinue can go down in less than half a turn, though Geraud's got a plot-motivated second wind. He declares that the D Extractor works by amplifying a pilot's will, much like what he's heard about Crow's VX. Crow doesn't need any more people after his Sphere than there already are, and comes after Geraud with full clout.

His fellow pilots sense something different about him, something very dangerous that reminds Quatre of the Zero System. He doesn't heed their

pleas to stop though, apparently lost in some sort of special effect related to the whole "Swaying Scales" business. What he says out loud is that he's had enough of people thinking they can just deprive others of their freedom with no compunctions at all.

Unblown shows up at this point, things having gone exactly as she planned. Her ultimate weapon is aimed at Crow's VX, since he's totally absorbed in punishing Geraud, and Esther leaps to his defense at the last moment. As she does so, she feels something entering inside her, and to her teammates horror, she turns into a Dimensional Beast on the spot.

Yes, this is the power of Unblown's Dimensional Science, replicating what Gaiou was able to do with his powers. It takes an immense amount of energy, and she's unable to fire another shot immediately. Zero rushes over to try to gather as much data as he can with the Druid System before Unblown flees, knowing this new development to be the biggest menace they've faced yet. DB-Ester attacks him immediately, breaking own his cockpit and cracking his mask... and exposing his left eye.

He manages to Geass Esther into stopping, rushing back to the flagship right afterwards. Unblown retreats, ordering Geraud to grab Esther and follow her. Crow is utterly determined not to let Geraud escape, and it's now clear to Roger that the activation condition for Crow's Sphere is not a doubting heart as everyone suspected. Recall Eim's words: though a scale may sway, its fulcrum remains unmoving -- and it seems that the real activation condition is a singleminded, focused act of will. Too bad the activation also results in total myopia regarding anything but the target of the focus. Roger has all the pilots try to call out to their friend and get him to return to his senses, which totally doesn't work.

So, what will? Well, as bad writing^W^Wfate would have it, Rand and Mail show up out of nowhere at this point. When Crow takes a threatening step in their direction, Rand and Mail "fight back" preemptively and totally demolish his ass. I mean, really demolish, like, bhut jolokia the wrong way through the digestive track-level ass demolition. This might have been overdoing it a weeee bit, even given that Crow was somehow able to eject. Zexis get busy rescuing what's left of Crow and taking out the remaining Insalaum forces. They're going to need Crow healthy if they're ever going to get Esther back...

Rand and Mail have come at a pretty fortunate time... or unfortunate, depending on your perspective. Some time later, Crow has returned to his normal self -- complete with memories of his little Sphere-induced episode. His symptoms are both better and worse than those of someone like Eim, and he isn't sure if he'll be able to consciously snap out of his trance-like state or not. He certainly failed to when facing Geraud. The question is, what about Geraud got under his skin so badly?

He isn't eager to discuss it, but when faced with the prospect of being forbidden to sortie (and hence unable to pay off his debts) he comes clean. What he hates is watching people like Geraud and Margret deliberately set aside their better judgement for the sake of their orders... something Crow himself did far too much of in his youth. Or maybe it's that Crow was jealous of Giraud for embracing his doubts and yet being able to carry out his mission. Zero remarks that this is a fairly muddled set of deliberations, and Crow suggests mildly that Zero's mechanical view of psychology could be the product of a certain... lack of experience. Zero digests that a moment, and then says "fair enough" -- if Crow truly has that good an understanding of his own inner workings, Zero will guarantee he stays free. But Crow had better figure out how to control his Sphere issues, or next time Zero will be forced

to take drastic measures. Crow asks for nothing more, save that someone pick up whatever is left of his corpse and send it back to Traia for analysis.

But that's the future. In the present, the question is what's become of Esther. Lakshata promises to take the data Zero's gathered to Traia, whose specialist knowledge of the DBs puts her in a better position to draw conclusions than Zero himself. Meanwhile Holland has been interrogating the Firebug pilots who managed to eject, but none of them seem to know much about where Eureka might have been taken. Zero will take turns questioning them next, and Crow tells him to give him a ring if anything comes to light. In the meantime, he's going to go say hi to the dude who pulverized his mech.

Tamashiro can't believe Crow could be so level-headed after all that's transpired. Those with eyes to see know that Crow must be tied up in knots inside, and yet is looking past that to the bigger picture. Knowing him, he'll try to take responsibility with his own hands at some point. Renton is the same way, and Holland figures everyone's better off if he goes back to the sidelines and lets Renton have space to think about how best to help his erstwhile girlfriend.

Rand is busy catching up with the Zexis team, already having been briefed on the parallel-world-people thing from Banjou. It seems he was brought by the Quake that Insalaum caused three weeks back, and has been putting the time to good use fixing stuff (and occasionally doing the opposite). He's hoping that he and Gain can get their "Heat and Cool" team back together, and it's not like Gain has anywhere better to be. When Crow shows up and makes introductions, Rand insists on making up for his rather violent intervention by fixing the Blaster as good as new. That's good with Crow, who amazingly offers Rand a drink on him to say thanks for restoring him to his senses. He knows they'll all have their work cut out for them rescuing Esther and Setsuko. AND he has a lot of questions for a fellow Sphere-bearer, which is why the other pilots wisely siphon Mail away to leave them some time alone. Crow realized Rand was a kindred Sphere-bearer the moment he saw him, which is very strange because that did not happen with Setsuko. It means that his Sphere Factor is getting very strong, and he desperately wants to know what he's in for...

Eureka has been brought before Unblown, who very unconvincingly tells her there's nothing to be afraid of if she obeys. There's no telling just when Unblown will get the data she wants, as a higher-priority test subject has just fallen into her lap. Margret requests permission to look out for Eureka in the meantime, as she knows her from before and expects that Eureka will be "more cooperative" for her. This is of course a pretext for Margret to be able to protect Eureka.

Marilyn seems a bit unhappy with the arrangement, but given that she's broken every doll she's ever been given [in which case, keep her the fuck away from my BJDs -- oh snap did I say that out loud?] she'd make a highly nonideal custodian for such an important test subject. Unblown intends to fix all the shortcomings of her artificial Revive Cells by studying Esther, and eagerly looks forward to what kind of DB would result from transforming Crow and his D Extractor. The cowardice of the Insalaum scientists before her in forbidding research into Dimensional Science is beyond her belief, and she's determined to make all Insalaum's people bow before her scientific might before all is said and done. Marilyn is super impressed, and receives a new mission: capturing a Singularity...

## CHAPTER 26. Falling to Hell

The interrogation will be carried out in accordance with Federation

regulations, and Zero promises that if the prisoner answer the questions, his freedom is guaranteed. The Arcsabers seem to be an honorable lot, and when the prisoner agrees to cooperate in accordance with the knighthood's creed, Zero relaxes a bit -- looks like he won't have to use his Geass. The prisoner names himself Kevin McLaren, Third Knight Corps, third grade (equivalent to an army captain). He says that Insalaum's primary objective in invading the Earth is securing labor and resources for the rebuilding of his homeworld (ravaged, you'll remember, by Gaiou). He's not sure what Margret told the team, but from what he knows something like 40% of Insalaum's populace survived the war, and about half its territory was not laid waste.

That doesn't tally with what Margret and Shubal have said, which Kevin ascribes to them being in the vanguard that fell first to Eim's machinations. The rest of the country may have been ravaged, but it didn't fall entirely and in fact repulsed Gaiou -- who, from what he understands, came to Earth next. This does explain why the Insalaum < Gaiou < Earth inequality wasn't holding up. Kevin recommends that Earth surrender before his lord Yuusar gets upset; despite his humble appearance, he's terrifying when angered. Terrifying enough to give Gaiou pause (supposedly), and terrifying enough to have killed his own father.

...Whoa. Supposedly he made Unblown his regent before beginning the invasion, which should have eyebrows raised throughout the room. At least Zexis now know what to do next, and as promised they let Kevin go free. He counts himself lucky that he was captured by such honorable folks, and means to make a favorable reporting when he returns to his squadron. Setsuna and Allelujah are assigned to give him a small transport and see him on his way.

Roger reckons that at least the fear of the prince was genuine, which implies that Earth should not surrender. As Zero knows well, victors are seldom charitable to losers. Though all this information needs to be sent up the ladder to the top Federation brass, Zero presumes that Zexis will still get stuck doing the actual fighting when the inevitable war breaks out. Sumeragi agrees with Saeki's recommendation to stop by Japan first, in the hopes of giving the team a little R&R. Maybe they can catch one of the Tinkle Project shows?

Crow is in the hangar with a serious scowl on his face, having finished a marathon drinking session with Rand. He's hung over, tired from Rand's banter, many dollar's worth of alcohol poorer, and not much more informed about the Spheres. He's only got one lead left (Asakim), but that's better than none. He and Renton are surprisingly good for cheering each other up, given how the women in their life are currently missing.

Crow wasn't the only one in info-gathering mode. Rand wasn't just enjoying the booze, but also finding out more about his fellow Sphere-bearer and busting his ass trying to mend the damage he dealt to the Blaster. Gain asks if Rand and Crow are destined to kill each other, and Rand huffs that he's not a dickwad like Asakim or Eim. For starters, neither he nor Crow have any particular interest in gaining each other's powers, busy as they are leading their own lives. Maybe Asakim and Eim's problem is that they had too much spare time on their hands? In any case, Rand is grateful for the chance to help save Setsuko and Esther, and intends to hang with Zexis for the foreseeable future.

Kei meanwhile is awfully curious about Japan's hot springs, especially the one called Kurogane-ya which her father spoke about often. Kouji is reluctant to speak of it at first, but when she persists he tells her that ogres dwell there, in particular a dreaded female ogre who sheds neither tears nor blood. And when he says genuine "ogre", he means it -- fuck this clown prince of

Insalauum guy. Some distance away, Kouji's teammates see how agitated he is but don't know what happened between him and Tsubasa to engender such animosity. Call it rumor mill fail.

The rumor-mongering is cut short when Gou somehow senses an enemy approach. Sure enough, Benkei rushes in moments later with word that Mechabeasts are advancing on Atami. Kouji's ready to kick Dr. Hell's ass, but Gou and Takeru warn him that something scary is about to go down.

Dr. Hell's sent a veritable army to lure Zexis into action, and Tsubasa figures that maybe she should her her freak on instead. Shizuko tells her she mustn't die yet: she's got a duty as a mother to tell Kouji and Shirou the Truth(tm). Tsubasa agrees, not intending to lay her life down here anyway. Knowing this day would come, she's hired a few bodyguards... that would be Boss and his hapless lackeys. Tsubasa's real lackeys tell Boss and they others they'd better not even think of showing the enemy their back, lest they be seen as "ungrateful" for all the hospitality they've enjoyed.

The encroaching army seems to lack any semblance of tactics besides brute force bullrushing -- does Dr. Hell really think he can simply overpower Zexis? No, of course not. Dr. Hell's prepared a bunch of "mechanical life forms" called Kedoras, which promptly go and glom onto Mazinger-Z and infiltrate the Tower. They grow by eating machines, and Tsubasa growls that Dr. Hell must have gone irrevocably bat-shit insane if he's unleashed these. Sure they're menacing Zexis -- they're menacing everybody, Ashura included, and if Dr. Hell thinks he can control them, he needs to be committed.

The Kedoras, to everyone's astonishment, can actually talk! They claim to be warriors of the ancient Mikeene, and vow to destroy everything not of Mikeene origin. They also have some kind of resonance going, inducing a Quake with their very breath! So, whoever released these things needs to be seriously sacked.

They teleport the team to what Tsubasa, looking very youthful, calls an abyss between worlds, where past and future are comingled. This is one of those setups where everyone sees a personalized vision, and Tsubasa is very curious to know what everyone will see.

Lelouch and C.C. see what she calls the "C World" -- a world "without lies" according to Marianne. As in, Lelouch's mom Marianne. Kei sees Gou as he lies in a stasis pod, and the Newtypes (including Setsuna!) start to experience transcendence. Renton sees Eureka and a Rainbow. Simon sees the space, and someone resembling Nia who tells him that neither he nor mankind are permitted to grow any further. Crow and Rand experience utter blackness, which Asakim says is what lies in the depths of their hearts. Alto sees the Twinkle Project...

...And back to Kouji, who sees someone who looks just like Mazinger battling kind of giant monster. Ashura declares that to be the god Zeus, betrayer of the Mikeene. See, in the old days, sea and land belonged to the Mikeene, and the humans groveled before them in fear. Ashura cries out to his god Hades to strike Zeus down.

When the team regains their senses, they find themselves in some totally unknown place. That's bad from the standpoint of Sheryl and the others, who are still back in the real world. Sheryl is desperate to find something to do to help, and Basara tells her to shut her pie-hole. He and Ranka seem to know what must be done: singing! It's already been shown that their songs generate Fold Waves, which if amplified might just open a portal to wherever Zexis has

gone. Grace is looking forward to seeing if the Little Queen can pull this off, but Sheryl thinks the whole thing is retarded -- she opts to sit by and pray for Alto's safety. This doesn't seem entirely like her, to be honest..

Sensors are largely on the frizz, but from what they can see there isn't a single structure or living thing for a hundred kilometers in any direction. The desolation reminds the team of nothing so much as the area around the ZONE. Kouji wishes the team could catch a Kedora and use it to get back, and Tsubasa (who's come aboard the Tower) says that's precisely the right idea. She's got Ashura by the scruff of the neck, saying he's as good a person to explain what's going on as any.

The Kedora were developed as electronic brains, to enable the Mechabeasts to have some measure of autonomy. The Mikeene were the old gods, who waged war across the galaxy, fighting Baal in every galaxy by crossing space and time. Baal is a dreadful foe, opposing the future of all sentient beings, and the battle between it and the gods is so dreadful that Ashura can't even bear to recount it. As for how Ashura knows so much, it turns out his two halves are named Tristan and Isolde. The memory had been repressed by the dreadful force that fused them into one, but the sight of Zeus brought everything back.

Tristan and Isolde were servants of the Mikeene gods, and he knows now that the team must find the Master Kedora to return home. He knows how to control it, and maintains that the team can trust him/her: they need to see Dr. Hell again. It was he who pulled Ashura from the Lake of Fire, and Ashura believes his debt to Dr. Hell will never be repaid.

The question, Tsubasa says with a smirk, is whether the team will believe their enemy. It's a hard decision, but one the team will have to make as the Mechabeasts, now controlled by the Kedora, attack. Kouji agonizes over it considerably, then declares that as much as he hates Ashura, he's declaring a truce till they get home. Things get weirder when Wayne shows up, on a mission to see to it that Zexis is buried here. Quite vicious, and Duo smirks that Wayne makes a fitting servant for the bloodthirsty prince of Insalaum. That gives Wayne pause, and he tells Zexis that they have no idea what he's going through -- nor is it worth his time to explain, but hey.

Crow will have to figure out ways of controlling himself while facing Wayne, and that seems to mean not using the SPIGOTs, his biggest weapon. That's a bummer, given that the Master Kedora has been trained exclusively to wipe out all cultures other than Mikeene. This upsets Wayne, and if he kills it the team will be stranded here forever. This makes for a very delicate three-sided battle...

Poor Wayne just can't catch a break against Zexis, and it's starting to really get to him. Snarling that he'll never forgive himself for this latest loss, he bugs out while the bugging is still vaguely good.

The Master Kedora exclaims that victory is impermissible for it, and knocking it down seems like it won't be enough. But this is when Ashura and Kouji spring into action, and the former Mikeene priest+priestess know(s) how to bring the thing to heel. Only One Problem(tm).

The blasted thing got so blasted that it can't be counted on to target properly. Things seem dire until a song starts emanating from nowhere in particular: it's Ranka, singing a song that Ashura somehow knows. The music then shifts to Fire Bomber, and Ashura hastily arranges to follow the music to its source. PIECE OF CAKE!

Alto has plenty of praise for Ranka for saving him with song... and for Basara

too, at least a bit. Sheryl hangs back from the merriment, unable to face Alto without having tried singing herself. Basara has decided to hang out with Zexis, whose burning souls feel like a good duet for his music. He tells the rest of the band to come with him, figuring that Ranka can manage the Twinkle Project stuff by herself if she keeps singing like she did today. Grace goes along with it, under the proviso that they come back as special guests when their schedule allows. This way, Grace gets to have the uncontrollable Basara out of her hair AND stimulate the growth of the Little Queen still further.

Kouji is still having a rough time accepting his mom, and when she needles him about it he grits his teeth and trudges off, telling Boss and co. to hold the fort while he goes and, to paraphrase Tsubasa, "fledges fully". Truth be told, his resolve is already fully-fledged: he just needs a bit more seasoning to become 100% kick-ass. Tsubasa looks forward to him coming back, knowing that when he does, he'll get to peer through a different door to a brand new edition of hell.

Wayne's back at the palace facing the music from Geraud, who's furious that Wayne mobilized troops and his mecha without express orders from Yuusar. After getting punched once, Wayne demands to know what the point of the Arcsabers is if not fighting for the sake of their country. His master, for instance, even went so far as to become Gaiou's lackey, all for the sake of sending back intelligence. And now look at the knights who remain: slaves to the young punk and the old bag. Geraud decks him again, telling him that one more word of disrespect to the prince and he'll challenge Wayne to a formal duel (presumably to the death). Wayne growls back that it's more than a little stupid for the few knights left to be fighting each other.

Geraud pauses a moment, then tells Wayne to become strong. All will be resolved if only one has a strength surpassing all others. That's what Geraud wants for him, though Wayne isn't in much of a mood to hear it. For starters, Wayne has no intention of becoming the Knight of Knights! The conversation sort of peters out in a staring contest at this point.

Yuusar meanwhile has taken to paying DB-Esther visits, somehow finding her presence calming. Never mind the fact that he's the one who's indirectly forcing her to fight against her will. He asks her rhetorically what he ought to be fighting for...

## CHAPTER 27. Zero vs. Zero

Zero managed to gather a hell of a lot of data with his Druid System, making it rather worth getting nearly killed in the process. Traia's been going over it personally, and Carlos and ADiC are in the loop as well. There's no magic in the results though: apart from differences in coloring, Esther seems to be indistinguishable from any of the other Damon-Class DBs. Traia forestalls Crow fishing for rays of hope, and fortunately for both of them he gets the hint quickly. The best Traia can tell him is to fight in such a way that he'll have no regrets. Frankly, she's more worried about Crow than Esther, due to the Sphere's negative effects on him. She promises to redouble her efforts to analyze the damn thing, knowing that Crow won't be able to proceed without its aid. It would be nice, for instance, if Carlos would come clean on where he got the VX from. Crow puts a brave face on it, but inwardly he's worried that the next time he sees Esther he'll have to kill her...

Fire Bomber (plus Gamlin) will be joining Zexis for now, and feelings are mixed. Sure, more rock stars aren't a bad thing in the team in general, but some of the pilots were hoping to see more of Sheryl and Ranka instead of



some spiky-haired diva (that would be Basara). Pierre on the other hand gets all multiple-orgasmic just at the memory of their music, and Aoi has to agree that impassioned yelling does more for her than a cute singing voice or some sexy dance moves.

Rei formally introduces the band, and right away Michelle steps up with a relevant question: are Gamlin, Mylene and Basara in a three-way? That's what the tabloids say, and as we all know if it's on the Internet it must be true! Gamlin and Mylene both stammer their denials, and Michelle rejoices that he actually has a shot. Basara seemingly cares for nothing other than forcing people to listen to his singing; for music, there is no friend or foe. It does, however, affect the Vajra, as well as the hearts of all the Zexis pilots who can hear it. Quatre, for instance, hears in it the expansiveness of space spread out before him -- a clear vision of that which the Zero System showed him a warped glimpse. Speaking of which, what are Trois and Hiiro up to now?

At least Hiiro is being a professional guinea pig, made to pilot the Wing Zero versus Mr. Bushido's newly-upgraded Mathrao. This is all in the service of Billy's bid for revenge against Kujou, and despite the Mathrao being just a testbed, it's fairly kicking the Wing Zero's ass... that is, until the Zero System kicks in. Hiiro starts ruminating on who his real enemy is... who is it behind Treize, the Innovators, Ioria, etc. etc.? He arrives at the conclusion that it's Zero himself, and immediately flies off to do something about it.

Billy tells Mr. Bushido not to worry about pursuit: though Tsubarof will be angry, they can have some other squadron follow it. The Wing Zero has served its purpose, and both of them can only wonder what it was Hiiro saw.

Hiiro must really be having issues, since he first goes after Zero's body double Sayoko. Kunoichi though she is, it's all she can do to keep ahead of Zero's murderous advance. Hiiro makes his way to the underground control room beneath Ashford Academy, meaning to take out Zero's other collaborators. He's left a little explosive to disrupt Rolo's Geass, knowing from past experience that Rolo can't use his Geass repeatedly. He then fires his gun into the equipment bays, destroying all the information-gathering capabilities of the school and rendering it useless (he thinks) to Zero as a hideout. He tells Viletta that he's got no need to reveal Zero's true identity, since he means to kill Zero himself!

He radios into Zero, telling him to come alone to meet him at Kaminejima. The Black Knights wonder what the heck is up with the terse communication, but Zero is determined to go meet his (former?) teammate. Inwardly he's fuming that revealing himself to Zero has led to this, and desperate to understand what turned Hiiro against him so abruptly. He figures he dare not bring any help along, as it would only heighten the likelihood of his identity being known to all. If Hiiro really does mean to kill him, he may have no choice but to use his trump card...

Lelouch shows up at the appointed time, and takes off his mask to face Hiiro one on one. Asked why he's turned against Lelouch, Hiiro says he's seen the future. The bit where Zero said he'd destroy the world for Nanaly's sake went over Hiiro's head the first time he heard it, but he now knows that Lelouch has sacrificed too much. Lelouch's gentle streak makes him incapable of shouldering all these burdens, and certain to come to a catastrophic end. Hiiro means to kill Lelouch, that is Zero, before he triggers a tragedy that cannot be undone.

Zero asks if Hiiro can really manage that, knowing that he's attached a little "insurance" to Rilina. Should anything happen to him, Rilina will meet an

unfortunate fate (he claims), and curse Hiiro for it. Hiiro sniffs that that's meaningless: what's meaningful is that the world Zero means to create will collide with the world Rilina wishes for. Thus, killing him here will lead to her wishes being granted -- even if she's not alive to witness it.

Zero now realizes that he's underestimated Hiiro, and that this so-called trump card is worthless. Karen and Wufei show up on their own at this point, and Wufei decides all on his own to side with Hiiro in order to test Zero's resolve(!). Hiiro tells Zero not to worry: he'll attack him "as" Zero, and Wufei wants to take Hiiro and his weird-ass Gundam out on general principle.

This lasts only until Zexis shows up (preferably if you take Hiiro down to <60% of his HP). Wufei has concluded by this point that whatever Zero is up to, he's the kind of man who accepts responsibility for his actions. He means to see Zero through to the very end, which apparently means he's back on the good guys' side. The question is Hiiro, who is being ever more bedazzled by the Zero System -- a system which makes it all too easy for humans to leave the fight to machines instead of actually having the guts to face each other. Translation: "The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword." And the man who passes the gas should open the goddamn window, as MC Hawking so astutely observed.

Wait, what's that I hear? Is it... the Sound of Arrows? Why yes, and in their vanguard are Revive and Divine, tasked with nabbing the Wing Zero which figures so prominently in the narrative of Ioria's plans. The only saving grace is that Hiiro sees Arrows as his enemies too.

After absorbing enough punishment, Hiiro seems to break free of the Zero System's curse... only to lose consciousness. Only to get grabbed by Ali, who appears out of nowhere with henchmen. He has no intention of telling the team who contracted him to retrieve the Wing Zero or why, but since he's here he's looking forward to a fun-as-hell battle with Zexis. He's even having fun when his butt gets pulverized, looking forward to the next, even fiercer, battle. He'd just better hope that the new Lockon doesn't get a shot at him, since he blames Ali for killing his brother.

It turns out that Hiiro was somehow able to eject from the Zero before Ali grabbed it, but there are no life signs in the area... meaning that the crazy dude somehow crawled out of the area, busted ass and all. Where the hell would he be off to, one wonders... Hey, at least he's alive, right? Possibly immortal, even, at this rate.

Wufei has some explaining to do as to why he was fighting Zero. His reason hasn't changed since joining Zexis: he doubts Zero's true motives behind his whole "Justice" facade. He suspects Hiiro believes likewise, and that that's what triggered the duel. Wufei himself came back because he judged Zero trustworthy (enough), not needing or expecting anyone to necessarily concur.

Zero shows up after all the doubts have been aired, intending to answer them all at once. Hiiro, he says, was under the influence of the Zero System, whose psychotropic effects are well established. Duo and Quatre know that it's not that simple: whatever the Zero System shows isn't entirely baseless. It amplified something already within Hiiro, and that's got them worried. Wufei however takes it at face value, explaining the reason he sheathed his sword. Zero is not motivated by higher good, but neither is he a moron -- and to the extent that he seems determined to take responsibility for his actions, he's earned Wufei's trust. And if Zero ever runs out of excuses, Wufei intends to be around to ensure that whatever good Zero had started, gets finished. And hey, maybe some of the team he's assembled could even stop him before he strays too far of the path, if he's lucky.

Roger for one is intensely curious about what serves as the backbone of Zero's intellect -- how did he make himself who he is today? For Roger, whose past is lost to amnesia, this could be a valuable insight for charting his own course forward. Dorothy is curious too: why is it that both of them seem to have such bad taste? Zero meanwhile is pondering this future Hiirou claims to have seen, and is 100% resolved that he will be the one to decide whether or not he lets things end up that way. He won't permit himself to die, not until he's made a world fit for Nanaly, and made amends for all the lives he's twisted.

## CHAPTER 28. Emissary from the Darkness

Watta has been having a moral quandary for several missions now (unbeknownst to everyone, including him): aren't the Mobile Dolls very tragic? Like, born only to fight, never knowing anything else? Well, never "knowing" anything at all given they're machines, but still! It sounds so obviously bad that clearly those meeeean old Adults(tm), who've forgotten how to be honest with each other and themselves, must be responsible for war! Maybe if people made robots for the right reasons, they could be our FRIENDS! Like Lorelai for instance, before everything went to pot.

Takeru meanwhile is in a great mood over the news that Rose (his "girlfriend") is coming to visit. Recall that Rose was a former Gishin commander before becoming a major figure in the anti-Zhul resistance. Takeru would love to find out a bit about this "Power of Darkness" business, but even just seeing her face would be good. Keeping in mind that Takeru isn't an Earthling, it seems as though everyone else in the galaxy is following the "Make Love" dictum, while the Earthlings are busy making war on each other.

The team returns to Battle Camp without further incident, reporting in to Ootsuka about what they've been up to. The commanders' plan is to continue keeping the heat off Zexis and letting them do what they do, which is fighting for world peace. And that especially means doing something about Insalaum, who have in fact openly declared war and who are aggravatingly good at hide-and-seek warfare.

Rose is ushered in, a rather grave look on her face from the outset. The good news is that the worlds dominated by Zhul are starting to calm down at last. The bad news is that she has no guess what this Power of Darkness could be. The very mention of it has sown a seed of fear in her, however, and she tells Takeru that she's now very afraid. He doesn't get much chance to soothe her fears, due to the alarm going off. It's a detachment of Robot Mafia types, headed to a seemingly deserted place called Kuroushi-jima. Shikijima is horrified at this, and pleads for Zexis to be sortied to go save one "Professor Furanken". This guy is a world-class robot researcher, and guess what: he's said to be working on robots with hearts! It's almost as though he's been reading the script or something...

[Brief digression for language tiems. "Furanken" is, by the looks of it, none other than Franken von Fogler of "Giant Robo" fame -- which makes sense given that the anime is a deliberate pastiche of Yokoyama works. Here's the awkwardness: instead of spelling his name in kana, they deliberately spell it in kanji. Now, if you believe the guy is German, that would make "Fu-Ran-Ken" a clever-yet-unusual case of ateji. In this game however, it appears that "Furanken" is actually a surname, and absent any other evidence I am going to preserve the novelty(?) of the game's kanji usage in my spelling in the FAQ.]

Furanken's masterwork has just been completed, conveniently enough: "Black Ox". In fact, Furanken has been getting support from Branch all along, and Branch

figures that Black Ox's existence should satisfy "Him" more than Donau Alpha-1 ever could have. Furanken laments that Stroheim's own perversion brought Donau Alpha-1 to a sad end, and vows that Black Ox will have a much brighter future as a productive member of society. See, that's the troublesome part: Branch's been hired to have Ox go on a rampage instead. And Furanken should have been expecting that from them, umm, "Robot Mafia" when he signed up for their financial aid.

Furanken opts to resist anyway, and rushes over to the device that will copy his mind into the robot: the final step needed to kickstart its AI. Branch simply shoots him, and orders his men to destroy the transfer device. They get interrupted, however, by Shotarou and friends, who clearly outnumber them and force them to flee. The pilots rush off in pursuit, leaving a few folks behind to look to the dying roboticist. Furanken is too far gone to be saved, telling the team in his last few moments how kick-ass Black Ox is. The main problem is that interrupted neural transfer, which has left it with the mind of a three-year old. With his last breath, he entrusts Shikijima with safeguarding his life's work.

The Robot Mafia have sortied their forces, and it looks at first to be a routine cleanup job for Zexis. However, Rose has that bad feeling going on, so there's no telling what to expect. Except the Spanish Inquisition, because no one ever expects that.

Not long after battle begins, Black Ox strides onto the field. It reacts to its own name, truly an autonomous entity, but suddenly the voice of the dead Furanken rings out from the sidelines, putting an end to its happy march toward Zexis and safety. There's a simple explanation this time: Branch is using a little gadget that imitates Furanken's voice. Result: gotta fight the darn thing.

It kind of sucks in combat, fortunately, and the team quickly brings it to a halt. It un-halts though, determined to do its utmost to fulfill what it thinks is its father's will. Branch orders it to go kill Shotarou, who stands his ground and appeals to Black Ox's notion of what sort of person his "father" really is. Would his real father order him to do bad things? Or could it be... that that rotten guy Branch is just pretending to be Furanken? Shotarou even plays the "both of us have lost our fathers now" card, and he finally gets Black Ox to stop and pay attention.

Branch gets fed up with this just around the time Rose shows up and blasts his little voice modulator box. Metarl then shows up in turn, blasting her and revealing himself to be Branch's employer. Rose can't survive another blast of his TK, but fortunately Mars intervenes and IN TURN blasts Metarl.

...Who, doesn't seem fazed, or phased for that matter. Metarl turns out to be the eponymous Emissary from the Darkness (big surprise), and tells Mars that all this elaborate nonsense is a scheme to take over the Earth. And all who stand in his way stand to get the business.

Back on the battlefield, Black Ox needs some edjumificashun. Let it kill at least three bad guys on autopilot. That sounds hard until a bunch of Darkness reinforcements show up. Metarl explains that he had had Branch go after Donau Alpha-1 in order to not have a heartfelt robot running loose, but in retrospect it was a dumb idea: all the people who care about courage, compassion etc. are slated for termination anyway.

Takeru tries to rejoin the fight, but finds himself unable to perform the Six-Gods Fusion. Metarl gloats that this is due to his "Devil Ring" power,

which currently has Takeru ruled by Despair(tm). That sounds like the perfect opportunity for a pep talk, and... you guessed it... another mech appears out of nowhere to deliver it. It's God Sigma, whose pilots are not impressed with the Power of Darkness. For them, plot-mandated SPOOOOOKY zombie-raising forces are no big deal: they've got their own capabilities, so does the rest of Zexis -- might as well call this the "Power of Light" -- and it's really as simple as having the will to fight on. Oh, so I can just go and bludgeon the bad guys like always?

You betcha. Branch for instance can't put up much of a fight physically, but he does have some psychological warfare left in him. When Shotarou tries to follow, Branch asks if he's really so determined to die like his father. Yes, Branch is the guy who killed him, and if Shotarou keeps treading on his coattails Branch will send him to where his father's at in short order.

Metarl is a pretty durable dude, and of course doesn't die when first beaten down. After apparently retreating, he communicates psychically with Mars and Rose. The true power of the Devil Ring is that the more Mars uses his telepathy, the more his life will be drained away. And of course it can't be taken off, at least unless he kneels at Metarl's feet. Is death his only fate?!?

Shotarou's father was killed on account of his research into solar energy transfer, which numerous parties wanted silenced. Branch was just the agent who happened to pull it off first. Shotarou is very similar in some ways to Black Ox in terms of paternal loss, and like Black Ox is determined to work for peace. Shikijima will take Black Ox back to his lab to raise him properly.

God Sigma has just finished its survey of the Solar system, paying particular attention to the Dimension Warp Zone in accordance with Marin's report on the Insalaum. As Marin feared, it seems the spot is fast becoming a stable gateway to a parallel world, and possibly a trigger for another World Breaking. Even all the science Marin learned on S-1 isn't equal to the task of severing such a gateway safely, and trying it unsafely could invite another Dohar catastrophe. Nothing for it but to entrust the Federation's scientists to think on their feet. Kiraken tells the team to say hi to Domeki for him, who he "just bumped into" near the Dimension Warp Zone. That implies that F.S. has had the original Dancougar team sniffing around the spot, but it's anyone's guess as to why.

Takeru meanwhile has done the stupid thing, deciding that he's got to deal with Metarl all by himself. His thinking is that the Devil Ring seems to have been prepared specifically to target him, and the rest of the party mustn't be put in jeopardy on his account. By the same token, he's promised Marg that he won't die, and Rose makes him promise to at least consult her if anything changes with the Devil Ring. She plans to stick around Earth and do her own investigation into this Metarl character, desperately wishing for ways to be useful.

Rumors are starting to circulate of a bloodless revolution in Azadistan, carried out under the banner of Absolute Pacifism. The eyes of the world are turning increasingly towards that small nation, and the mercenary community smells an opportunity there. One band in particular has recently incorporated a young man of considerable skill, and considerable disinterest in socializing. That is, until Quatro shows up with word from Treize -- who has a little something he wants to give to Hiiro...

Treize welcomes Hiiro as an emissary of the Peace he cherishes so much, which might strike some as odd given how many rounds of ammo Hiiro has squeezed off this week alone. Hiiro wants to get down to business immediately, but Treize in his unflappable way manages to engage him on the subject of Peace... which to Hiiro is merely the state that exists when the fighting is over. Who, then, is Hiiro's enemy? Anyone who stands before him and seeks his life, or so he thinks. Treize thinks otherwise, observing that there can be no end to fighting whoever Fate sends his way -- if so, his enemy must therefore be Fate itself.

All the same, that sort of fighting won't change where the world is heading; that requires someone like Treize to act, as he acted once before already when establishing the current order. Treize has no desire to tread that path again; nevertheless, he doesn't view his time with Hiiro in vain. Seeing the young warrior, totally unafraid of death and willing to experience it at any time during battle, is what he describes as the greatest joy in his life. Hiiro is, in short, the prototype for how humankind should be. Unfortunately, the both of them have currently lost sight of their enemy, and Treize states that Hiiro must not end up like him. Luckily, he's got something that can show Hiiro the way: the Gundam Epyon.

It's fitted with the same system as the Wing Zero, and what Treize hopes is that Hiiro will use it to find a future worth fighting for -- something which Treize has despaired of doing himself. Should Hiiro fail, Treize means for the both of them to bid the cruel world farewell. See, Treize believes to this day that human propriety exists in battle... and yet, he's been unable to glimpse the future in that way so far. The Epyon serves two purposes: one, a sort of "if at first you don't succeed" bid to enlist others' help in his enlightenment. And two, as a way to bless both the Victors and Losers in the battles to come. A god? Perhaps: if nothing else, it will remove all doubts from any warrior with the will to fight. Who could be closer to godhood than that?

One final warning for Hiiro, who needs to go on fighting and sees the Epyon as as good a method as any: he must not assume that it's a weapon. Treize wants Hiiro to come back a Loser, and frankly Hiiro wants the same. May his battles, Treize wishes, bless the world!

Trois, it turns out, is still alive and is back hanging out with Catherine in the circus. Said circus has come to Azadistan, a nation in need of some entertainment if ever there was one. Trois seems to be quite amnesiac, referring to Catherine as his elder sister, and she for her part intends to never let him get near a battlefield again. The fact that he kept his promise to return to her carries much weight...

Revive and Healing are in space, discussing the impending demolition of the Wing Zero. They have not been allowed to try their hand at the Zero System, ostensibly because -- given that the Innovators can already glimpse the future -- it wouldn't work on them. Certainly no one else has been able to master the damn thing. It seems almost a shame to get rid of it before its role in Ioria's plans becomes clear, but Unknown Unknowns are generally something to avoid. And, it's durable enough to offer decent practice for the Mobile Dolls.

Before the shooting begins, a very unexpected guest appears: Zechs Marquis, or rather Milliard Peacecraft. Howard clued him in on the pending "assassination", seeing in Milliard a chance for world peace. Milliard in turn sees the Wing Zero as vital to overthrowing the Innovators, and though it pains him greatly to bid farewell to the faithful Tallgeese, he sacrifices it in a desperate bid to board the Zero. The Innovators expect him to fail like

the rest of its would-be pilots, but to their shock he not only masters it, he flies off like a fucking madman before they can lift a finger. His course indicates planetfall in Azadistan, and that can only mean a showdown with Arrows is in the cards...

Meanwhile, an unexpected guest has come to the Ptolemy-2: Ian's wife Linda. Who, it turns out, is shockingly young (enough to make Shinn jealous of Ian). She's also an engineer, and has come bearing the 0-Riser, a support gadget capable of expressing the Double-0's true worth. Ian sees it as an agent for changing the world, which may not be as much of an exaggeration as it sounds. Linda's also brought Trois' Heavy Arms, stashed for safekeeping while he was off infiltrating Oz. Ian agrees to undertake an upgrade, hoping in the process to learn more about the five doctors and their time with the CBs.

Doubtless all the new firepower will come in handy when (not "if") Arrows tries to force Azadistan back into the Federation. As Setsuna wishes for Trois' safe return, Camille senses something very familiar from him... something that would mark him as a Newtype.

Lint will be in charge of the Arrows' offensive, after Katy's relief of command in the wake of the previous debacle. Koorasawar is as in love with her as always, intending to do better this time and give her something to smile about. Arrows mission is to crush the Azadistan rebels, lest their ties with Cinq Kingdom lead to an ever bigger embarrassment for the Feds. Koorasawar knows a surprising amount about Cinq, and about the mercenary Red Shoulder folks Arrows has been obliged to hire. Louise has her reservations about fighting Rilina's friends, but her role in Arrows is just one of the many changes she's undergone lately. Jinin too has changed, insofar as he's single again: widowed by Catalan bombs... a fact he's not shy about using to motivate Louise to fight.

Mr. Bushido finds Ypsilon glaring at the Mobile Dolls, which to his mind are a prostitution of everything that makes warriors noble. Wars, in his view, should be fought for the pride of humans facing other humans, and on that he and Bushido can firmly agree.

Speaking of Rilina, she's decided to pay Marina a visit, hoping to learn more about peace at her side. Dorothy has tagged along, and is far less optimistic about a bloodless resolution to Azadistan's problems than Rilina is. Then again, Nanaly is also hanging out with Marina, admiring the determination that brought Marina back to her nation despite its best efforts to kick her out. Cinq, Azadistan and Area 11 seem to have quite the axis of peace going on, and if only Euphemia were alive today (and not reviled as a mass murderer) the picture would be perfect. Alternately, there's the idol of all idols: Diana Sorel: Queen of the Moon.

The pleasant reminiscence is broken up by an unannounced attack on the capital. This, says Suzaku (on hand to protect Rilina) is how the world actually works. And not a moment too soon, according to Dorothy. The man responsible is Ali, glorying in burning citizen and government representative alike. Neina (remember her?) is watching in disgust from the sidelines, barely restrained by orders to keep watch on the guy. Killing his ass is more like what she has in mind, in revenge for Johann's death, but she's gritting her teeth and watching for now.

As Dorothy sees it, this sort of thing is bound to happen as long as people exist who attempt to restrain others' fighting instincts. Blaming this mess on Absolute Pacifism seems like a bit of a stretch, but Dorothy and her eyebrows have never been all that sane. In any case, Zexis is on hand to try to mop up what's left of the capitol, which is to say damn little. Ali sics Arrows on Zexis, as predicted, and they secure Suzaku's cooperation with the

prospect of taking Zero out. Bushidou isn't impressed with the all-new, all-murderous Suzaku, nor is he thrilled about how Arrows intends to pin all this on the Celestial Beings. Not the most civilized way of settling their differences, to be sure.

Kiriko gets his own surprise when Ypsilon shows up among the bad guys, and a military march starts playing. This seems to be the Red Shoulders' anthem, and it seriously disturbs the normally unflappable Kiriko. He surveys the sea of flames and the Red Shoulders standing among it -- it seems Hell hasn't loosed its grip on him yet. Sumeragi orders Kiriko to lead the charge against the ground foes.

Trois and the circus are in town with some of the worst(?) timing ever. Catherine is once again looking out for Trois, and by no means intends to let him get in harms' way. Just the mention of "protecting" him gives him a splitting headache, and Catherine wonders rightfully just how many victims like him war must claim before being satiated. Seeing her distress, Trois goes out on a little "errand", promising to protect her.

Back on the battlefield, Hiiro shows up in the Epyon, wondering what the hell Treize is thinking. Well whatever, enemies to blow way!

Mr. Bushido has a nasty surprise in store: his own Trans-Am system! Veda isn't supposed to have had any records of how it works, and that would tend to imply that Arrows reverse-engineered the design on their own. Whatever its providence, the Trans-Am system makes taking down the Mathrao priority number one.

As the battle wears on, the Epyon system activates, causing Hiiro to want to destroy each and every being that wants to fight. Meanwhile, Milliard shows up in the Wing Zero, wondering if this conflagration is the rightful state of the world. Hiiro comes on the offensive, and Zechs demands to know if Hiiro is his enemy. Hiiro snaps back that he should ask the Zero system, and Zechs does just that. It tells him to kill everyone who's come here to kill, and Zechs is willing to battle Hiiro as one warrior to another.

The two Gundams start laying waste to the scenery, and that's Lint's cue to send in even more Mobile Dolls. Unless the warring Gundams can be stopped, even Zexis can't mount an effective counterattack. Howard radios Duo at this point, telling him that Zechs (who, like Duo, has been taken under Howard's wing as an anti-Arrows freedom fighter) is aboard the Wing Zero... and has fallen under its spell. Duo yells to Setsuna to try using the Trans-Am system, which was so effective when Duo was possessed by it.

When he cuts the Trans-Am limiter the Twin Drive powers up past what Linda describes as the theoretical limit, in danger of simply exploding. Ian hastily scrambles Saji in the 0-Riser, hoping to prevent all-out calamity. When it docks, Setsuna's previous psychic attempts to connect with Hiiro and Milliard finally come to fruition. What he, and the other Newtypes, can hear are the voices of all the warriors in attendance at this battle.

Louise and Saji can hear each other, wondering at each other's presence on opposite sides of the battle lines. Quatre reestablishes contact with Trois, who despite his amnesia finds something tear-jerkingly familiar in this moment of communion. Catherine is on the party line as well, and though she still wishes she could keep Trois from fighting, she's resigned to the thought of him going and doing the right (dangerous) thing.

Hiiro and Milliard can hear each other too, and Setsuna tells Hiiro that



he surely has the ability to beat his mech. Just as Hiiro told Setsuna to become a Gundam back in the day, Setsuna is now telling Hiiro to defeat a Gundam. Others add their voices too, including Rilina, who hopes both Hiiro and her brother will join her on the path of peace one day. Even Marina gets in on the act, telling Setsuna that while she doesn't know why he fights, she believes that they're both headed towards the same destination.

All of this has awakened the Zeta Gundam's Bio Sensor, which further enhances everyone's ability to understand each other. Hiiro reaches out to Milliard, proposing that they trade Gundams. Hiiro believes the Epyon when it says that Milliard will be an obstacle, but the Epyon itself was built by Treize, whose motives Hiiro can't comprehend. Zechs agrees that Treize would have given him the Epyon if he could have, and the trade is made.

Hiiro's hesitation is gone, and he means to put the Zero to its proper use. As Hiiro bends the Zero System to his will, Milliard figures out who his own enemy is and flies off. Trois also shows up, picks up his newly-upgraded mech, and proceeds to ruin Lint's day. Interestingly, Zero and C.C. felt the transcendent communion too, and C.C. observes that that must be what Charles is really after.

Zero knows that Suzaku has to be here in Azadistan protecting somebody... Nanaly, purportedly? But what would the steward of Area 11 be doing here??

Meanwhile Allelujah has experienced an interesting side effect of the Double Trans-Am: he's now back in touch with Hallelujah! Saji on the other hand finds himself distanced from Louise by virtue of becoming, inadvertently, a Gundam copilot. Not exactly what he had in mind.

The battle draws to an uncertain close: much was won here (including the Wing Zero's might, when properly tamed), and much lost. Hiiro at least has Rilina to thank for his sanity. Ribbons on the other hand, back in his lair, is super pissed off about all the Gundams with all the capabilities he's never heard of before. Liu Mei asks him what's got him so upset, and he slaps her hard across the face. Grace tells him gently that the ruler of the world should not stoop to such acts, and Ribbons consoles himself with the thought that getting his hands on the two Gundams will solve all his problems. Rijeene is intensely curious what role Ioria intended the Wing Zero to play, but Ribbons thinks he's got it figured out. Imagine what would occur if the Zero System were linked to Veda, for instance? It's demonstrably a superb way of getting data into its pilot's head, and given that Veda has as much data as any source in the world...

Ribbons thinks he's the only worthy pilot for these two Gundams, and Grace is starting to see why the Colonial scientists wanted to firewall their creations. Unlike Ribbons, Grace does not reckon that Ioria was trying to create a god via the plans for the Gundams. Figuring out what he was trying to create will be key to understanding the arc of his whole plan.

Cue the tearful reunion with Trois and Hiiro. In his laconic fashion, Hiiro explains how he overcame the Zero System: even if what it shows its pilot is their Fate, it's still up to the pilot to accept that fate or not. Indeed, through fighting, a pilot may change their fate, which is exactly what Zero is trying to do as well. For his sake, Hiiro hopes he succeeds.

Noin is on hand too, having left Cinq Kingdom's employ with Rilina's permission to join Zexis. Rilina means to face any adversary who would assail Cinq Kingdom without using weapons, which makes Noin's presence there a moot point. She would rather work with Zexis to fend off potential enemies before they ever reach Cinq. Hiiro thinks Rilina is too blinded by her laudable

ideals to realize that there's no way of realizing them under the current circumstances; nevertheless, they're worth pursuing in the long run. Most people need "hope" to live; he, he claims, only needs his will to fight against oppression. It can then fall to the Absolute Pacifists to run the world once oppression is gone.

Linda's gotten a whole load of new data to take back to her lab in space, vowing to create even more cool gadgetry for the Double-0. Ian on the other hand finds himself conflicted, brought face to face with not one but two Gundams that never should have existed. Camille suspects he knows what's going on with the Twin Drive, and with the uncanny ability to telepathically communicate with Setsuna -- he calls Ian aside for what will be a lengthy chat...

Saji's gone to his room to think, and before Kiriko does likewise Allelujah asks why the Red Shoulder March upset him so. Kiriko emphatically doesn't want to say, but his internal monologue explains that the juxtaposition of the march with a city in flames forced him to remember his secret sin. What happened on the planet Sansa is rotting his insides, ironically spurred on by Fiona's awakening of his emotions. The one thing he wants more than anything in the world right now is to see her...

Lelouch is starting to suspect that Nanaly is interested in Absolute Pacifism, a dangerous turn since Charles would by no means tolerate that in his government. His reverie is disrupted however when word comes in from Taigauchi of a new ZONE in Northern India, along with the obligatory brigade of Insalaum folks. The fleet rushes toward the scene at flank speed!

## CHAPTER 30. Pinpoint Strike

The new ZONE is indistinguishable from the previous one, including the part how it appeared out of thin air. Insalaum forces have basically seized control of northern India, flattening all the Federation army types in no time flat. This looks like a job for Zexis, but the question really is what to do once the team reaches the ZONE itself. Crow declares that he's prepared to do what Setsuko did, and use his newfound Sphere powers to seal it. He figures it's better he do it than to let Rand have a go and make Mail a widow.

Lockon tells Crow to stop there: reaching the ZONE itself is not, in fact, a given. Better the team move their ass than waste time chatting. Michelle asks if he's that worried about Catalon's central Asian branch... not that he's accusing Lockon of BEING A SPY OR ANYTHING. Zero gets them to halt the debate, and off to the side Klan tells Michelle that he's not sounding like himself. He's the first to admit as much, but he can't get over a feeling of animosity toward the CB sniper. In any case, Sumeragi and Zero plan on taking the swiftest route to the ZONE, even if certain sacrifices must be made along the way...

All this time, Unblown has been busily researching Singularities in her lab. If there's anything notable about them, it's the lack of notable features vis a vis normal humans. Not precisely a stunning result, especially given the effort Unblown went to to get her hands on test subjects (Kei and Atena, who only came along when Marilyn took a whole city hostage). Truth be told, even Marilyn didn't choose that avenue as a first resort: she had expected to be able to seduce the famous womanizer Kei. Kei freely admits to liking the fairer sex -- meaning that Marilyn's failure is due to her being NOT so fair. Unblown cuts the banter short, vowing to investigate Kei thoroughly in fullness of time and telling Marilyn to go get ready to sortie.

Marilyn flounces off, bidding a playfully mocking goodbye to Kei the Singularity. Kei says that if someone's gonna be playing doctor on him, he'd rather it be Margret than Unblown. Margret gives him a great poker face, so he tries a more serious question: is it true that Eureka is imprisoned aboard this ship? She says that that's not for her to say, which is answer enough. Unblown tells Margret not to fraternize with the samples, who after all are merely ingredients for her Dimensional Science projects. Kei smirks that he was never good at science, but Unblown isn't having it. As soon as she finds his "opposite", certain new discoveries will follow rapidly. In fact, one of her science projects is now stable up in space. Is she talking about Orson? If so, Kei and Atena can't hang around here forever, city full of hostages or not. They'll wait for their chance, when this ship participates in whatever attack is impending and their guards get negligent. The old witch and were-kitty are going to be VERY sorry they ever messed with Kei...

Yuusar, still emo as ever, is still chatting with Esther. On the one hand, he doesn't feel like he'll be much good on the battlefield. On the other hand, he knows it's a prince's duty to motivate the troops. LE SIGH! Marilyn comes up to tell him it's time to rock and roll, claiming to have heard none of his venting. Actually she heard it all, and is rather worried about how much of a problem this guy is becoming for Unblown.

The diversionary team advances toward the ZONE, and Crow decides to head out first and see just how invincible the thing really is. He and the team will have to fight through its guards, DBs, first. Amazingly, Crow's SPIGOTs do exactly zero damage, and Kei and Atena show up to explain why. Jeffrey makes the snap call to withdraw the team and replan, and Crow reluctantly complies.

Rand chews Crow out for his selfish(?) action, but the real issue is the DB, which Kei calls a "Luke Adamon". He explains how Marilyn interrupted his and Atena's "pleasant" holiday in this world, and then gets down to business. The Luke Adamon takes power directly from the ZONE, warping dimensions around it and making it immune to attacks from outside. Well, mostly. Kei and Atena pilfered some data about it while Unblown was giving them the once-over, and Zero sounds like he's been able to deduce from it a weak point.

Victory, Sumeragi cautions, is not assured. The barrier Luke Adamon erects doesn't quite cover its immense bulk: the spot where the energy is injected seems lightly guarded. And this Achilles Heel's size? 20 square centimeters. Ish. Oh, and it's got ray shielding and shit -- only a direct hit with the photon torpedos will-- yeah, that. Send in the wamprat-bullseyers, turn the targeting computers off, use the mother-loving Force, what have you. It comes down to taking out the surface armor with a light attack and then hitting the real weak spot with something big yet focused -- if Zero and Sumeragi are right, that will prevent it from using its dimension-warping powers ever again.

Gain is certain that Zexis' cadre of snipers can pull this off, though he wouldn't mind Youko's help (wherever she's at now). Michelle deliberately discounts Lockon on the sniper roll-call, finally airing his grievance against the guy: no way he gets to just run around calling himself by his brother's moniker. The old Lockon, frankly, was the embodiment of everything Michelle aspires to as a sniper, and just having a twin brother doesn't make the name fungible. Michelle even admits openly that he's being selfish and kind of an ass, and sort of asks the new Lockon to forget about his venting. Err, not that simple for people to do -- nevertheless, the more sniping aimed at the bad guys, the better. Gain has a little contest in mind to help take their minds off the drama.

Speaking of drama, Kei apologizes to Renton for not rescuing Eureka during his escape. At least Margret seems to be ensuring that Eureka is well cared-for,

so she's unlikely to suffer any harsh treatment for now. Even that gladdens Renton's heart, and he's as determined as ever to rescue her. Isn't young love wonderful?

Some time later, we find Wayne waiting for Zexis' onslaught by the ZONE. He assumes Zexis' attack will be futile, though he's not pleased that the futility only comes by relying on the perverted monsters Unblown's procured. Glaring at the Luke Adamon, he feels the weight of Geraud's words: power surpassing all others, indeed. If he is to become truly strong, he needs to do it without relying on the old bag's pets.

Zexis' plan hinges on getting the three snipers to specific spots and blowing the crap out of Luke Adamon's defenses. Gain will get the first shot, and it's up to the other pilots to fight for who gets the second shot in. It's kind of crazy, but it's also just the sort of added incentive needed to carry the day under such dire circumstances.

The CBs are having "circumstances" of their own, it seems. Anew seems to have feelings for Lockon, while Saji is grappling with his feelings for Louise. As much as it pains him to be Louise's enemy, he's discovered a higher calling in fighting for world peace. Setsuna says that he'll do the fighting, and tells Saji to concentrate only on keeping the Twin Drive stable -- assuming that peace ever arrives, it will fall to the non-combatants to forge the new world order.

This time, Crow's friends are able to suppress his urge to go medieval on Wayne's ass. Not that Wayne should worry though: Crow will beat his ass in once the team breaks into the ZONE. Zexis will need to do this within five minutes or all is lost.

Piece of cake! With the snipers in position, the gattings begin in earnest. The new Lockon proves his mettle to Michelle, and that's at least one drama llama slain. Just in time too, because the second wave of Insalaum includes Esther. Yuusar is on hand too, and while he praises Zexis for injuring his trump card, he also points out that they're nowhere near to defeating his people. He tells them to surrender, or... Or what, he'll trash the Earth? This is just the sort of psychopathy that Kevin was talking about, and Zexis calls Yuusar on it. He seems confused, and definitely doesn't know who the hell Kevin is, so Margret tries to convince him to relinquish command of the armed forces to her. He's determined to show his princely virtue, which makes him a perfect target.

As for Esther, Crow seems to have something in mind, and against her better judgement Sumeragi tells the rest of the team to leave Esther to him. The ZONE needs to be stopped after all, lest the whole vicinity be converted to a wasteland.

Luke Adamon may be huge and buff, but it's just one more target for Zexis' stalwarts to practice on. Margret violently denies leaking its weakness to Kei, who laments that she isn't being more honest with herself. At least she knows how to get out while the getting's good, and even Prince Whatever has the sense to not get his royal mech reduced entirely to scrap.

The real question mark is Esther. It becomes clear that Crow means to put her out of her misery, seeing no other way out. As he's about to pull the trigger, Margret frantically radios in to stop him. She says that DB-Esther may still have some semblance of human intellect left, just as her (former) brother DB-Shane had. As proof, Margret notes that DB-Esther seemed to understand what she was saying from time to time... not that there was anything she could do about it. At any rate, Unblown's Artificial Revive

Cells are incomplete, so Esther's transformation might be too!

C.C. tells Crow that Margret is speaking the truth, and Zero secretly believes too -- his Geass probably wouldn't have worked on DB-Esther if she had no humanity left. He cries out to Esther to "stop", as he did before with his Geass, and she obeys. DB-Esther seems to recognize Crow for a moment, and flees at high speed. Now Crow is hopeful again, and thanks Margret for the tip. She claims to have just returned the favor Crow paid her before, and with no further regrets vows to defeat him next time they meet. That's fine with Crow, who will face her as an Arcsaber head on.

Matters get worse when the ZONE activates, and as before the team's focused firepower can't so much as scratch it. Crow figures he's got to follow in Setsuko's footsteps, but before he can reach the ZONE Wayne comes over to stop him. Bad move, as Crow knocks his mech completely out of commission with one furious blow. Before he can get back to the ZONE however, Rand steps up to bat instead. After all, if Crow sacrifices himself here, who'll save Esther? Just that now, he'll have to save Esther AND Setsuko AND Rand and Mail too. At least Rand and Mail are cheerful as they lock themselves into a staring contest with the ZONE, unlike poor Setsuko.

Crow reports in to Traia, who figures Crow is much better off seeking ways to save Esther than ways to humanely do her in. Crow asks her to give the battered Blaster a full checkup, and maybe some power ups while she's at it. She's been waiting for him to ask for that, brimming with fiendish ideas. Unfortunately, they all hinge on one thing: Crow being able to draw forth the power of his Sphere at will. That sounds like a tall order if the goal is to keep him sane, but there's already the example of Hiroyuki beating the Zero System's steely grip. Maybe someone's voice could help him retain clarity? Like Traia's, perhaps? Crow is dubious, but further dickerings will have to wait till he gets back to the lab. Scowling, he muses to himself and to Rand that all Traia's upgrades might be pearls before swine if he doesn't somehow step up his game.

Unblown is furious that Zexis turned out to have multiple D-Extractors and could neutralize more than one ZONE. Hearing that Crow is the only remaining D-Extractor bearer, she orders Margret to kill the guy off. She shouldn't have the authority to command one of the High Knights to do any such thing, but Unblown claims that Yuusar has officially delegated that authority to her, pissing Wayne off greatly. Unblown had wanted Crow and his mech as samples, but under the circumstances she prefers him, simply, dead.

Margret haltingly murmurs assent, but Geraud steps in and claims the mission as his own. He knows that failure is not an option, and judges Margret to not be up to the job. Unblown is amazed and pleased that he'd do the honors, and Geraud's orders to Margret are to serve as official witness to the duel to come. Again, she agrees timidly to this, even as Wayne fumes over Unblown's increasing usurpation of Yuusar's authority. How the hell can this be what the trusted Arcsabers should be deployed to do?!

Yuusar is now ten times as emo as before, having failed abundantly to get any work done in the Seiouki. The fact that he's all by himself, pouring his soul out to a monster he helped create, makes him even more emo yet. Esther seems to be trying to cheer him up (in a multi-story, Cthulian horror-sort of way), but Yuusar has finally concluded himself to be incompetent, and Insalaum better off with Unblown and Geraud leading the show. It sounds as though he's about to do something drastic and probably irreversibly tragic...

We find Asakim ruminating on how Setsuko and Rand have left him behind: kind of a bummer given how badly he wants their Spheres. The news isn't all bad though: he now understands the meaning of these ZONE contraptions, and he likes what he sees. He doesn't mind the prospect of an eternal, unending sleep given how he'll be reborn in the currents of the Origin Row. ...Whatever that means.

It's becoming pretty clear to the Zexis pilots that these damn ZONE things must go. At a minimum, the next one will likely require sacrificing Crow to stalemate; and who knows what happens after that? Predicting the Insalaum's moves will require tracking them down for starters, and the so-called Dimensional Radar to do the job with is nowhere near ready. Nor are there any indications how to free Setsuko or Rand. The Insalaum force that attacked India retreated as soon as the ZONE was installed, but one can guess where they'll show up next. If their goal is to make their ZONE-centered invasion stick, odds are that they will come looking for Crow.

Since Luke Adamon wasn't bad-ass enough, Unblown has cooked up something called a Giga Adamon. Capable of leveling a Dinodemon in one hit, she claims it is what her modified DBs have been striving to be all this time. The regular Adamons are just modded remnants from Gaiou's DB batch, but the Giga Adamon is 100% biodynamically farmed indigenous ravaging terror. In theory, there's no further need to convert Earthlings and their mecha into DBs any more, especially given how inefficiently the process gobbles Dimensional Energy. Unblown's invention is good news for the invasion plan, but Yuusar finds himself wondering just who's revenant shell the demonstration was perpetrated on. The Dinodemons were all formerly High Knights, and although Yuusar permitted their use in battle on the theory that they'd want to give their lives for Insalaum, he wants to see that no further "demonstrations" like this occur. It costs Unblown nothing to accede to this, and she figures the next test can happen by sending some Giga Adamons to help Geraud take out the Sphere.

As Geraud makes to leave, he runs into Wayne at the exit. Wayne doesn't like seeing the Knight of Knights running errands for Unblown, but Geraud maintains he's doing this for his Highness, and more than anything else for the warrior blood that seeks strong opponents. Personal errands aren't an especially noble use of the Diamed, but Zexis is a strong enough foe that he doesn't care. He swears victory on the scars on his cheeks, and with a more deferential demeanor Wayne asks where the right scar came from (given that the left scar came from battling Gaiou). Turns out he put the right scar on himself, to remind him of his wife, his daughter, and of the taste of defeat.

Many lives were lost during the war, and even the 72nd King Insalaum was sent to heaven by Gaiou's hand. Geraud may be "guilty" of not protecting his king, but then so are all the Arcsabers. When Geraud and the rest of the survivors fled between dimensions, Geraud swore never to lose again, and by scaring his face caused himself to feel a token of the pain his family felt when they died. The sad irony is that Insalaum got stronger by being defeated, "thanks" to Unblown's Dimensional Science -- a power that Geraud acknowledges comes at the unreasonable cost of Insalaum lives. Wayne has never wanted to depend on Dimensional Science, and Geraud wants him to hone that independent, righteous strength. Shubal was sure that Wayne could be the greatest knight of them all, and Geraud has made it his mission to see that he does. At that, Wayne finally grins ruefully and heads off to start repairing his mech. He tells Geraud that he'd better be prepared to practice with Wayne when he gets back.

Geraud has words of wisdom for Margret too. The Arcsabers are intended to fight, not for Insalaum, but for their own beliefs. Geraud's beliefs in fact

extend to Insalaum in general, but Margret seems to believe in Yuusar specifically. He remembers the smiles of the people when she was named head of the royal guard: the sight of her and Yuusar together was precisely what the future of Insalaum should have been. So much has changed since then, including Margret's heart, and Geraud tells her to live according to where her heart leads, wherever that may be.

Crow meanwhile is having a bit of trouble getting it up to test out the powered-up Blaster. He's not able to engage the VX enough to budge the mech one inch, much less clatter around the shooting range. Traia is forced to conclude that actual battle is needed to make the thing work, and since that seems imminent anyway she sets about installing it for real. As she does, Crow gets to choose the direction for the armaments to head. Plan A is combat-oriented, with high maneuverability to allow coming to grips with an enemy and dealing a fatal blow -- call it the "super robot" variant. Plan B therefore is the "real robot" plan, involving long-range gunnery.

[Pick whichever one you want.]

Crow runs into Carlos next, who steadfastly refuses to tell Crow where the hell he got the VX. Not only has Crow not mastered the thing, Carlos thinks it's a major miracle he can use it at all, given that it requires an unshakable focused act of will to activate. He reckons that Crow has basically no will of his own to focus, that he's lacking in autonomy and subconsciously wants his surroundings to decide things for him. He seems to prefer even painful courses of action to having no course at all. Crow is beginning to get irked by this point, but Carlos continues that Crow apparently needs to be tied down by something in order to be able to gauge his self-worth... debts, for instance. Crow has to admit that Carlos has a point, and Carlos lightly tells him to pay it no real mind: everyone has bigger or smaller hangups in their life. The last thing Carlos wants to see is Crow a slave of his own making, and Crow has to hand it to the sly rich man: that's damn good advice. He's not sure if he's going to be able to keep his promises to save Rand or the others if he does what he now knows he must, but he's not going to abandon responsibility either. It's do or die time.

Geraud reaches the Scott Lab, hearing from Margret that he's somewhere inside. Zexis arrives simultaneously, and inform Geraud that they're not just going to let him have it out with their friend. He's prepared for that eventuality, and a platoon of Arcsabers will have it be their honor to accompany him into battle. No DBs or automated kill droids this time. These knights seem genuinely worthy of the name, justlike Kevin McLaren -- who NOBODY among the Arcsabers (including their chief) have actually heard of. In any case, the plan is to take Zexis out before Crow shows up.

Not happening. Crow turns up in a a customized Axio, the "Axio Scott SP VR Maxima II" whose coloring isn't exactly to his liking. He seems like the old Crow, but although he soft-pedals it, he's as determined to face Geraud as Geraud is to face him. His objective: buying even a little more time...

Once the team starts actually scratching the Diamed, Unblown sends in the completed DBs, powered up in every way and out to get Crow. Traia manages to get the new Blaster in time, and Geraud specifically calls off the DB attack long enough to give him time to board it. Crow appreciates Geraud's "human"ity, and warns that he's not sure he can even get the new mech running. The other Zexis pilots are impressed, but Geraud tells them he's not worthy of their admiration -- he is, after all, in the process of invading their world.

When Crow rushes in to pick up the new mech, Traia tells him she's fixed

everything up exactly like he requested. The key will be the "CDS", which is up to Crow to activate. The new mech isn't the "Blaster" any more, and Crow has a little chat with it about how its first battle may well be its last. Still, if he's going to die, he intends to do with with his Sphere powers at max. The "Re-Blaster" seems happy with this, and into battle they ride.

Before mixing it up with Geraud, Crow tells the rest of Zexis of his plan. He's counting on them to do the "right thing" if he gets overwhelmed by his Sphere, noting that without it there's no way to beat Geraud. Time for one last(?) roll of the dice!

At the last moment, Margret goes and gets in the way, which turns out to be a very bad idea. Interestingly though, Crow manages to maintain just enough of himself to barely avoid killing her along with her mech: that is what the CDS is for. Believe it or not, what Crow has had Traia rig up is a gadget that emulates the sound of falling money -- the so-called "Coin Drop System"! This is either brilliant or completely crap, and none of the other Zexis pilots can decide which.

Geraud wants to know why Margret did something so reckless, and she tells him he's needed for Insalaum's future. This was her final act as an Arcsaber who's lost her way, and Geraud accepts it as such, telling her to slink off to wherever she chooses. She does so, and Geraud and Crow renew their duel. In honor of Crow's unshakable resolve, Geraud dubs him "The Unbreakable".

Geraud also loses the fight, asking what makes Crow so strong. Crow, like Geraud, bears burdens that, until discharged, force him to remain in the cockpit. Geraud admits defeat, but also says that he can't allow the Diamed to fall into enemy hands. He manages to disappear, leaving Zexis admiring him in his wake.

Geraud wants to tender his resignation (from life) to Yuusar in person, dripping blood all over the throne room in the process. He actually tells the indignant Unblown to shut her yap for a moment. He tells Yuusar that it's been an honor to serve his gentle, royal self, but that going forward Insalaum will need strength, not gentleness. It seems Geraud is expending his life to convey this message because Yuusar is the one who shed tears for Geraud's wife and daughter, when Geraud himself could not. He returns the title of Knight of Knights, along with the Diamed, and asks that Wayne be named his successor. He passes away, noting "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust".

Crow's teammates greet his return with a mixture of disgusted admiration and admiring disgust. Traia, however, expected Crow to prevail all along. After all, even when he was on the Firebugs he retained a sliver of himself for when the going got tough... surely the VX wasn't going to best him. The sight of Crow getting his shit together really impressed Carlos, who's left the Scott Lab to start a new job somewhere. He's formally forgiven Crow his debt, meaning Crow can concentrate fully on saving Esther and the others. That is, until Traia tells him that he owes her bigtime for the Re-Blaster. Crow is dumbfounded at this, but eventually regains enough equilibrium to agree to continuing repayment of debts as its test pilot.

One other message from Carlos: the VX came from none other than Elgan himself. Where he got it is unknown...

Just then a little emergency pops up: the capital of Talivia, a republic in South America, has just been destroyed by an apparent orbital laser strike. Arrows seems to be at it again...



## CHAPTER 32. [route split]

The attack likely came from a powerful laser cannon aboard Earth's low-orbital ring. Talivia has long chafed under Britannia's rule, and indications are that its departure from the Federation was near. Arrows, one supposes, has decided to end such sedition with one swift stroke with a weapon they readied while Zexis was busy with the Insalaum. Anyone with half a functioning brain can see that the development and deployment of strategic weapons against fellow humans is an utter departure from Arrows' peacekeeping mission... hence, it's a prime target for Zexis.

The theory goes that the weapon requires considerable recharging time, but the second volley could come at any moment -- and one has to imagine that Zexis is high on its priority list. Zero figures Zexis should split in half -- one group to actually wipe out the laser, and one group to act as a diversion by doing something else useful on the surface. Sumeragi figures that this diversion is best handled by the super robots, leaving the more maneuverable reals to go after the laser. Whichever way Crow decides to go, there's a serious fight waiting for both teams.

And in both cases, Insalaum is likely to be out for vengeance on Crow. He's just fine with that if it gets him a step closer to rescuing Esther... and paying off his debts, of course. Traia notes that she's sunk enough money into the Re-Blaster that if Crow can't provide profitable data, the lab will have to close its doors. No way Crow's letting that happen.

[To stay on Earth, go to 32E. To go to space, go to 32S.]

Elsewhere, Wayne's got a lot on his mind as the only High Knight left. What the hell are the Arcsabers supposed to do now? Yuusar comes up to him at this point, and there's a very different look in his eyes from before. He declares that Wayne is to be the Knight of Knights, not because Geraud asked him to, but on his own initiative. He orders Wayne to swear to give his last drop of blood for Insalaum, and after a moment Wayne does swear -- to become the very epitome of knighthood. And to stake his life on the victory of the king and of Seiouki.

That's what Yuusar wants to hear, as he means to reorganize his entire nation with Wayne's help. He admits with a rueful smile to being inwardly terrified of delivering such a resolute speech, but desperate times call for desperate measures. They've a responsibility to the heroic dead, and to the still-living, and Yuusar actually bows Wayne while begging for his help. Wayne's thunderstruck, and indeed pledges himself wholeheartedly to the task... not of helping Yuusar per se, but of helping Insalaum as a whole.

## CHAPTER 32E. The Stolen Iron Man

Drama is about to ensue in the throne room of Palace Insalaum. Unblown can't believe Yuusar actually named Wayne as the Knight of Knights, a doubly-meaningless distinction given that a) there's only one High Knight left and b) the Arcsabers are obsolete now that the Giga Adamons are here. Wayne tells her to shut her mouth -- that she knows nothing of the knights' struggles. Her protests are quickly cut short by Yuusar actually yelling at her to be silent. He then asks her to forgive him for allowing her to fester, for the royal family's weakness in not keeping her hands off the forbidden sciences.

He orders her to confess her hidden sins and together with him make reparations, cutting her off when she tries to blame it all on Gaiou's

appearance. He promises to forgive all, quoting the Seiouki's creed that "The Sun Exists to Illuminate All Things, and the King's Love Exists to Nourish All People". Unblown seems unable to refuse, and even Marilyn finds herself swayed by Yuusar's newfound presence. He proclaims that Insalaum's true struggle begins here, steeling himself for all out war on the theory that the Earthlings will never forgive his invading people now.

Back on the surface, the Zexis pilots are understandably nervous from the giant crosshairs they feel emanating from above. Someone or other has even deduced the weapon's name: "Memento Mori", supposedly a Latin reminder of the inevitability of one's own death. If Zexis' pilots are feeling nervous, the same could be said of all the world's peace-and-freedom-loving folk. All hope isn't lost, as even the Federation army has people like Schwartz and Ootsuka who still retain a semblance of morals.

As the pilots banter, it comes out that Shotarou has headed back to Japan ahead of the rest of the group, hoping to get some fine-tuning to Tetsujin (and maybe hang out with Mackie). Mackie is in fact glad to see him, and only teases him a little about how much he's been absent. Shotarou's got a heavy responsibility restoring Mackie's world to livability, though it seems she's doing okay for now with Black Ox hanging around, learning.

Mackie goes into the other room to fetch some freshly-baked cookies, and a scream rings out. Lo and behold, Branch and Marilyn have invaded the place, and now have Mackie hostage. It seems the Firebug commander has a mission to carry out, and it just so happens to align with Branch's. Of course, they force Shotarou to hand over his V-Con.

Outside, Iizuka has been busily drilling Black Ox on how to be good in a fight. That might come in handy, when Tetsujin sorties and word comes in that it's not Shotarou at the controls. As Iizuka gets ready to fight back with Kokubouger, Shotarou strikes up a conversation with Black Ox (who remembers him) and readies for battle too. Branch has an army and Gestalt backing up his nefariousness.

And Zexis have their usual group of stalwarts, who are unpleasantly surprised that Shotarou can't seem to hang onto his little radio-watch-thingie. No matter, Tetsujin won't remain a lackey of Evil for long, even with Marilyn's reinforcements show up.

Pretty quickly Branch realizes that one of two things are true: either Tetsujin isn't obeying his commands very faithfully, or (more likely) he sucks as its pilot. His incompetence gives Takeru an opening to go in and steal back the V-Con with his psychic powers (stopping a hail of bullets from Marilyn in the process). Unfortunately, Metarl shows up to gloat a bit, and all Takeru's psychic heroics are taking a dreadful toll on his body thanks to that Devil Ring. Metarl means to kill Takeru right here and now, but Shotarou and the others interfere.

As Metarl makes to leave, he offers Branch one last chance: either destroy Zexis here and now, or face The Consequences(tm). As Marilyn runs off to deploy her mech, Takeru manages to persuade Shotarou not to tell the others about the Devil Ring. The V-Con will take a few moments to reboot, and Takeru makes an ineffectual effort to buy that time with Gaia.

Fortunately, there's another deus ex machina waiting in the, um, machina. This new ally names itself the Rose Knight, and instructs Takeru not to fear death. At the Knight's urging, Takeru does his combination thing and enters God Mars mode. The Rose Knight vanishes again, just as Tetsujin returns to Shotarou's control. Conditions are now right for Marilyn to get on with her

\_real\_ mission, which is remeasuring Zexis' strength.

Marilyn gets her frilly goth-loli tail turned around right quickly, but she tells Crow not to worry: they'll have their duel to the death soon enough. Oh and for his information, the good Prince has gotten a bit scary of late. Ominous much?

Even Branch's "Branch Robo #5" can't salvage his ass, though it seemingly won't fall to Shotarou to strike the final blow. Metarl seems unsatisfied with Branch's litany of Fail, and has planted a powerful bomb inside Branch's mech. The plan is to blow him AND Zexis sky-high, unless Branch intends to try to flee -- in which case Metarl will simply execute him and then go after Zexis himself. Shotarou takes the high road at this point, promising to shield Branch from Metarl's attack long enough for Branch to face the legal system properly. This touches something inside the Robot Mafia's leader, and he decides for once in his crime-ridden life to do something noble.

He rushes over and latches onto Metarl's mech, yelling that Metarl is but a servant of an even bigger power: two people controlling the Power of Darkness who are the cause of all of this. He then detonates his mech, damaging Metarl enough that he decides to leave Takeru alive for now. Odds are that he'll assume direct control of the remaining Robot Mafiosi now that Branch is gone.

No time to ponder that though: a most unexpected message has just come in from Ootsuka. Part of the Federation army has just staged a coup d'etat aimed at Arrows, and based in the Africa Tower!

But anticlimactically, that gets to wait until the pilots fawn over Black Ox, whose three year-old heart already loves Justice so vewwy vewwy much. Shotarou will be its caretaker as it joins Zexis' struggle, and that struggle is going to Africa, possibly to put down the coup. Takeru renews Shotarou's promise to stay mum on the Devil Ring thing, vowing to not let it beat him. About that Rose Knight, whose voice sounded male, Takeru knows only that its words had a strange, familiar ring in his heart. Why a friend of Takeru's would feel the need to hide their face is mysterious...

Anyways, off to Africa, where the Memento Mori attack seems to be behind the action. Hopefully the space team holds up their end of the operation...

## CHAPTER 32S. The Battle for Memento Mori

[See the other path for Yuusar's newfound bad-assery.]

The CBs have just received a care-package of upgrades for their Gundams, and not a moment too soon with the space launch impending. All that remains is carrying out Sumeragi's plans for a raid on Memento Mori, the weapon with the crap name that, according to some sources, is a Latin reminder of the inevitability of one's own death. Some take this as a form of encouragement, insofar as the listener must still be alive in order to hear it. Lockon takes it as further proof that the Innovators think they're god, and is willing to do whatever it takes (including outright assassination) to stop them. Anew tells him to be careful, using his real name, and Lockon admits to the team that the two have become lovers. Better that than have Michelle and the other tomcats hitting on her. Lyle sure works fast! Announcements to the rest of the team will have to wait until this mission's over, and that could be harder than it even sounded originally.

It seems part of the Federation army has just staged a coup d'etat against

Arrows, taking over the entire Africa Tower and its associated launch facilities. This is even worse than it sounds, given how the Tower is home to a sizable civilian population. Whoever's responsible seems to think they can get away with this, as the bulk of the Arrows forces are currently set up to defend Memento Mori. Said person is in fact about to start a live broadcast to explain themself.

The man on the screen names himself Colonel Pang Mercury, of the Federation Army's Information Bureau. The takeover serves but one purpose: to bring the barbaric acts of Arrows to light and start a global referendum. He proclaims Arrows to be murders of millions, announcing the Memento Mori strike that the Federation's information doctoring has thusfar so cleverly hidden, and says that his comrades are all soldiers acting in the best interests of the civilians they're sworn to protect.

Ribbons is happy to see things are finally moving, thinking back on mankind's history of using knowledge to stave off its own destruction. During every previous attempt since the Industrial Revolution, the visionaries' efforts lasted only as long as their lives, letting mankind recede into the murk after but a few decades. Ioria's contribution, as Ribbons sees it, was creating a breed of non-humans, free of mankind's life-span limitation, and therefore able to participate in the "conversation" to come. And lest Rijeene get too full of himself, Ribbons reminds him that Ribbons is his creator. In fact, he claims to have made all the Innovators other than himself, justifying in his eyes using them as pawns as he sees fit. Amuro is clearly not a fan, as with every word Ribbons expands his god complex. He snaps that a world built upon sacrificing human lives is worthless, and the creator of such a world is not so much a god as a hypocrite.

Ribbons cautions Amuro to watch his tone, but Amuro growls that he's very well aware of what Ribbons is up to with Memento Mori. And no Newtype mind-reading was necessary: anyone with half a brain could figure out Ribbons' plan. Clearly Ribbons can't hear the voices of all the lives he's ended. Amuro's heard something like this before, the sound of millions of voices suddenly crying out in terror and being suddenly silenced. It would seem that the Innovators' Neural Wave powers are only perceptible to each other -- given how confident Ribbons was that no Innovators were among the Memento Mori dead. This limitation proves to Amuro that the Innovators are disqualified ad mankind's forerunners. Ribbons, to Amuro, is neither an Innovator OR human!

Ribbons doesn't stand for that any more, sorry that his only "pure" comrade has aroused his ire as he take out his gun. This way of putting it is further proof of Ribbons arrogance, and Amuro finally springs into action by focusing his considerable psychic powers on Ribbons. He challenges Ribbons to oppose him with his mind instead of his gun if he truly is an "Innovator", and Ribbons knows full well he isn't up to the task. He tells Amuro that his mech is ready in the hangar, and orders him to get the hell out and remember that leaving is a big mistake. Amuro counters that the next time they meet will be the battle where Ribbons is unseated once and for all. It won't be Amuro who strikes the final blow though, but rather a true Innovator.

The Feds have sent an old friend of Pang's as a negotiator: Sergei. He conveys the Federations' unwillingness to disband its general assembly, or to release anti-government prisoners, as the rebels demand. None of which comes as any surprise. Sergei adds that there's no way for word of Pang's deed to spread given the Federation's grip on the news, and asks why he's gone to the trouble of taking so many unrelated people hostage. Pang counters that they're hardly unrelated, as it was the wilful ignorance of the people that let the Federation government run amok and set the stage for Arrows' rise to power. The common people's eyes must be opened, even at the cost of some pain. There

is clearly no point in further negotiations, and Pang tells Sergei to go back and report such to the brass. Sergei warns that Arrows is going to take even more extreme measures after this, including sending in the Automaton on Kill Mode to slaughter the civilians. Pang's willing to endure that, believing the civilians will eventually be free once they've internalized Arrows' brutality beyond all reasonable doubt. Only, he declares, with an informed public can good government and a good military exist -- and he'll happily be vilified if he can inform the public at the end.

In the short term, the Feds will probably brand him as some fringe terrorist, to avoid the kind of public doubts that would circulate if it was known that the regular army per se is behind this. But the truth will be known if enough civilians get involved. Sergei warns that Arrows may well have anticipated this, and that, Pang replies, is why he's chosen to occupy an orbital elevator central to mankind's joint wellbeing. Even Arrows can't just nuke the place, or its 360,000 residents... can they? Anyway, the more fuss he causes here, the easier it'll be for Zexis to take out Memento Mori...

Now who do you reckon Arrows put in charge of Memento Mori? Oh, duh, Lint, megalomaniac extraordinaire! He's convinced that Memento Mori has everyone including Insalaum shaking in their boots (nevermind the fact that Insalaum is pan-dimensional and so far has stymied everyone but Zexis in battle). He isn't even worried about Zexis, especially after he hears that their main battle units are screwing around in Japan. All's got to do is wait for the main energy charge to be complete, and Pang is history, along with any future dissenters.

That's about the point where Zexis busts onto the scene. Phase One is using Aquarion's Infinite Punch to open a hole in Lint's defenses. The Ptolemy hurries right through the hole, and Sumeragi warns everyone against getting cocky yet. Memento Mori turns out to be a Free Electron Laser powered by the Orbital Ring's particle accelerator, and disabling it will require more detailed info than Zexis has now. As Sumeragi gets in close for a more detailed scan, the upgraded Gundams will have to run interference. There's not much time to get this right.

A group of Innovators show up and immediately head for the Ptolemy-2. Too bad for them Amuro is on the scene, and he's tired of taking their crap. The feeling is, of course, mutual. That Arrows actually intends to fire at the Africa Tower is just further proof of how urgently they need to be stopped. Amuro tells Setsuna he'll explain later where's he's been all this time, and inwardly believes that it's Setsuna who will truly take the Innovators down.

Keep killing and reinforcements will arrive [helpful for getting the Skill Point, one supposes]. Amuro is glad to see that Camille's presence has helped Setsuna come into his own, and the team get busy keeping things on Sumeragi's schedule.

Lint's sorry ass gets demolished in short order, but no sooner has Sumeragi finished her analysis than Lint comes rushing back. He seems determined to die if that's what it takes to keep the Memento Mori firing on schedule, and Sumeragi isn't down with them apples. See, it turns out that Setsuna isn't the only one with the Trans-Am System, as Lint finds out to his immediate cost. The Double-0 Riser gets sent in to strike the final blow, but not quite in time...

The Pillar at the Africa Tower takes a direct hit, and the building starts to collapse. It seems the Federation really is willing to sacrifice the 60,000 souls still inside to protect their own government. Things are going to be

seriously messy at the ground level when the building falls on the surrounding city, and Pang has resigned himself to go down with the proverbial ship. He tells Sergei to get out of the area and tell the world what's happened here, but Sergei won't hear of that. He orders Pang to protect civilians like a real soldier, and THEN die if he must...

#### CHAPTER 33E. Black Avenger

See the other path for Pang's broadcast to the people he's effectively taken hostage. The pilots find themselves in a precarious position, agreeing with Pang's objective but not his methods and facing a stalemate between his forces and Arrows when they reach the Africa Tower. About the only sure thing is Zexis' mandate to keep the civilians safe, by whatever means necessary. Kamon wants to notify Isabelle Cronkite at once, but Crow recommends he not -- unless he wants to put her life in serious jeopardy. Arrows, or rather the people behind them, are proving themselves to be a pretty ruthless bunch, and whatever information Zexis leaks to the press needs to be handled veeeery delicately.

At this rate, word of Pang's exploits won't actually reach the outside world after all. Then again, Schwartz is sure that Pang has thought of this: on every operation they've done together, Pang has shown himself to be clever... and critical of the Federation's leadership. Pang's exploit will have at least 60,000 witnesses in the persons of the Tower's residents, and the longer it takes Arrows to reclaim the place, the more likely the truth will be to come out. Pang seems a) determined to the point of sacrificing himself, and b) very shrewd in his choice of targets.

Only. One. Problem. The dudes running Memento Mori have decided to blow away not only the Orbital Elevator, but all 60,000 of those truth-knowing civilians! There's nothing much the ground forces can do but hope the space forces succeed in heading this calamity off. The commanders meanwhile are analyzing Pang's tactics, realizing that he means to let his "hostages" go before the Tower can be knocked over onto the surrounding buildings. It's hard to believe that Arrows could take out the Orbital Elevator, crucial to the world's supply of resources from space, but that's how desperate they are these days.

Sadly, the space team isn't able to prevent Memento Mori from firing one more shot, damaging the Elevator enough to cause all its external structure to purge. Everything underneath is going to be flattened unless someone can somehow reduce the scrap to harmlessly-small bits. Sumeragi radios to Zexis and Catalon with coordinates for the debris, as the orbital team races to the rescue, and as Zero is about to spring into action word comes in from a different Catalon refugee camp... in an area that's supposed to be uninhabited. That means Sumeragi has omitted it from her directions, and hence that thousands of additional lives are at risk. There's no choice but for the ground force to run to the rescue.

Evacuation begins swiftly and efficiently, but there's a new menace. Two, actually: Invaders, and a shipment of DBs courtesy of Insalaum. They're hoping to take over North Africa with a minimum of fuss, and with the fragments of the Elevator coming in fast there's not much time to defeat the bad guys and save what remaining lives can be salvaged. The camp itself will have to be abandoned.

How does one spell "bad timing"? S-H-I-N D-R-A-G-O-N, showing up at the worst possible moment. The news isn't all bad though, as a black Getter Robo shows up in pursuit. It's Ryouma at long last, who is as surprised to see Saotome alive as Saotome is to see him. Saotome claims that this is

\_not\_ the day they'll settle their score, but vows that one day he and the pilots of Shin Getter will all know the truth of Shin Dragon's evolution.

Shin Dragon runs off, and Ryouma damn near pursues the thing until his one-time teammates persuade him that helping the civilians here is more important than \_maybe\_ averting a larger calamity by running after it. After getting a \_very\_ stern talking-to, Ryouma admits that maybe he's a bit jetlagged after returning from the Shadow Moon (say what?!). In any case, he agrees to pitch in, directing his fury at the bad guys.

The team makes their retreat in good order, sweeping any remaining civilians with them. News of their good works reaches all the way to Schneider, as does Pang's death. Schneider sounds almost regretful that someone more charismatic wasn't at the head of the failed coup, which did genuinely have the potential to sway the whole Federation. He more or less expected this to happen, and if anything is counting his blessings that the damage wasn't worse. Then again, perhaps greater damage would have done the world some good in light of the tragedies yet to come. In any case, there's no evidence left linking Pang to Schneider himself, and Zexis did him the favor of taking out Memento Mori. Arrows' Toromo Bureau will probably respond by hastening their new terror weapon. If only someone could stop them in the meantime... someone like Treize for instance. Schneider himself claims to lack the resolve to confront Arrows directly, seemingly lacking in kingly quality despite being a Prince. And let's not blame Charles for being totally asleep at the switch: Charles, according to Schneider, merely has his finger on a different switch. A switch disconnected from "trivia" like a few tens of kilodeaths...

Akagi is super-furious at the demolition of the refugee camp, whose refugees are now twice evicted from their home and face a very uncertain future under Catalan's care. At least if there was a way to notify the world of this fiasco, it might be for something. F.S. fortunately has announced a plan to use WILL to search for Veda, as the first step towards restoring the free flow of information to the world. If there's a glimmer of hope for now, it comes from the fact that Zexis' name was enough to move some of the regular army to pitch into the relief efforts. Sergei's name came up in relation to the coup, though it seems he mustn't have been one of the actual leaders. Sumeragi is following up on this lead, but at the moment he's presumed dead and Mary isn't likely to take the news well.

Ryouma meanwhile makes his reintroductions, having been gone -- in his timeline -- for merely one week. Talk about jetlag! Ryouma can tell at a glance that Kei is Genki, proving beyond a doubt that this is the real him. After ribbing his old teammates about the fact that they've become, umm, old, he tells everyone what happened when he was caught in the graviton missile blast. His body was wreathed in a mysterious light as Shin Dragon was being tossed between dimensions, a light he now knows to be that of Getter Rays. In an instant, he found himself traveling through space and time, and through the memories of all living things. When he came to, he found himself in the cockpit of a discarded Getter Robo on the Shadow Moon: the Getter graveyard, as it were.

Ryouma himself has no idea how his journey worked, but he's been spending the intervening time cobbling together the most functional Getter he could to make the journey home. Interestingly, the Getter graveyard contained a number of Getters he didn't even recognize, remnants of struggles similar to that they faced against Gaiou from other parallel worlds. Confirmation will be impossible for now, as Ryouma knows of no way to retrace his path to the Shadow Moon itself. Kind of a shame Ryouma wasn't able to garner any more information from his time at the Shadow Moon, but at least he came back in one piece. As Hayato heads back to do captain-type stuff, Ryouma asks him to

radio his thanks to Tielia: the guy's example paved the way for him to not screw up himself this time around.

Ryouma continues reacquainting himself with the team, including the new coterie of Getter pilots. He now knows more or less what Gou is, and asks him to look after Kei in his stead. Meanwhile, Simon remembers Lowgenome's prophecy, and wonders if the "moon" he referred to is actually the Shadow Moon...

#### CHAPTER 33S. Within the Sundering Light

Andrey remembers the leader of the coup as one of his father's friends, always talking about the proper role of the military. Andrey isn't a fan of anyone who would take tens of thousands of people hostage, and isn't exactly thrilled with his father either. He tells Louise the tale of a skirmish between the army and some terrorists when he was young, where his mother's squadron was on the front lines under his father's orders. Those orders were to prioritize the safety of nearby civilians above all else, and led to his mother's squad's destruction. Andrey essentially followed his mother into the army, meaning to somehow prove to his father the error of his ways while bringing about peace, and for that matter Louise can tell a very similar tale.

However that'll have to wait for later, as word of the attack on the Africa Tower comes in. For a change Koorasawar is the rational one, getting them to stop panicking and start preparing to assess the (no doubt horrific) damage from the tower's collapse. This gives Andrey the opening he needs to blame the whole mess on Pang.

What's happening is that the orbital elevator itself has gone into auto-purge mode, cutting itself off from the terminal station in the orbital ring so as not to bring the entire frigging thing crashing to the surface. The external bits will burn up during reentry, but the superstructure underneath will not, meaning complete devastation for a wide radius around the tower. The plan therefore is for Zexis to reenter along with the debris, blowing it into chunks as small as possible.

Amuro hastily fills his teammates in on where he's been. Ribbons, the chief Innovator, leads his army of collaborators from a ginormous spaceship which presumably is no longer where Amuro left it. Many things make sense now, since even with Veda in hand there's no way Ribbons could alter the course of world events without folks like Homer Katagiri and Lord Delmeier. Amuro wasn't allowed to explore much of the ship, whose size rivals a small space colony and yet is concealed with Stealth, but the whole contraption seems to fit into the Innovators' notion that they're carrying out Ioria's plans.

That's just oh so joyous for the CBs, who would love to prove that not everything goes the Innovators' way. Reducing the damage from all those fragments sounds like a good start. Amuro and Camille however are more interested in Setsuna's awakening as a Newtype. That it coincided with Setsuna getting the Double-0 Riser and its Twin Drive explains to Amuro why Ribbons wants Twin Drive so much. Camille hasn't shared his suspicions with anyone but Ian (inventor of Twin Drive), and Amuro thinks that's for the best: the best thing either of them can do right now is keep Setsuna safe. The question now becomes, where the hell is Char now that this world's people are starting the change as well?

Even Mary is lending her skills to the battle, well, not really "battle" so much as humanitarian action. Allelujah is a bit worried at first, but respects her wishes to help out. Watching this, Shinn remembers the debacle



with Stella -- he wants to believe Allelujah can protect his beloved in ways Shinn could not. Rolan too has a promise he's in danger of breaking: his promise to Diana not to fight again.

Only airborne units can participate in this non-battle, and there are a hell of a lot of bits and pieces to shoot. As in, the Skill Point asks you to shoot down at least 100 with the PCs. They've got to be contained before they become unstoppable...

The plot dictates that there's more fragments than the team can (trivially) shoot down, so Sumeragi gets on the radio and broadcasts a plea for help to all channels. Pretty simple: pitch in and help save tens of mega-lives. The first to show up is a very unwanted guest: Marilyn and her DB hordes, intending to crush Zexis while they're distracted. Soon after however, Sergei and Milliard show up, as well as Andrey and friends. It seems that for once all the humans are actually working together, MUCH to Marilyn's annoyance.

As the fragments continue to fall, Rolan makes the fateful decision to unseal the Moonlight Moth. When he promised Diana not to use it ever again, he never expected something like this going on. He says he's prepared to receive whatever punishment Diana might hand down the next time he sees her, even as the other pilots marvel at this newfound attack. Allelujah has the strangest feeling that he's seen the Moonlight Moth before, and even weirder, Setsuna feels like he hears someone... singing!

Diana appears on the screen, actually praising Rolan for having the resolve to break the seal. Entrusting the Turn A to him was clearly the right decision! Apparently Diana must be in this world, and close by withal, but there's still more fragments to take care of before any more happy reunions can take place.

It turns out that Marilyn is just here to gauge Zexis' strength for Insalaum: she is not intending to stick around and genuinely settle the score with Crow today. Pity.

By Zexis standards, this was a lengthy operation [more than four Turns, that is]. The damage has been kept to a minimum, but that still means the lives of all those in the Tower itself were lost. Zechs is so infuriated at Arrows' tactics -- really, the Innovators' tactics -- that he flies off without saying a word. Sergei knows what's on Zechs' mind, and what's on Mary's mind that she opted to fly instead of watch the tragedy from the sidelines.

Pang is still alive, and Sergei tells him to accept that this is what his actions have wrought. Could it be that Pang's sponsor expected this to happen?? Wait, sponsor, as in, he wasn't the one behind all of this? At the sight of Pang's mech, Andrey orders Louise to follow him while he orders the ringleader mech to stand still. Pang recognizes Andrey's voice, and the shock of realizing it's him causes Andrey to reflexively fire before Pang can finish warning Sergei about someone named "Sch-". Hmm.....

Sergei tries to get Andrey to wait, but Andrey goes crazy enough to actually kill the guy in a fit of passion. Sergei's apology to his son falls on deaf ears, and his last words are to tell his long-dead wife Holly he's sorry. Mary, it must be said, doesn't take the sight very well, especially after Louise keeps Allelujah's mech from intervening.

[See the other path for Schneizer's chat with Kanon.]

Miraculously the falling debris didn't actually injure anyone, but it sure

pummeled the hell out of the town. Poor Marina had been trying to seek solace in Africa after losing Azadistan, but that hasn't quite, um, panned out. Lacus' best recommendation for helping heal the hearts of the people is to sing, and as fate would have it Marina has already composed a song from hearing the children at play. Marina's already sung the song once, and Lacus credits it with calming the nerves of the refugee children when the fragments were falling. Marina's far from confident that a peace-monger like herself has any use in a world where everyone's at war, but Lacus assures her there is. In fact, she wants Marina to sing of peace in her stead, since the conclusion her travels here have led her to is that she, Lacus Clyne, must sing songs of battle. This resolve is what Diana's been waiting for, and in turn Sandman and Fudou have been waiting on the both of them. As they leave, Lacus thinks to Kira that she's about to join him on the path to the battlefield, a road she'll gladly walk if there is truly no other way to win back that which is precious.

Poor Mary is catatonic from the shock of seeing her surrogate father killed, and the rest of the team aren't much better off. Yeah they were all victorious and whatnot, but nobody sane would pop the champagne with a city of rubble all around. Setsuna takes it as a chance to reflect at how bad the distortion of the world has gotten, and how the CBs are partially to blame. The rest of the team leaves him some time to himself...

...allowing the plot to send in Ali, who is bodyguarding Ribbons. Ribbons greets "Solan Ibrahim", saying that he remembers meeting Setsuna before even if Setsuna doesn't remember it from his side. It was back in Cursis, and Ribbons was watching a little boy running in panic... from the cockpit of a Gundam. Talk about raping one's childhood: Setsuna must now come to terms with the fact that the 0 Gundam that started his whole shit was actually piloted by the very same master villain who's been ruining the world.

Ribbons claims that he disobeyed the order to remove all witnesses when he saw how Setsuna was gazing at the Gundam, and claims to have manipulated Veda to make Setsuna a CB. If Ribbons figured that would make Setsuna somehow shocked enough to just hand over the 00, he's going to be a tad disappointed. Ali, true to his bodyguard role, manages to shoot Setsuna, though he fails to score a direct hit. The question is, why would he be helping the Innovators?

Ali claims that any self-respecting merc goes where the money is, and claims that Setsuna could never understand his real motivation. Lockon runs up at this point, making Ribbons decide to withdraw for now. All the scores to settle will have to wait for another day. Setsuna collapses, and it's all Lockon can do to rush him back to safety.

Elsewhere, Milliard runs into Quatro returning from shooting down some fragments on his own. Quatro's been aware of someone tailing him for some time, and that person emerges and names himself "Carns", from a group of Colonial freedom fighters known as the "White Fang". He wants their help to revolutionize the world, pointing to this latest mess as proof that Arrows must go. In particular, he wants them and their Gundams, symbols of resistance that they are, to accompany him to space...

#### CHAPTER 34E. Reunion With the Dead

The damage from the collapsed orbital elevator may satisfy the best-case scenario, but it's still not good or satisfying in any way. The blow to global logistics and the environmental disaster are bad enough, but the loss of life is what has F.S. really steamed. Among the group bathed in the holographic glow of Dragons' Hive's control room is Eiyda, who apparently got herself fired from the Twinkle Project (the press euphemistically refer to that

as "graduating"). Not that Eiyda did something wrong to get fired: it's apparent to anyone not blinded by the idol stardom that Grace is increasingly turning Ranka's songs to military ends. And Sheryl, who's still battling some mystery medical complaint, is being treated like a third-class citizen at best by her manager, which was probably the final straw for Eiyda. She doesn't regret telling Grace to go fuck herself, but she'd be lying if she denied being a little lonely now.

She's also more than a bit worried about Ranka, who is now effectively shouldering the entire weight of the Twinkle Project herself. F.S. and Tanaka don't like how someone aboard the Frontier Fleet seems to be monopolizing the newly-discovered "Fold Wave" research. Sayuri is hopeful that Grace will return the Project to normal once the Vajra are repelled, and thinks that Eiyda will even get her position back. Kishimo, an adjutant sent from the Federation's Far East branch to help Sayuri, is far from impressed with Eiyda, and nobody else on the team seems to like him either.

Sayuri's big contribution is helping WILL in the search for Veda: it's uber clear that stopping Arrows is a top-priority item. If the good guys can steal Veda back from whoever's got it, Arrows will abruptly become the "emperor with no clothes" for all the world to see. And that in turn will let Ootsuka's new operation proceed, which can't happen a moment too soon given all the factors threatening the world. Among them is the Dimension Warp Zone, which new research suggests is a true catastrophe in waiting.

If its unstable dimensional walls collapse, there'll be a... hole in the dimensional manifold, with consequences only God could guess at. It's a good thing then that both Dancougars are coming home. Sayuri is especially happy to be seeing her old friend Sara, who once saved her when a man assaulted her in their old hometown.

Once the banter ends, WILL gets down to business in cyberspace. Apparently he's facing multiple opponents who want to delete him, including Moon WILL. WILL abruptly halts, which brings Dragons' Hive itself to a standstill. As the commanders frantically try to switch over to subsystems, they detect an enemy force headed their way: the Zeravia! Eiyda will have to spring into action to defend the place, and since none of the hatches open she's got to blast her own way out.

It seems the calm, confident idol star has been hiding a she-wolf, and this is as a good a time as any for a little howling. F.S. orders Sayuri to get busy resurrecting WILL while Eiyda buystime.

The original Dancougar folks show up in due course, followed in short order by Zexis. It's a rowdy reunion, especially since Eiyda isn't at all shy about expressing her attraction to Johnny, but Moon WILL doesn't give the team much time to relax. It's been revived by the Dark Power, and is in control of the Original Dancougar. Moon WILL is all proud of shutting down Earth WILL, and talks a big game, but the original Dancougar squad shuts down that noise in a hurry. That Moon WILL needed help from this Dark Power bullshit proves he's smalltime, the proverbial "fox pretending to be a tiger".

On the other hand, Moon WILL does have an army, including a bunch of tough mecha laden with explosives. Those are being sent to Dragons' Hive, which Moon WILL figures will make an easy target. ...Which makes it odd that he doesn't stick around to gloat, but hey. The enemy won't have an easy time punching through, with Dancougar Nova Max God and Final Dancougar both opposing them.

Victory comes easily, but the real problem is resurrecting WILL. Several things are wrong with WILL's easy defeat, including the fact that Dragons' Hive has strong protections designed specifically to avoid WILL losing in cyberspace. F.S. questions Sayuri, whose idea this operation was and who was tasked with supporting WILL's online search. Tanaka explains nicely that this is all rather irregular, but then Sayuri's "assistant" aims a kick at Tanaka's head (which he dodges). It seems he's the one at fault here, and he grabs Sayuri and runs for the hangar.

Kishimo is presumed to have threatened Sayuri into messing with WILL, and the two of them are nowhere to be found on radar. According to Ootsuka, Kishimo was never the kind of person to do anything like this, opening the possibility that this was either an imposter, or the real Kishimo but being controlled by someone. That "someone" would presumably be Moon WILL, who's cooked up the really nasty virus that's got Earth WILL in a cyber-coma.

The problem isn't really Moon WILL though. Even the brash Shinobu felt the same thing Hyou did: when Moon WILL appeared, an even darker presence was somewhere lurking behind him. It was almost like that was the real "Dark Power" or whatever, and Moon WILL was following its orders out of fear. In any case, there's no way to analyze all the data Dancougar brought back from the Dimension Warp Zone, so it's agreed that it will travel with Zexis. That's great news to Aoi, who maybe has a bit of a crush on Shinobu...

One other thing. Ruu asks Sara if she's ever met Kishimo before (she hasn't) and tells her that Sayuri scolded the guy to his face in front of everyone. That shocks Sara, who never would have guessed Sayuri capable of something so bold. Ruu at first put this down to commanderly concern for a subordinate, but the more she looked at Sayuri, the more afraid she got -- as though Sayuri was becoming more and more... not "her".

Actually, there's yet one more thing. The revolutionary group calling themselves "White Fang" has taken over the Arrows space fortress Barge by force, and is broadcasting an open message to the world. That could only happen if they somehow defeated the Innovators' worldwide information control. On the broadcast is Milliard, disgruntled about Oz and Arrows' repeated attempts to control the very soul of the Colonies. He's here in the interest of true independence, saying that it's plain that space and Earth cannot coexist. He therefore declares war on the Earth Federation, using his real name, which is sure to cause more than a little unrest on the Earth.

Except that there's one OTHER other thing, which as a rhetorical device is starting to get really tiresome. It seems that two new ZONES have materialized at the same time, one in the Pacific and one in the Dark Continent. Is the end near?

#### CHAPTER 34. The White Fang

Flash back to war-torn Cursis, where a desperate little boy beheld something out-of-this-world: a God in all its might. That might clove the battlefield in two, saving his life. It was Setsuna's goal to be one of these gods, these Gundams, and change the world. But there are no gods in this world after all, least of all his savior that day. Has his whole life been a mistake?

Maybe not, says Lockon, appearing before his old friend. The only thing the past can change is how one experiences the present, nothing more. The question is the future, and if Lockon has a wish it's for Setsuna to change that future in his stead. He's sure Setsuna has it in him.

Unfortunately, another thing Setsuna has in him is Pseudo-GN Particles, borne by Ali's bullet. They're messing with his cellular metabolism, producing the same sort of symptoms Lasse suffers from. And like Lasse, Setsuna won't be long for this world, a truth Sumeragi is counting on Setsuna to come to terms with. Lasse has recently been pondering Holland, whose will to survive and in particular to protect the woman he loves was strong enough that he contemplated destroying the whole world to make it happen. Lasse doesn't have a girlfriend, but he means to learn from Holland's determination -- there are some things you can't steel yourself for until you know you won't have a tomorrow. Having said that, Lasse doesn't intend to kick the bucket till he sees the world changed. Hopefully the same can be said of Setsuna...

Elsewhere, Anew tries to get Lockon to talk about his brother, still a touchy subject for the sniper. He recommends she go toss Crow a poker chip or something: the guy is sure to spill all sorts of juicy stuff. She wants to know Lyle's own memories, and he claims to basically have none. See, he deliberately went to boarding schools ever since Junior High, preferring to run rather than be constantly compared to his gifted brother. He may have followed him into the Gundam Meister profession, but he's got a very different motivation. He asks her about her family, and she finds herself quite stymied, and then relieved when he declines to press the issue.

This is the point when Felt radios in, immediately embarrassed to have interrupted the two in bed. Unfortunately there's an emergency: the Barge, Arrow's space fortress for observing the Colonies, is under attack. This could be really bad news...

Tsubarof can't believe his Mobile Dolls are getting taken out so easily, but he probably ought to worry more about his own safety. Oh, except Milliard won't give him that chance. Carns praises Milliard for his swift work, and gloats over how the Barge's factory facilities will greatly enhance the White Fang's warpower. Milliard then gets busy delivering his declaration of war on the Earth Federation, believing it'll have an effect even if the Feds manage to squelch the information from reaching the world at large. Quatro observes that Milliard's doubts seem to have all vanished, which explains how he's managed to master the mech Treize gave him. That's more than Quatro can say...

[See the other path for Zechs' declaration.]

It turns out that Arrows' info-doctoring is not working today, and Rijeene professes complete astonishment. Ribbons thinks this is an act, that he and Liu Mei have been scheming behind his back all this time, and Rijeene stoutly denies everything. Ribbons smirks that he seems to be telling the truth, which does raise the interesting question of just who could be behind it. The fact of the matter is that Ribbons is starting to run a little low on pawns, and he decides that the time has come to silence Zexis. He wants "her" used, setting in motion a little plan he's devised to distract the masses. He thinks Amuro and Setsuna are about to learn the true terror of the Innovators.

The G-boys view Milliard's announcement with no small amount of anxiety: for someone who seems to want the colonies to prosper, he's picked about the most reliable way possible to plunge them back into war. Of course, the lonely struggle carried out by the G-boys has just become moot, and it's not surprising that Hihiro and the others must now view Milliard as their enemy. Getting rid of Arrows: good. Getting civilians dragged into the conflict: bad. And like, just who outflanked the Innovators to let the declaration get through to the world anyway?

Just then Mary walks onto the scene, sort of. It's "sort of" because she's now back to calling herself Soma Pieres -- and not just calling, but being. She

is very clear on one point: regardless of whatever the hell these White Fang yahoos are up to, Arrows is going down, by her own hand. Allelujah is all with the recriminations for letting her fight after promising not to, but Lockon tells him to get his shit together and actually respect the fact that his woman has opted to fight of her own volition. Amuro adds that if he's worried about her, the best thing he can do now is fight to keep her safe: she is going to be in serious danger so long as she fights out of hatred. Amuro is really thinking about Char, who by now ought to understand the syllogism that fear^Wwar leads to hate, and hate leads to \_suffering\_.

Poor Saji wonders aloud how one can eliminate hate, and Camille (only half-sarcastically?) says that if someone figured \_that\_ out, the world would already be a more peaceful place. Well then, says Setsuna as he comes over, it's high time to seek that method. It seems Setsuna has changed yet again, no hesitation left in his eyes or his walk. Setsuna knows that Saji is really thinking about Louise, and that's precisely the kind of understanding people need to take the next step. Amuro knows this firsthand.

Saji's greatest fear is that the rising tide of hatred will eventually drown his beloved, but Setsuna tells him that battle isn't just about destruction. It can be about creation, and that's what the Gundams are for. And if Saji does nothing more than keep crying out to Louise (and, keeping the Twin Drive stable along the way), so be it. Hihiro seems pretty impressed, figuring that Setsuna could even master the Zero in his current frame of mind. But in fact, Setsuna's got the Double-0 instead.

...And that's fortunate, since White Fang have just sent a force down to the surface in an apparent attack on the South American Galleon base. It would be really nice if the White Fang and Arrows simply killed each other off, but their battle is sure to claim the whole world as collateral damage if it lasts long. Thus, Zexis has to put a stop to it: simple, really.

Quatro has been leading the attack, and in short order the base falls. Quatro however isn't happy, sensing from somewhere nearby a sinister Pressure that reminds him of the Fortified Humans. That would be Ribbons, who figures that Quatro is \_so\_ much more awesomer than Amuro and decides to spectate on what's about to unfold.

Zexis' pilots aren't happy to see Quatro here, especially in command of legions of Mobile Dolls. Jeffrey tries to do things the easy way, requesting parlay with Quatro and White Fang, but Quatro says that Milliard's already decided that the world doesn't have that much time left. Quatro himself refuses to either endorse or repudiate that view, but he does say that Arrows must be stopped and that Zexis, effective as they are, are after all just a bunch of warriors. They lack vision, which Treize and Milliard clearly have if they're prepared to make sacrifices to reach their ultimate goals. Neither Amuro nor Camille will stand for Quatro plunging the world into war as the way to make it change: he, it seems, is drowning in an overabundance of idealism. Maybe a Fin Funnel up the ass will serve as a life preserver?

Lockon wants to get the battle going, but Crow cautions him that there's two kinds of people who would dare to go into battle in an all-gold mech. Type one are the utter berks and rice-people, with a \$10k car and a \$50k spoiler. Type two are the Bruce McLarens. Which do \_you\_ suppose White Fang would put in forward command? Lockon thanks him for the warning, and checks with Anew that everything is in order. She seems to be momentarily distracted, but Lockon gets her back on task by telling her he loves her. On the open channel. Bummer for the other tomcats, good for him. Now start the f00king battle already!

Camille has very interesting words for Quatro, telling him that he'd go along with any decision Quatro truly committed himself to. But Quatro is currently vacillating, and that's the last thing Camille wants to see. Quatro replies that he's always been a small man, unworthy of Camille's hopes, but Camille shouts that that's just Quatro deluding himself. He'd better not keep Camille disappointed! Amuro has fewer words for his longtime rival: he intends to snap Quatro out of his stupor by force (remember: Fin Funnels are lighter than water!)

It almost comes as a surprise to Quatro that Zexis can kick his AND his squadron's ass in less than 1.5 full turns. Ribbons reveals himself by saying that Zexis aren't the sort of people you can defeat by half-measures. He calls out to Anew to "awaken". She stands up from her operators' seat and begins firing her sidearm around the bridge, her personality changing in an instant to that of an Innovator. She steals a shuttle and takes off with full readouts on the CBs mecha, inviting Lockon to come with her and see the world revolutionized.

Lockon now has a really tough call to make. Can he bring himself to shoot her down? Why is he here in the first place, exactly? He cannot, in fact, and that fact makes him furious with himself. Ribbons tells Amuro not to blame himself too much: Anew only recently awoke to her Innovatorship, just like Revive. They're two of a kind, and that gives Revive the ability to link her consciousness to Anew's. He intends to force Anew into battle as an Innovator, but for now he even more intends to take the data and bail.

Anew and Ali remain behind, and NOW, Amuro yells, Quatro's seen the face of the true enemy. More White Fang forces arrive, led by Milliard in person, determined to inflict a little pain on the world to make it change. Oh, like Anew changed? Char ought to know fucking well that atrocities like her are what happens when people start fighting. What to choose though -- to be Quatro and join Zexis, or to be Char and bring the fight to the world at large?

He chooses "Quatro", stepping away from command to help save the world as a single soldier. He doesn't deny that Treize and Milliard have a point, but what the world needs now, he reckons, isn't sacrifice. That makes them enemies, and Ali can't wait for them to shut their yap and resume fighting. He's welcome to fight all he wants, sniffs Anew, while she attacks the immobilized Ptolemeios. Lockon tries to get his shit together fast, but Setsuna knows it's too much for him. He promises to take Anew down instead, telling Lockon to hate him in Anew's place. He knows that whatever reason Lockon has for fighting the Innovators, he's got an even stronger reason for not fighting at least this one. Lockon grits his teeth and snarls that he'll do this, as a CB and member of Zexis.

A lot is at stake here, since both Hiiro and Milliard think they're fighting on Rilina's behalf. There's the love that Anew and Lockon share. And of course, there's Setsuna's showdown with Ali. Of course all this turns pretty acrimonious when the principals actually fight each other.

Mr. Bushido shows up at one point, all talking about how his mech is now the equal of Zexis' and that the battle will be decided by "resolve". When his ass gets demolished however his tune changes to "must... improve... mech..." and makes one wonder why he even bothered showing up in the first place.

Lyle however is able to overcome the acrimony [if you've met all the right conditions that is; check <http://www14.atwiki.jp/srwz2nd2/pages/14.html> for all the conditions to meet]. It's always been his policy to go out and take what he wants, and what he wants more than anything is to make Anew his

lady once more -- Innovator or not.

Ribbons however controls her again, and she starts blasting Lyle. It looks like things are grim, and Lyle will have to ask Setsuna to step in after. But then Anew is able to speak to him in her own voice, glad in a way that she's an Innovator insofar as it led her to meet him. They truly did understand each other, and that's a tall order in this world. This brief moment gives Setsuna a chance to aim, and god damn it's a good shot: disabling her mech and cracking open the cockpit without actually killing her. Setsuna has Lockon carry her unconscious form to safety, noting to Saji that he's had a very good marksman to use as an example. Like he was saying earlier: fighting can actually do more than just destroy.

Kicking Milliard's ass isn't enough to shake his resolve to take out the Federation, and he wisely retreats rather than fall here. Back in the Cinq Kingdom, Dorothy is busy with her favorite activity, namely tormenting Rilina with how seemingly crappy this Absolute Pacifism thing is. This time, it's the fact that her own brother has started a world war. But not to worry, Dorothy has a way Rilina can do something about it -- it'll just take a little preparation. That means phoning up Delmeier, and Dorothy is soooo eager to see what Rilina chooses to do next.

Lockon is more grateful to Setsuna than he can ever express, now that Anew is back safely in the infirmary. Setsuna says levelly that he did nothing more than save two of his comrades, which Mary will surely be glad to hear. Allelujah says that there need be no fear of a relapse: he's got a way to shield the Ptolemy from Neural Wave interference: Soma's recommendation actually, based on her previous experiences in the HPL. She'll have to wear a small helmetized version like Magneto till the full shield is built, but that's about it. Holy fuck what a good day. Aren't you glad you gave Setsuna all those kills now?

Meanwhile, Quatro has finally\_taken\_off\_his\_goddamn\_sunglasses to face his fellow Gundam pilots. The longer the war rages, the more smiles will become tears of pain: normal people aren't able to bear the strain of all this fighting. That's where the Gundam pilots come in, and Amuro for one welcomes him back as a trusted friend. Quatro warns that Zechs has completely cast aside all hesitation, and will do whatever it takes to win, but Hiirou isn't fazed. If "Zechs" can pilot the Epyon, he'll just counter with the Zero. Piece of cake-ish.

"NOT SO FAST", as they say in college football. Two ZONEs have just showed up simultaneously. Is the end near?

#### CHAPTER 35E. Breaking With Yesterday

Has anyone been wondering where Carlos went? Apparently he's got a new person he's "sponsoring", and that person is obviously Gaiou even if they won't put his name into the text box. Gaiou's future is so bright, he's got to wear shades -- well actually, it's so he doesn't make passing little kids cry. He is not, however, above scarfing down hot dogs: fast food, to him, tastes like peace. Only outside of war can the young and happy afford chow like that, and once the hot dogs run out the two men head off "wherever the wind blows them", in Gaiou's words. Which is totally like, neither ominous nor cryptic, or anything.

Meanwhile, Palace Insalaum is flying over the Indian Ocean. Unblown thinks Yuusar ought to go into battle himself to motivate the troops, and to Yuusar that sounds like a transparent attempt to get him to go die in battle. Umm,



yikes? In the process of going from Prince Whatever to Prince Oh No They Didn't, he's figured out that Unblown has tainted her soul with all sorts of forbidden stuff (and at his bidding, too!), and now wants him dead and the Seiouki for her own. Well she won't get to own it, but he will loan her the car keys as part of taking "responsibility" for Insalaum's revival. That's the reason he's had Wayne and Marilyn go and erect two more ZONES, and when Unblown still sounds dubious, he tells her she ought to trust her own Luke Adamons and the Knight of Knights a bit more. He's got her on a very short leash these days...

The Earth half of Zexis has been reading reports of their comrade's battle with White Fang with much interest. On the one hand, anyone who stands up to Arrows deserves some credit. On the other hand, provoking world war is a suicidal act for mankind as a whole. It's a level of stupidity that seems beneath Zechs/Milliard, and both Zero and Toudou suspect that some deeper purpose has put Milliard in command of the White Fang. In any case, the other half of Zexis is tied up battling them, leaving this half to do something about the ZONE in the Pacific. Assuming they can eliminate it, there's still one more on the Dark Continent... and Crow has already made peace with the probably need to sacrifice himself just to deal with the first one. To do that however, the team will need to get in close -- no mean feat with all the DBs on patrol.

In particular, the Luke Adamon will require some precision sniping, which in the absence of Michelle and Lockon will have to fall to Gain and Dolly (who, she claims, has a sniper's soul!). Crow has been impressing a lot of people these days, seemingly more at peace and less obsessed with every last penny than he was before getting the Re-Blaster. Crow is still a fairly young guy, but he's willing to let the kids think of him as an "old man" since he expects to have to entrust his wellbeing to them when he stops the ZONE.

The ZONE is stationed on a small island in the middle of nowhere, and the immediate question is why. Probably not fear of Federation counterattack. There must be some logic behind where the ZONES go, and if the team could just figure it out they might be able to anticipate Insalaum's strategies better. Seeing that the Luke Adamon isn't protected by dimensional barriers, Crow decrees that the team needs to take it down first.

BUT, it's emitting an unknown energy signature, and immediately Crow is plunged into some alternate state of consciousness where he (thinks) he hears Esther. Why, oh why did she have to become a DB? Why couldn't the Firebugs have arrived sooner and saved her hometown? Net result: low morale for the team! That's the bad guys' cue to show up, and Wayne announces that he's inherited the title and mecha of the Knight of Knights after Geraud's death. He actually apologizes to Crow for what he's got to do to win, which includes using his D Extractor to enhance the trauma within Zexis' pilots' hearts.

Zexis' pilots show extraordinary resilience to Insalaum's evil, but Crow has to admit things can't go on much longer like this. Fortunately they don't have to, as Asakim shows up out of the blue. He is not here to devour Crow just yet, but that doesn't stop the Luke Adamon from cowering in fear. Wayne reckons that anyone who can cow one of those must be an even bigger monster, and Asakim sniffs that at the very least, he's stronger than Wayne is. Wayne tries to put it to the test and gets taught a very harsh lesson.

Quoth Asakim: No deviant's Sphere, and especially not someone like Wayne is now, could hope to stand against him. Wayne has no choice but to exercise the better part of valor, and Asakim smirks that the new Knight of Knights is way too much of a simpleton for this job. It's that IQ deficit that makes him doubt his job, and it's those doubts that make him lose like a whipped

cur. Crow at least manages to parse this: what Wayne really wants it to fight Crow fair and square.

So uhh, why is Asakim here again? If it's to go after Crow, the other Zexis pilots will totally try to take him on. Asakim nearly busts up laughing at that: it seems like everyone here has teh st00pid today. No way a bunch of Jerry's Kids could hope to bring out Crow's true power, is there? Maybe not, but Crow at least can manage that himself, as he demonstrates by trouncing the pesky Luke Adamon. There's actually a very valuable lesson to be learned here: if there's trauma in your life, attack it at the root.

In other words, the team needs to fight these monsters not with their weapons, but with their hearts. ExACTly, smiles Asakim. The question now is whether Crow's mundane companions can pull it off. They certainly think they can, and Asakim even offers to help out. Not that that'll win him any points with the team, but it's better than nothing. It quickly becomes clear why the Luke Adamon is afraid of Asakim. When it tried to read his heart in search of trauma, all it found was darkness in his past, and the expectation of more darkness to come.

With all the Insalaum forces dealt with, it's ZONE time. Crow prepares to make his sacrifice, but Asakim isn't prepared to let him "have"(??) it. He's confident that he'll be reborn within the flow of the Origin Row, and leaves Crow with a word of caution: his Sphere is starting to drive him. Is that a genuine smile we see on Asakim's face as he does the deed??

Certainly none of the commanders can fathom what would drive Asakim to sacrifice himself for the world's sake. Whatever his reason, it's very fortunate he intervened and thereby kept Crow in circulation. Zero is adamant that it will be up to Crow himself whether to sacrifice himself to silence the Dark Continent's ZONE, but maybe with Zexis all back together now some new counter-measure can be found. Just then word comes in from Kevin McLaren, who claims to have some new information to pass along to Zexis. He seems to have a bone to pick with the prince, and at the recommendation of the others Zero allows the meeting to happen.

The pilots too are pondering Asakim's uncharacteristic act. Quatro's theory is that Asakim judged that Crow would become eternally out of his reach if he were the one to seal the ZONE, though Amuro can't see that that would be enough reason to feed himself into the meat grinder. This is the point where the pilots tell each other what's been going on on the other path, as always. Lockon will be bumming hardcore, due to Anew being an Innovator "Manchurian Candidate" and Setsuna having no choice but to shoot her. At least she told him with her last breath that she was glad they met. Lockon now has a better understanding why Crow fights, and vows to blow a hole right through everything that's distorting this world.

Anyway, time to go do something about that final ZONE and bring Insalaum's ambitions to naught. The question is what Asakim's final words mean -- how is it that the Sphere would be driving Crow?

#### CHAPTER 35S. Struggle for Tomorrow

[See the other path for Carlos' little chat with the hotdog-loving Gaiou, and Yuusar's chastening of Unblown.]

Saji has become a total Setsuna fan after his latest exploits. Unfortunately he'll have to spend a little time away from his newfound idol, since Lockon has something important to tell Setsuna alone. Lockon is now in deadly earnest

about fighting the Innovators: not as a member of the CBs, or Catalon, or Zexis, but as himself. For the moment, that means helping get rid of this damn ZONE thing by doing what he does best: sniping.

The other pilots are busy gossiping about the doings on the other path, and in the Twinkle Project. Alto's heard nothing from either of the idol singers, despite repeated emails, and frankly he's getting a bit worried. The biggest worry is the ZONE, however, and the fact that Crow will probably have to sacrifice himself to stop it. First the team has to physically reach it, and then shoot down the Luke Adamon.

The battle is on, and if you rescued Anew she's back on the bridge and ready to rock. They'd love to know the logic behind where the ZONEs get emplaced, and wish they didn't have to deal with its guardian. As on the other path, everyone starts out all traumatized and unable to muster much of a fight. This is basically the same mission as the other path, and probably trickier because this path is stocked with mincing real-robot types.

After the battle the commanders have the same conference as on the other side. The pilots too get reacquainted with each other, and Crow gets to ponder Asakim's same cryptic statement about the Sphere beginning to "drive" him...

## CHAPTER 36. Accelerating World

[Happy though I was to save Anew, I kept the Earth route.]

Kevin's initial information isn't exactly news: the ZONEs are giant strategic weapons, from what a friend of his has been able to eavesdrop from Unblown. Kevin sees Unblown as a traitor who's sacrificed Insalaum for the saker of her accursed Dimensional Science, and furthermore blames Yuusar himself as a co-conspirator. He claims that many in Insalaum have had it with Yuusar's use of Gaiou's attack as cover for killing the previous king, and for converting the people into his personal arsenal. He wants the whole dynasty ousted.

He claims that the ZONEs are a system for accumulating Dimensional Energy for use in directly attacking this world's nations, via something he calls the "Dimensional Overload Bomb". This munition causes a local Quake, the result of which is the superimposition of another dimension's copy of that locale with the target. Result: utter annihilation. The fourth ZONE is already busily charging up the DOB, and it would be really nice if there were some way to stop it.

As it happens, there is. That unbreachable energy shield around it isn't as inexhaustible as it looks, and a series of sufficiently powerful attacks should be enough to breach it. "Sufficiently" powerful amounts to Zexis' full arsenal, but it's a better plan than just sacrificing Crow to neutralize the darn thing. Sumeragi asks Kevin if he's actually their ally, and he admits that it's a tough question. The Earth's greatest power, the Federation, runs counter to his ideas of justice -- but Zexis themselves seem to be on the level. He agrees to research ways of freeing up the Zexis members currently tied up in neutralizing the other ZONEs and takes his leave.

Not the world's most trustworthy person, in Zero's view, but as he's Zexis' only source of information there's little option but to trust at least his latest info. As luck would have it, battle has begun in the vicinity of the fourth ZONE -- though dimensional distortion prevents confirmation of precisely who is fighting who. Whoever it is, it seems like Zexis' big chance!

Well, sort of. It turns out that Zexis isn't the only thing in this world capable of overwhelming a ZONE's defenses. Gaiou (remember him?) can do it too, as he demonstrates to an astonished Marilyn. Not good, he says, to let children play with toys that dangerous. When she tries to sic the Adamons on him, Gaiou just smirks before blowing them away in an instant. His view is that nobody who would sic such perverse weapons on him has any right to call him a monster, and proves it by trashing the Luke Adamon for good measure.

Marilyn demands to know who the hell he is, and for a moment he seems to be considering giving her his real name. Instead however, he smirks and names himself Gaiou, Lord of Destruction. The other Arcsabers know that that means they should be very afraid (as though the destruction of the ZONE didn't do that to begin with), but Marilyn doesn't give a good goddamn. She wants this dude dead, and is especially annoyed when he starts ignoring her. Gaiou notes that the "wind has shifted", and in short order Zexis appears. Marilyn has no choice but to retreat, yelling that Gaiou is going to pay for messing up her face like this. Yeah, we'll see if Marilyn has it in her.

For now though, Zexis are astounded to see Gaiou still alive. It's taken him some time to get his powers back after their last battle, which to him was a lot of fun. It dawns on Zexis that the ZONE's lens is cracked, and Gaiou grins that he needed something to test his might on. Fearing the return of the Imperium, Zexis get ready to rumble until Carlos shows up. He claims to be Gaiou's "manager" (of sorts), and tells them that at the very least Gaiou has no intention of fighting them now. Gaiou adds that Zexis probably has better things to do than play with him, what with the universe shaking and all. Cue a giant Quake, probably triggered by the ZONE's destruction. Gaiou muses that "they" have gone and done it this time, but of course he won't elaborate to Zexis now. He merely looks forward to their next battle, and vanishes.

It seems the Quake has struck the Dimension Warp Zone, and with Hayato staying behind to investigate the other ZONES, most of Zexis rush into space. Sure enough, there is a dimensional hole to be seen in space, and Lord only knows where it leads to. From this "Abyss" come a bunch of bad guys who've got to be working for the people Diana's been after, and the first thing they do is threaten Diana's contingent. Time for the royal guard to earn its paychecks, and for Wits and Roaby's solo journeys in this world to reach their "climax".

It seems Lacus and Diana haven't been idle all this time -- they've had a little experiment going, the result of which is the arrival of the Eternal. AND Jamir and Enil, who've tagged along to find out what's become of all the missing ZEUTH members. Fudou's filled them in already (back in their own world, meaning Fudou is pan-dimensional too...) about the Insalaum folks and their plan to bring war to this world, so there's nothing to do but fight the pesky DBs.

The next menace to show up is a bevy of Mobile Dolls, apparently made in this world. Hot on their heels is Zexis, who are very pleasantly surprised to see their long-lost friends on the scene. What Diana, Lacus and friends have actually been doing is tracking down the real bad guys. No, the REAL real bad guys, who seem to have both DBs and Mobile Dolls on their payroll AND were the ones who made this dimensional hole. Margret's been doing the same, and since one of those bad guys is on hand, she takes a potshot at him.

The target is none other than Eim -- back with a whole new pack of lies. First he claims to be his own brother (like Lockon), then admits that he somehow hoodwinked even Asakim himself in order to take his plans to the "next level". Was the whole "losing the ability to speak" business just an act? Eim's coy about this, but Margret isn't coy about laying blame for

Unblown's misbehavior at his door. If not for Eim, Unblown would never have figured out enough about Dimensional Science to become a menace to South Central, nor would she have drunk gin and juice in the hood.

Hell, even this world's Mobile Dolls are based on the ones from ZEUTH's world, and Eim's the person who forked over the plans to Oz and Arrows. Eim even impersonated one of the Arcsabers along the way -- one the team knows well: Kevin McLaren! It seems Eim wields the same level of Dimensional Power-ed disguise skills that Asakim has, and Crow is faced with the uncomfortable realization that he's nowhere caught up to Eim in terms of utilizing his Sphere powers yet.

According to Margret, Eim's been super busy spreading false rumors that perturbed both Insalaum and Earth military order. Even this DOB story was a fake, calculated to get Zexis to fight Gaiou and hopefully take each other out. Oh well. Eim claims his goal is world chaos, and part of the plan is the Abyss, which now connects ZEUTH's world to this one. This abruptly explains how Fudou and the crew have been able to keep fighting the good fight in this world... even Tifa, whose role was to telepathically relay information back and forth between the two worlds.

It seems his ultimate goal is gathering Spheres, and that meant getting Crow to heighten his focus so that his Sphere would be ripe for the harvest. The same could be said for the two Spheres ZEUTH has. Eim claims that Crow's Sphere is the only power that can save Esther, and that makes Crow really... very coldly rational, actually. He's learned not to let Eim provoke him, and says that he doesn't need Eim's potential untruths to motivate him. He'll maximize his Sphere potential, and when he does, Eim will be toast!

Can the team really take Eim down, given that he's fully actualized his Sphere abilities? At least the Meteor units are on hand to help Kira and Aslan, and the G-Falcon available to help Garode.

Eim is way too tough to readily defeat here, and on his way out he tells Crow he prays Crow will rescue Esther. Crow rests easy in the thought that Eim will be back to see him again at some point, and easier at the thought that it's clearly in Eim's best interest for Rand and Setsuko to not meet their end. Odds are therefore good that the other ZONEs can be defeated, and that Eim might even do it himself... though he might wait till he's got Crow's Sphere first. Gaiou's resurgence can't be good for the world, though it's far from clear what he and Carlos are up to. Apparently it's nothing to do with Eim, who seems to have written Gaiou off as a pawn.

What's also clear is that the picture Kevin painted of Yuusar is bogus. Zero enlists Margret's help to try to broker a cease-fire with Insalaum, since it's clear that Eim wants the two worlds' peoples fighting each other. She seems strangely out of sorts, but the pilots are pretty sure she can be trusted. By the way, isn't it cool that the two worlds are now connected? ...Maybe not.

Turns out the Abyss has stable and unstable periods, and Eim and Fudou may be the only people who can pass through without paying that heed. The good news is that Fudou can go through at all, and with him can come a host of upgrade equipment and even mail from loved ones back home. Lacus has a lot to tell Kira about the time she's spent in this world and maybe once things calm down she'll give him the full story.

Jamir confirms that his people are here not as part of an official Federation force (from the other Earth), but as a sort of small recon project. Thus, all the people he's brought with him will be absorbed into Zexis for the time

being. There will be a general pooling of resources to figure out how to use the Abyss safely, and at Diana's insistence no special fuss will be made over her.

The happy reunion gets cut short however when a familiar battle song comes over the PA system. It's the Red Shoulders' march, and of course Kiriko is ready to shoot someone. It turns out that the entire world is having this music forcibly broadcast through all electronics, and on the viewscreens, footage of all Arrows' atrocities. Someone's broken through Veda's protection, but what does that have to do with the Red Shoulders?

For once, this is something that is not going according to Ribbons' plans. It's so far off the script that even he hasn't the faintest idea what to do about it. Liu Mei wants to know anyway, and he snaps at her that there's no need for him to explain himself to a mere human. Ah but wasn't it his plan to make all of humanity into Innovators? Not so: he means to cut off the old world and its anachronistic notions of greater and lesser, even as the new comes into being. He assures her that she will not become an Innovator, which probably won't increase her likelihood of cooperating with him.

As for what to do about this mess, Ribbons sees it as a net plus. Now people are sure to increase their resistance to Arrows, and as a result become all that much easier to root out. Then, the masses will stay silent as they always do. No need to fiddle with The Plan, then? Not with Delmeier in action and Rilina on track to be the perfect pawn. Oh, by the way, the person responsible for the broadcast left their handle: Wiseman.

#### CHAPTER 37. To Make the Galaxy a Stage

The event now known as the "Wiseman Shock" has caused disturbances worldwide: maybe not the best way to bring the truth to the public in retrospect. In fact, by choosing only the most sensational parts of Arrows' misdeeds, the broadcast has caused more panic and anti-government sentiment than it has produced actual agitation for Arrows' ouster. The reasonable folks like Zexis and Ootsuka are now drowned out by cries of revolution, and if the Earth's common enemies (including Insalaum) were to strike now, the whole house of cards would collapse. If Wiseman aimed for that deliberately, he's truly an opponent to be feared. And is there some kind of message for Kiriko from this Wiseman character? If so, Kiriko seems in no mood to discuss it...

As it happens, a visitor has come for Kiriko, and is busy chatting with Zero on the bridge. As Kiriko stalks for the elevator, Basara gives him a bit of friendly advice: keep his blazing soul bottled up too tight, and it'll explode. Kiriko ignores this and heads out, seemingly having reverted to the way he was when the team first met him.

The guest turns out to be Jean-Paul Rochina, Arrows' chief of information. The former Gilgamesh army officer has gone where his talents are most useful, and notes that sooner or later both the Gilgamesh and Valalant forces will have to fuse together under the Federation's aegis. But Rochina has come here to see Kiriko and propose a duel between him and Ypsilon. He was part of the PS project back in his Gilgamesh days, and though the project was taken from him long ago he would really like to see it come to fruition.

In particular, the PS project can't be called complete so long as there's a regular AT driver (that's Kiriko) who the PS's have failed to defeat. Kiriko asks if Rochina has Fiana, and from what Rochina's been told Fiana's with Ypsilon at this moment. He's even willing to personally help Kiriko get Fiana back if Kiriko defeats Ypsilon -- not so much out of generosity, but out of

animosity for the Secret Society and its ties with Arrows. More than anything though, he's found himself fascinated with Kiriko as a man. Wait, that sounds wrong. Anyway, he assures the team that it wasn't his idea to play the Red Shoulder March, and that his people are busy trying to figure out who this Wiseman character is at this very moment. Even the Arrows high command (meaning the Innovators) have no clue.

Rochina intends to notify Zexis once he hears what the Secret Society are up to, and after much thought Kiriko agrees to his terms. Both Kiriko and Zero are forced to admit there's no other known way of getting Fiana back than to trust this guy. As Zero and Rochina's conversation fades into the background, Kiriko finds himself wondering if he's actually fit to live with Fiana, the only thing that's saved him amidst the flames of battle. He knows of no other way to go but toward her, even if it means selling his soul to the Devil to do it...

The other pilots fill in the Fire Bomber folks about Kiriko's pursuit of Fiana, which sort of elevates Kiriko in their eyes. The question turns to why the hell Basara insists on singing on the battlefield, and even Gamlin isn't 100% sure. The space whales, mysterious living masses of energy, are the latest target Basara's selected to sing at after the war with the Proto-Devlin. It seems he flew into the middle of a skirmish between "space whalers" and patrol craft trying to stop them, and went straight over to a giant white whale for a little crooning. Basara never sings to defeat people, just to get through to their hearts in some fashion -- in the Proto-Devlin's case, that was enough to simply make them stop attacking.

What Gamlin and crew witnessed was Basara actually getting through to the white whale's heart (no mere mass of energy after all, then). Apparently the experience was intense enough that the whole pod of whales folded on the spot, dragging all the Valkyries in the area along for the ride. After all their pilots have been through with Basara though, that was no big deal. Gamlin has noticed how irritable Basara makes Alto, and tells him that's a perfectly normal reaction -- and one he himself had to start with. As the air raid sirens blare, Basara seems in no hurry to break off singing, and Alto can only wonder what the hell is going through this guy's head.

Apparently it involves a new song that Fire Bomber has been wrestling with for some time. Not ideal timing, in Alto's view, for a new single to hit the airwaves. The rest of the team don't agree. The enemy turn out to be Vajra, who for all the team knows have actually been lured by Basara's singing as a perceived threat. The question is, where is these Vajra's queen? Basara flies out in front, singing all the while, and the furious Alto is adamant that these are not like Proto-Devlin or space whales.

Defeating the first batch of Vajra brings more, PLUS Eim with a shipment of DBs. Dude is seriously doing the bad-penny impression, or else is Crow's personal stalker. Among EIM's troops are some VF-171's outfitted with the Mobile Doll system, which can't be good. He's got a very peculiar notion: he offers Basara the chance for his songs to reach innumerable worlds... in short, he wants to be Basara's new producer! He believes Basara's song should be used as an anti-Vajra weapon, just as Ranka's is. Ranka is singing the songs she's being told people want to hear -- unwanted songs are, after all, just noise.

OR, it means that this guy is just being a critic. Basara is adamant that he sings what he wants to sing, when he wants to sing, to whom he wants to sing, period! His songs are his alone, and that determination has powered him up enough to use a certain gadget the team's just received. Apparently it converts songs into LASERBEAMS OF DEATH, which bring EXPLOSIONS

OF DEATH. Bad(-ish) ass! Gamlin yells for Basara to keep singing while he does the fighting part, dealing more damage to Eim for good measure. Crow explains to the thunderstruck (no, literally, he was like struck by thunder and shit) Eim that his lies won't work on Basara. Eim flies off in fury, and the second wave of Vajra seem to think it's a good idea to bail too.

Even Kiriko seems to be digging the music, and Alto is now determined not to let Basara have all the fun. He and Gamlin will take on the remaining drones (with a little help from everyone else of course).

With the last of the enemies gone, something HUGE Folds in: the Barlaena, or white space whale. It seems to have come in response to Basara's song, and is inclined to do a little singing of its own. Time for a duet, obviously. It's a brief one, and the whale Folds away again, but the rest of the team is really hoping the pictures of this little event come out properly. Basara assures the team that this mighty creature isn't a god, but rather a being with a heart, just like everyone on the team.

Alto has finally figured a bit out about Basara, like how Basara stakes his life on his singing. Alto's done more than a little performance himself, and can tell at a glance that Basara is the real deal. Something within him didn't want to admit that someone could actually pilot while singing, and Gamlin recalls to mind "QM69", a maneuver involving a series of high speed turns. It used to give Gamlin fits how easily Basara mastered it when he could not, but now he's gotten over both his complex towards Basara AND his mental block about the maneuver. He notes that Alto is still relying too much on brute strength in some of his maneuver, and offers to give him some pointers. Alto gladly accepts.

Basara walks past Kiriko, telling him that whatever he's worrying about, nothing will change unless he moves forward. Kiriko admits the sense in this, and everyone seems to be accepting that songs have power. Setsuna remembers the song he heard during the fall of Africa Tower: it surely belonged to Marina Ismael... but was that just his ears -- or his heart -- playing tricks on him?

No time to reflect though, as some major Federation announcement comes on TV. It seems they're about to take a DRASTIC step to quell the unrest throughout the world. After claiming that Wiseman's information was fake, the acting Federation president announces that the Federation army is henceforth under the command of Arrows. And as for the common people, who surely need someone they can trust besides the government as a representative -- well, they need look no further than Rilina Peacecraft! She announces that Cinq Kingdom has just joined the Federation, and that she is now the people's voice. She says she believes that this is not the workings of the old feudal system, but rather the first step along the best known road towards true world peace. She appeals to all to lay down their arms, and join hands as they walk towards the future she believes they all want. She declares here and now that the Federation will be reborn into a true world government.

Crikey. Queen Rilina? Yeah: you heard right: the Federation is now a constitutional monarchy. Of course it's all a farce and a repetition of how the Federation tried to rule the minds and hearts of the Colonies, and surely Milliard isn't going to be too happy. The thing whoever rigged this has failed to realize is that Rilina isn't one to be farcical, or to lie: she will do everything she can to genuinely bring about this brotherhood of man business, and many within the Federation will gladly follow. The question is whether the Innovators can undermine her influence and reduce her to a mere figurehead. If they do, Hiiro is prepared to kill her...



Meanwhile, Margret is surprised to find that Yuusar knows all about Unblown's dealings with Eim. Now that he's begun his own agenda, Eim has added himself to Insalaum's list of enemies, nothing more. Yuusar means to take Unblown at her pledge to use Dimensional Science for Insalaum's benefit, and will not allow Margret to speak ill of her after her departure from the Arcsabers. He declares that he's cast everything aside for the sake of victory, and when Margret objects that he's going to plunge two worlds into war, Yuusar orders Wayne to apprehend her. Wayne, through only partially gritted teeth, declares that as the new Knight of Knights, he'll face all of Insalaum's enemies with the Diamed. Yuusar orders Margret into solitary confinement, lest any morale-related issues arise with the other Arcsabers. Margret tries to protest, but Wayne tells her, as her former subordinate, not to make him draw his sword. Nor does he want to kill Shane's sister.

Margret falls silent at that, and allows herself to be led off. Unblown wonders aloud at Margret's chutzpah in pursuing Eim, and Yuusar sharply asks if she's really severed ties with Eim. She maintains she has, saying that he's not shown himself anyway since she finished work on the Giga Adamon. He warns her never to betray his trust again, shouting that she must do her utmost for him and for Insalaum, now that Gaiou has returned. Speaking of whom, Unblown's used the info that Eim left her to arrange for the capture of one more Singularity, the use of whom will let her bring Dimensional Science to its zenith. He's willing to let her do whatever is necessary, believing Insalaum to be already past the point of no return.

As for Eim, he's paying Charles and V.V. a visit at the MYSTERY LOCATION, with a question to "humbly" ask. V.V. asks what the Key-bearer wants here, and intimates that Eim's supple, duplicitous tongue can be removed if need be. Seeing that he'd better hurry, he asks how many people on Earth know of the Black Knowledge. This count, he says, will allow him to prepare for the day when he reaches the Ultimate. Charles tells him that the number is six, including his elder brother. One of those six is someone Eim's already acquainted with: "Wiseman". Charles intimates that any further questions will lead to Eim having a very bad day, and even Eim is smart enough to not press his luck when standing in front of a God-killing weapon. He'll be back one day though, when he's actually achieved godhood.

V.V., who turns out to be that elder brother of Charles' (despite appearances!) doesn't like Eim one bit, and Charles agrees that he's the one he's most worried about. The only reason Charles gave out any information about the Black Knowledge at all is Eim's resemblance to his son Lelouch. Speaking of whom, V.V. thinks it's time Lelouch be punished, and has just the person in mind to dismantle Lelouch's lies. There's not much time, especially now that Wiseman has stepped out of the shadows of history to reveal himself. Wiseman strives to be an Inheritor of all this, and in that V.V. feels a certain kinship. Fortunately, it is he and Charles who wield the Sword of Akasha, and the time for their wish to be granted is nigh.

#### CHAPTER 39. (Route Split)

Gaiou and Carlos are wandering the streets of some random city, pondering the big news about Queen Rilina. Is her ascendancy a sign of the times? A modern fiction? Only time will tell, but what's clear is that Eim's little gadgetry has caused Gaiou no small amount of inconvenience. Zexis too gets to ponder the announcement, whose immediate effect has been to quell much of the anti-Federation sentiment worldwide. Insalaum is still busily skirmishing however, and the commanders have to conclude that Margret's mission failed. Hopefully Margret herself is still okay...

Now the question is what Zexis' role should be: can they still ride herd on Arrows after the big announcement? Sumeragi has an interesting excerpt from the Wiseman footage, dated to when the Orbital Elevator construction began. In it is Elgan, looking much as he does today despite the footage being over a century old! The conclusion would be that Elgan is an Innovator, explaining neatly why the Federation has now fallen under Arrows' control. Except, why then did he authorize Zexis' autonomy? There's no way to know without meeting the guy, but Jeffrey proposes that there could be schisms within the Innovators just as there were within the CBs themselves. Possible, but in that case, Elgan might already be dead.

...Well \_that\_'s an unpleasant thought. Jeffrey presumes that the team can't count on support from Ootsuka just now, so Zexis will have to act on its own. Zero says that the Black Knights will need to return to Japan under such circumstances, hoping to cement a strategic toehold in what was historically one of the most rebellious areas of the world. Hiiro at the very least must accompany Zero, owing to his well-known standing as an "observer" over Zero. Zero is thinking that Rilina's announcement must have had an effect on Nanaly, and he wants to see her reaction with his own eyes before concentrating on the battles to come.

Traia is seriously steamed about Carlos' wayward ways, but Crow tells her he's got enough problems with Gaiou and Eim. The interesting question is Eim's exhortation to Crow to get his Sphere shit in gear and rescue Esther -- even though the guy is a pathological liar, there tend to be kernels of truth in his words. Seems like Crow has to figure out how to get even more out of the Re-Blaster than he already has. Traia tells him to take care of himself: she's already lost Carlos and Esther. If she were to lose him... who the hell would keep her lab solvent? Crow seems relieved that she's not starting the mushy stuff -- of course she was, and then trying to cover it up, but she won't readily admit it from behind her kitsune mask. As she totals up his earnings, Crow hears explosions near the lab. No big deal though, honest.

Traia is generous with the cash this time, and asks Crow what happens next. Well, he either stays with the CBs and goes to the Dark Continent, or takes a little side job from Sumeragi and goes with the Black Knights to Area Eleven (she promises to cover his breakfast expenses if he does). To go to the Dark Continent, head to Chapter 38D. To go to Area Eleven, head to Chapter 38E.

Meanwhile Yuusar is back to hanging out with Esther, who doesn't seem too fond of his decision to incarcerate Margret. He is, after all, her enemy. The actual Arcsabers, Wayne states as he walks up, are waiting for Yuusar's command and prepared to risk their lives. There are half a billion Insalaum citizens whose lives hang in the balance, and Yuusar orders the Arcsabers to give their last breath defending the final ZONE. He silently bids Margret farewell, vowing to fight for Insalaum's future.

#### CHAPTER 38D. Communicable Despair

If you remember the early days of Gurren Lagann, you may be wondering where the hell Youko has gone. It turns out she's on a small island called Korehana, teaching elementary school. Her kids are very bright and very eager to learn, and have loads of questions in the wake of Rilina's big announcement. She answers honestly that she doesn't agree with Arrows methods, even if she does agree with the goal of world peace. Nor does she think that Rilina by herself will be able to change the big bad world, which is why she needs all her students to study the world really carefully and become informed citizens thereof. It's a child's job to study, to play, and to grow up strong... and to leave th fighting to the adults. Preferably the exemplary adults, like

the Great Gurren Gang.

Even "Yomako-sensei", as she's now known, was once a child, but thanks to a group of very stalwart friends, she's grown up strong. Her students are really glad she came to this island half a year ago, and one (Nakim) wonders if she might not be a member of the illustrious Gang herself. His suspicions are all but confirmed when an explosion rocks the school, and "Yomako" rushes toward the blast even as she orders her students to take cover in the cellar.

They don't, preferring to see who's responsible for the chaos. It's a couple of Beastmen in Gunmen, who seem inclined to become "kings" of this little island after Rilina was made queen of the world. They spot the kids (who are too terrified to flee) and decide to take them hostage. Yomako interdicts this in short order, and class is now in session.

The bad guys get schooled, but they're not too worried. It would have been nice to plant a flag here before Kamina City falls, and it will fall. What the heck is going on there, Yomako wonders...

Rather than wonder, she decides to head off to the capital. By this point her students have totally figured out who she really is, but the polite fiction will remain that she's merely Yomako-sensei, going to do a little adult fighting to preserve the kids' future.

Back within the Zexis contingent, the commanders are reviewing the effect of the Wiseman Shock on the Dark Continent. Things got chaotic enough that Roshiu almost mobilized the military to maintain order, until Rilina's announcement calmed everything right down. That charisma reminds Simon a bit of Kamina, though his elder brother figure's personality is obviously quite different from Rilina's. A message comes in from Kitan at this point, imploring Simon and the team to save Kamina City. Seems a large guerilla force of Beastmen are besieging the place -- larger than anything to date.

Hayato asks the first question: why not contact Arrows? After all, keeping the so-called peace is their official mission. Roshiu is afraid that Arrows' participation will just make things worse, and means to use his local forces only. Even should he win (and he is outnumbered), Kamina City will still suffer extensive damage. Simon is initially silent as Kitan says that his child has just been borne, named Anne. Simon lights up at hearing her name, saying that she and the other townsfolk have done nothing wrong by wanting to live in peace. It's his job to defend them, and indeed is the job of all of Zexis. As Hayato mobilizes the team, Simon just hopes that Nia is still okay.

Roshiu's advisors are sure their forces will win due to superior equipment and positioning, but Roshiu knows that the city will still pay the price from a protracted battle. What they don't realize is that Beck and Timp are among the enemy... as are Viral and Kan Yur. Viral is surly as ever, but still manages a word of thanks to the others for taking him in.

First Simon (nicely) then Hayato (less nicely) tell Roshiu to withdraw his troops and leave the bad guys to Zexis. Roshiu reluctantly complies, and Timp can only shake his head at Zexis' penchant for lousing his up his plans at the worst possible moments. Oh well, maybe Kan Yur has the right idea and they should just stop worrying about tomorrow. As it becomes clear to Zexis who the ringleaders are, Crow asks Roger where he's been lately. A little errand in Area Eleven -- personal interest in the whole Zero business, let's say. Jiron is looking forward Kitan firing this giant-ass missile Jiron stored in the hangar all this time, and Simon will have to be the one to take out Viral once and for all.

Viral seems to have finally met his end, having become something more than just an adversary to Simon. Just what he's become is unclear, but Ryouma tells Simon to believe in Viral -- surely he'll appear before them again one day.

After the commanders make their disgraceful exits, another wave of guerillas shows up. Nia emerges onto the parapets of the palace, and asks Simon to stay his hand. Knowing that Nia must have something planned, Simon gets Zexis to hold their fire. Her appeal to the guerillas is an odd one: she tells them she can't understand their motivations, probably because she's happy. After rattling off several other reasons her life doesn't suck, she mentions the baby a friend of hers just had. Maybe the combatants would like to come be happy with her if they can't find happiness on their own? Or at least come to talk it over?

Only Nia, a genuine innocent, could get away with a speech like that without it being taken for pure sarcasm. Given that she's the speaker however, all the remaining guerillas lay down their arms. Rilina's not the only one around here whose very presence can quell unrest.

Simon gladly goes to greet Nia, who's prepared a big feast for the whole team. Simon takes a ring out of his pocket, intending at long last to propose to her. However, as he does so, a change comes over Nia. In a cold voice, she declares that the Anti-Spiral people have decided that the Earth's Spiral danger level has reached stage two. Thus, Phase 1 of the humankind destruction system is being activated. She says she now knows that she and he can never coexist, and says that it's the duty of the Anti-Spirals to defend the world from the Spiral Nemesis.

He wonders if she's come down with a fever or something, but she continues that his Core Drill is the essence of the Spiral Nemesis, whose Spiral Power will destroy this universe. It is the power of Evolution, which causes organisms with spiral DNA and the spiral galaxies they live in to expand forever. This cannot be permitted. And, given that the ten billionth child has just been born, well.... DOOM AND GLOOM!

Nia bids Simon farewell and hops aboard one of a fleet of Unknowns that appear out of a dimensional warp. This mankind destruction system sure wastes no time! Corwen and Stinger, who seem to have expected something like this, appear too. They blame this mess on the Abyss, and though they're coy on precisely what these new menaces are, they claim to share the same objective (taking out mankind) with them.

As the gunfire begins, Nia claims it's too late to stop the coming despair. Not if Banjou has anything to say about it! He declares that Simon needs to keep moving, to head past the sun awaiting across these dark clouds to the open skies above. That's what Kamina bequeathed him, is it not? Of course it is, and everyone including Viral is rooting for him to see the light. He does, and offers Viral the best seat in the house now that the war inside Viral is over. He plans a very special attack, mingling spirals of man and beast! The sight is rousing enough that the rest of the team vow not to be left behind, and the struggle to find whoever did this to Nia is underway!

Nia sadly tells Simon that she can't stop what she's doing. She was sent as a messenger from the Anti-Spirals to dwell among those with spiral DNA: a facsimile of life. Simon simply refuses to believe that this is the real Nia, and vows to take it out on whoever's making her talk in words he can't understand.

What she does say is that it's very ironic that she, child with Anti-Spiral

Factors hidden in her DNA, was born to the Spiral Lord himself. She says that she can never return to being a normal human now that her Anti-Spiral abilities have activated. She vanishes, leaving Simon and the others behind. Every citizen nearby has heard at least part of the dialog, and panic is already beginning to spread. Hayato orders the team, Simon included, to retreat lest things get any worse. No doubt there'll be Anti-Spiral forces to fight wherever the team goes anyway.

So is this what the whole "Ten Billion Monkeys" prophecy is about? DUH except that the population of the Earth is only about half that, so what the hell? Roshu is bound and determined to make Lowgenome cough up the info now.

Meanwhile more bad news has come in: Karen has been captured by the Knights of the Round. Suzaku apparently was able to nab her during a rare lapse in Zero's command, which Wufei is far from thrilled by. On the other hand, Wufei expects that Zero will mount some kind of rescue effort, and Crow declares he's putting all his chips on that. Simon has currently asked to be alone in his room, but Ryouma knows a way to get him out of his funk. He says that he's going to show Viral the ropes by having him face off with Simon in a drinking match. Suits Viral just fine!

Oh, and there's that Banjou guy, who's been busy running errands for Sandman. He's been surveying the world, spying on Arrows, checking into Veda, and even analyzing Insalaum's strategies... and pursuing Eim. The immediate Nia question is one Hayato is hoping Roshu and his coterie of scientists can shed some light on. They seem to know more than they've made public, and that knowledge will come in really handy if there's more than just Phase One of the Anti-Spiral killer system to look forward to.

The "Lowgenome" Roshu's got isn't the genuine article, but rather a clone made from Lowgenome's cells. Don't ask why it's still got all his knowledge and memories. Lowgenome Mk.II isn't thrilled that Roshu's gone to the extreme of prying the doors of the afterlife to drag the words out, and tells Roshu that he need not feel shame over the fear his people have been living in. Fear can protect. It can also make people afraid, and Roshu's had about enough of them apples.

Okay, fine: 20 questions tiems. Spiral Power turns out to be the power of Evolution, a power that drives all beings with spiral DNA and indeed all structural spirals (like the galaxy) to expand without limit. There are those who find that kind of unsettling, who have become the Anti-Spirals. Lowgenome himself was once a Spiral Warrior, fighting to protect the galaxy from the Anti-Spirals and other "Baals". Baal (singular or plural) is the enemy of all sentient life, a ravaging demon of destruction who the Earthlings know of from the Invaders.

The Gunmen and Razenger were originally intended to fight Baal, as was the Ranga. As a Spiral Warrior, Lowgenome fought alongside the Gods of Light, the Generals of Dimension, and other warriors who craved unending evolution. The battle transcended dimension, taking place across all worlds. The sad truth is that the Spiral forces lost this unfathomable battle, and fled to the safety of their homeworld as a last resort. He warped mankind and had them hide underground as a measure to avoid triggering the anti-humanity system, controlling the population as an extra safeguard on top of the Earth's already limited Potential. The problem is that damn Abyss, which has effectively linked at least two Earths, and hence pooled the headcount for the purposes of the Anti-Spiral accountants.

And yes, Anne was precisely the 10 billionth human... not that it was her fault. Lowgenome snorts that the only way to keep humankind alive was to

try to stunt its potential to evolve. Which certainly can't be achieved by an appeal to logic or altruism, since it flies in the face of the very impetus spiral-based lifeforms share. Even his best attempts at a regime based on fear ultimately proved futile.

He knows that the Abyss was opened to satisfy the greed of the Key-bearer. Greed, after all, is a fundamental part of Spiral life-force. He's quite sure that "they" won't let the Key-bearer lay hands on the Original Power, for to do so would bring about the Spiral Nemesis: the end of all. Lowgenome's will was strong enough to truncate his own spiral, trapping himself in a closed flat circle for a thousand years. THAT is the kind of resolve needed to avoid total oblivion... though he has to admit that watching the humans' struggles did stir something in his blood.

Roshiu pleads to know what's going to happen in the final phase of the Anti-Spiral system, and Lowgenome tells him that he'll become unable to turn back if he finds out. May be, but it's Roshiu's duty to find out. Fine then: Lowgenome explains as the game fades to Intermission...

#### CHAPTER 38E. Assassin from the Past

Shirley is trying to figure out what to get for her teacher Viletta's birthday, and seizes on the idea of asking Lelouch to help her shop on their next date. She suddenly stops short in the middle of the mall, realizing abruptly that Lelouch is none other than Zero, the man responsible for her father's death. Viletta, too, isn't just her teacher -- she's a soldier... and what the hell is Nanaly doing as the viceroy of Area Eleven. Is she going crazy? What's real, and what isn't??

Watching her from the shadows is the person who's brought about her total recall, a shadowy figure equipped with what he calls a "Geass Canceler", which as its name suggests is capable of destroying all Geass effects. He's finally obtained the power he needs to destroy Zero, and as this test has proven some of Lelouch's classmates already seem to be under Geasses of some kind. Time to enter Ashford Academy and settle everything!

The secret base beneath Ashford has been put more or less back in order, thanks to considerable effort on Viletta's part to hoodwink her superiors. And no thanks to Hiiro, whose tagging along with Lelouch Rolo can't fathom. Lelouch keeps the peace by perpetuating the polite fiction that Rolo is his brother, though inwardly he's still prepared to see Rolo meet a suitable end for trying to replace his real sister in his affections. Sayoko has been keeping up the dates with Shirley in Lelouch's absence, maintaining their friendship at a platonic level as per his orders.

Hiiro observes drily that Shirley seems to be one of the few pieces of compassion Lelouch has left... the sort of thing C.C. would say. Lelouch lets this pass and receives Viletta's report on how Area Eleven's been doing lately. The Wiseman Shock has been less pronounced here than elsewhere, largely thanks to Nanaly's ongoing efforts at peaceful integration. Though Viletta's sure that Britannia itself is exerting itself as well, it's her view that most of the Elevens' lessening anxiety is thanks to Nanaly and her alignment with the newly-christened Queen Rilina. Lelouch actually smiles as he muses that Nanaly's always been friendly with Rilina -- no wonder that their goals would align.

The question is, why has he risked bringing the Black Knights back to Area Eleven? Their presence is already known to the authorities. Lelouch says that Area Eleven is still special to the Black Knights, and that its liberation

will play a pivotal role in the larger overthrow of the Federation. He tells Hiiro that he understands why Zexis is focused on only taking out the Federation's rulers (the Innovators) and their enforcers (Arrows). He however sees a need to destroy the mechanism that permitted their dominance in the first place, and inwardly craves the moment when he'll come to grips with Charles himself when this chaos comes.

Fighting will come to Area Eleven, but he intends to force Britannia into making the first move. That's what the Black Knights are here to provoke, and Lelouch believes that if the Black Knights can repulse the Britannian forces, the people -- primed by the Arrows business -- will start doubting the government. He says that he expects that this will in turn cause Nanaly to take more extreme unification measures, but even Rolo knows that Lelouch's ultimate goal is to save Nanaly from Britannia. He wants the chaos to help him create that chance... As Lelouch heads downtown (with Hiiro in tow), Viletta can't help but be impressed by how Lelouch is simultaneously fulfilling his own goals \_and\_ advancing Zexis' objectives. Rolo however is all emo at the thought that Nanaly's return will finally lead to his eviction from Lelouch's affections.

Trouble arrives however in the form of an intruder onto the campus. Sayoko goes to fend whoever it is off, asking Viletta to get all the students away from the combat zone. The intruder is Jeremiah, and although neither combatant wants to kill the other, there seems to be no other way around it. Sayoko has mad ninja skills, but Jeremiah now has a cybernetic body that is largely impregnable to Sayoko's blades. She knows to aim for what little flesh-and-blood is left, but before someone gets killed Rolo runs up and yells for Sayoko to flee.

He attempts to use his Geass to halt Jeremiah in his tracks, but Jeremiah's Geass Canceler kicks in moments later. Sayoko suffers serious damage, and Jeremiah tells the thunderstruck Rolo not to move. It's clear to him that Rolo and Sayoko have been turned by Lelouch, proving in turn that Lelouch's memories must have returned. This ability to defeat Geasses is why the Geass Order chose Jeremiah to assassinate Lelouch. Viletta runs up at this point, astonished to see her old commander alive. She tells him that Lelouch is in the ghetto now, and implores him to set her free. Jeremiah accepts her request and heads off, leaving Rolo furious at the apparent betrayal. In fact, Viletta has bought time to give Sayoko medical attention while Rolo contacts Lelouch about the oncoming assassin -- she expects Lelouch, plus Hiiro, to be able to do something about Jeremiah... maybe with some help from Rolo.

Meanwhile, Shirley has put in a phone call to Suzaku of all people. Lelouch "stumbles" upon the gathering, claiming surprise at seeing his friends all gathered together. All three of them are on guard, not sure what to say with the other two around. Suzaku for one has been inclined to distrust the steady reports of Lelouch's presence in Area Eleven despite the Black Knights' activities overseas. Lelouch smoothly excuses himself, saying that he's not worried about a little clandestine rendezvous between the two of them. He does ask Suzaku to be sure Shirley stays safe, telling Shirley that this place isn't safe. She remembers him genuinely risking his life to protect her when the terrorists attacked, and decides to change the conversation she was going to have with Suzaku.

She confesses that she "likes" Lelouch, and asks how Suzaku feels. Suzaku says that he used to like him, but that he can't forgive him now. Shirley says that nothing is totally unforgivable -- if anything, it must be that Suzaku himself just doesn't \_want\_ to offer forgiveness. She herself has forgiven Lelouch long since...

The Black Knights will have to stir up trouble without Zero on hand to command them, as he's phoned up to say he'll be a little late. This is an annoyance to the rest of the team, especially since Hiiro is also absent to do bodyguard duty, but Karen and C.C. know something serious must have happened. The Knights of the Round aren't among the first group of Britannian guards to appear, but that's just fine with Crow: the point is to provoke the locals, not to get potentially killed by them. Watching Todou take command, Zero is confident they'll win, and equally confident that he and Hiiro can handle his upcoming assailant. Zero tells Hiiro to take care of any other agents while he handles Jeremiah -- he's got some questions for the erstwhile soldier.

The first wave of security forces barely make for a light snack, but as Ougi surveys the battlefield for more targets, he spies Viletta -- who in turn knows he must be aboard the Black Knights' flagship.

Meanwhile, Lelouch faces "Orange" one-on-one. He's heard about Jeremiah's cybernetic body and Geass Canceler, telltale signs of one determined mo-fo. Not determination, corrects Jeremiah, but loyalty: loyalty to Britannia, despite all that's changed about the world. Lelouch doesn't like this, demanding to know what the hell Charles has done to inspire loyalty. He then activates his trump card, a Gefion Disturber (hidden aboard a nearby train) which nullifies Sakuradite as a power source. Lelouch has correctly guessed that Jeremiah's cyberware is Sakuradite-powered, and is using Jeremiah as a test case for his ultimate plan to bring the whole of the Tokyo Settlement to a standstill.

Lelouch wants some questions answered, about the Geass Order and about where V.V. is at this moment. But Jeremiah has questions of his own, urgent enough to motivate his "loyalty" and even urgent enough for him to risk his life confronting Lelouch. Despite his cyberware being offline, he stretches out his hand toward Lelouch, demanding to know why he's created this Zero act and turned against Britannia -- that is, against his own father. Lelouch snarls back that it's precisely because he's Lelouch Vi Britannia.

It's precisely because his father stood by and let his mother be killed, let Nanaly become blind and lame. Jeremiah knows what happened to Marianne and Nanaly, since he was there personally. It was his first assignment as a royal guard, and his ire at not fulfilling his mission led him to help organize the Loyalists. Jeremiah now knows that Lelouch was acting on Marianne's behalf, and is quite prepared to serve him in her stead (assuming the Gefion Disturber gets switched off in time, which Lelouch does). He confirms that V.V. is not his master, nor did he come here actually intending to kill Lelouch off.

Hiiro walks over at this point, having rounded up all Jeremiah's henchpeople. That frees Lelouch to take his plan to the next phase. Unfortunately, at that very moment Shirley has run into Rolo. She asks him if he truly likes Lelouch (which he of course does), and asks to be included among Lelouch's comrades. She wants to help protect him, to help bring back his happiness, along with his sister Nanaly. Eek, probably shouldn't have said that...

Meanwhile, the Knight of Ten (Luciano Bradley) has finally shown up: the infamous Britannian Vampire. He's widely known as the most bloodthirsty of all the Knights of the Round, and it's quite an affront to see him here in Area Eleven. Karen advances on him, meaning to smoke his ass, but that just makes her fall into a trap that Suzaku has set. He springs from his hiding place, disabling the Guren and enabling his men to capture it. Suzaku is adamant that Karen will be useful as a prisoner, and is not to be killed off as Luciano would normally do.



It seems that Suzaku's decided that he simply can't forgive Lelouch, regardless of Shirley's views. Lelouch radios into Karen privately, promising to rescue her and telling her not to give up. He needs her, badly! Luciano's presence keeps the rest of the team from immediately running to Karen's rescue, and the question is, where the hell is Zero??

Zero shows up in short order, and Luciano rushes over to try to kill him off. He's got this set phrase where he asks his victims what's most important to them, answering rhetorically that it's their life, but before can deal fatal damage Xingke shows up to help. He insists that Zero isn't allowed to perish here, as the Empress has staked their nation's future on Zero.

Seeing the Vampire as a Knight of the Round is an unpleasant surprise, but as someone once said, the "Worst Enemies Make the Best Allies". Having him on the payroll certainly furthers Britannia's own agenda. Zero spies Rolo and Shirley nearby, and has the rest of the team withdraw. That suits Ougi fine, since he's got his own meeting to arrange.

Viletta and Ougi have their long-awaited reunion. Ougi may think of her as "Chigusa", the woman he saved from bleeding to death, but Viletta still thinks of herself as a Britannian count. She can't see a way to go on living in this world with the stain of Elevenhood hanging over her, and draws her pistol. He explains that he didn't kill her because he fell in love with her while keeping her under observation -- initial plans to ask her for info about Zero forgotten as he fell into their daily routine. Yeah, that may make him an idiot, falling for his enemy and whatnot, but what're you going to do? Just then Sayoko and Diethart show up, taking both of them into custody.

Lelouch meanwhile has headed to see Shirley and Rolo [by the way, this would appear to mean that I satisfied the requisite number of Zero Points; otherwise, the original plot of Code Geass would have kicked in by now. "You know of what I speak", to quote Christopher Lee. Amazingly, both Banjou and Roger are on hand as well, assuring Lelouch that Rolo is alive and well. Roger has Banjou take Shirley home while he has a word with Lelouch, but before she goes she tells Lelouch that she's always believed in him, ever since that day back at the Narita graveyard. She looks forward to seeing him at school tomorrow, and Zero now knows that she's remembered about his real identity.

Roger wants to confront Lelouch about his double identity, and Hiiro makes sure Rolo doesn't interfere. Roger arrived at the truth via his own investigation into Euphemia's inexplicable outburst, traveling all over before ending up back here in Area Eleven. He's deduced that Lelouch has some sort of magic-like powers of hypnosis, drawing upon his own experience as a Negotiator to rule out other possibilities. Roger has even surmised that Euphemia's slaughter of the Elevens was likely some sort of accident, based on Zero's unprecedented level of agitation in the immediate aftermath, and subsequent over-stoicism.

Roger doesn't like risking his life on deductive reasoning alone, but he's had little other option. His temporary separation from Zexis was in the interest of satisfying his own doubts, since he knows perfectly well that Zexis' battles are only going to get fiercer going forward: there's no sense in harboring doubts unnecessarily. He does not intend to expose this truth, independently arrived at, and merely wants Zero to follow through on the notions of Justice he's extolled so far. Roger's sure that Zexis will fight by his side if he does so.

Rolo pleads with Zero not to listen to any of this: surely Roger is trying to use Zero somehow or other. Roger smiles and tells Rolo that that's mutual, and not as bad a thing as Rolo imagines. Rather than treating everything as

a mercenary exchange of value for value, he could try imagining that some people are bonded by mutual trust. Hiirou tells Lelouch that the single biggest thing Lelouch lacks is trust in others, and the longer Lelouch stays blind to that fact, the more likely he is to become Hiirou's enemy.

Rolo is still agitated, but Lelouch looks him in the eye and asks what he came here to do to Shirley. All of them know that Shirley's gotten her memory of Zero's identity back, and yet she still has chosen to believe in Lelouch. He thanks Roger for keeping Shirley safe, but Roger says he's merely done the trustworthy thing. Only he and Hiirou know the secret so far, and he instructs Lelouch to keep up the Zero thing and to not betray that trust. Lelouch tries to play coy, but Roger firmly states that Lelouch should have nothing to hide at this point. Irritating, and that's not a bad thing in Roger's view: what he wants to do is actually help Lelouch in his battle with his bygone past, if he will but share. Really, it's the future that Roger wants...

Banjou has arrived bearing tales of what happened on the other path with the Antispirals -- yet another enemy to battle. Ougi and the extremist mediaman are busy chatting about something or other, and Xingke confirms to the team that he's here to stay... on his Empress' orders. It seems she's convinced that Rilina means well, and is hoping to find ways to better harmonize China with the Federation... and that means taking down Arrows and the Innovators, which Zero seems rather good at. Tamashiro is convinced that Zero, who he claims as his best friend, is busy steeling his resolve for the battle ahead, and for the task of creating the new world after that.

Lelouch in fact shows up at school the following morning, not late for a change. He apologizes to Shirley that he's got to leave, and she understands perfectly what this means. While she can't help him directly, she promises to keep a place warm for him for when he can finally return. Lelouch watches her go with the most genuine smile he's had on his face for months, and C.C. for one is glad to see it. His "Silence, witch!" rejoinder lacks its usual steel, but he assures her that his resolve is stronger than ever. After all, he's now got Shirley to defend in addition to everything else. He means to rescue Karen, and with Viletta missing he intends to do it fast.

His target will be the Geass Order, whose strongholds he's now pinpointed thanks to Jeremiah's info. Rolo's still worried about him putting himself in harm's way, but Lelouch tells him that nobody ever grabbed tomorrow by running around in the present. He intends to put his life on the line for and with those people who've bestowed their belief on him.

## CHAPTER 39. Forbidden Inheritor

[I kept 38E.]

Flashback tiems! Charles looks to be in his 30's, while his "elder brother" still looks like he's 11. What, V.V. wonders, has Charles learned since becoming the Britannian emperor? Only that everyone around him are liars, as has ever been the case with this rotten empire. Actually, mankind as a whole is rotten, and sooner or later that will put the world in danger of total ruin. So sayeth the Black Knowledge, which V.V. has gained the right to touch now that he's he's received the Codes only the head of the Geass Order knows. Thus their plan, to kill God and destroy all lies in the world.

If you didn't get the explanation from Lowgenome's clone before, you'll get it now.]

Speaking of the Geass Order, Lelouch has all the info he thinks he needs to

wipe it out. He's concluded that the Order poses a great enough threat that it's better to destroy it than to try to turn it to his purposes... and it's not just further waves of assassins he fears. It's the Order's bad habit of warping people's fates and treating their lives like so much trash that he hates, and he wants no further tragedies like Nanaly's. If his is truly the Power of the King, he means to use it to end all further power and further sin on the Geass' account.

He knows that C.C. is immortal, and presumes V.V. is also: his plan therefore is to immobilize V.V. the way Clovis once did to C.C. He asks if she, formerly the head of the Geass Order, still means to help him, and she sniffs that her position was a) long ago, and b) ornamental anyway... unlike V.V. Assured of her ongoing co-conspiratorship, Lelouch assures her that he'll settle the final score with his own hands, adding that he's opted to include Roger in their little circle in part as thanks for helping protect Shirley from Rolo. C.C. regards him with a cryptic look and tells him she rather likes it when he sees fit to trust people. She still won't tell him precisely what she wants in return for giving him his Geass, saying it's got nothing to do with the current operation. "Selfish" as always.

Meanwhile, Simon seems to have recovered his good humor, and is optimistic he can rescue Nia before all is said and done. The other pilots are eager to help, bolstered by a load of new weaponry and, in Watta's case, a new combo attack with Banjo and Kappei he thought up during the last school athletic festival. They call it "337 Beat", based on the names of the robots involved. Hopefully it'll come in handy in the assault on this Britannian special forces group that Zero's targeting, since poor Karen is still being held captive. Britannia's influence in the Federation remains very strong, based on its negotiating stance when it joined the Federation in the first place.

Kiriko is anxious to help free Karen, who's helped him out several times by now. Allelujah is glad to see Kiriko back to his old self, and understands Kiriko's figured out a way to get Fiana back. Allelujah is in a similar boat, since Mary has been his reason for fighting on through some pretty tough times. The motto here is: while there's life, there's hope.

That hope comes to fruition when Rochina shows up with more information about the Secret Society. Apparently they get their orders through a separate chain of command from Arrows, and it's clear that Kiriko's final battle with Ypsilon is nigh. That's why he's busting ass making final modifications to his machine. Zero walks up, recognizing the Type-20 Turbo Custom design from when the team raided a former Red Shoulder base. Zero makes the unusual offer of helping to put in the final software tweaks, reminding Kiriko that there aren't any better systems engineers than him on the team. His first instinct is to claim that this assistance is only to avoid losing a skilled part of the team's warpower, but in reality there's a bit more human interest lurking under the surface. Kiriko reminds him that such things have happened at least once before back in the Shinjuku Ghetto, and as they continue working Lelouch actually takes off his mask -- claiming (transparently, to both of them) that he "only" did it so he could work more efficiently. It seems that Lelouch's trust of his teammates as people is growing...

Meanwhile, V.V. has requisitioned a bit of help for the Geass Order, just on the off chance that Lelouch tries to attack the place. Guess where from? The Secret Society, of course, because that's the way these games work. V.V. sees no need to mention any of this to the Emperor, figuring that at best it'll take Lelouch time to find the place. And even if they do find the place, the Secret Society troops will buy enough time to simply pull up stakes and move to one of the other bases. When his subordinate asks, V.V. says that his dealings with the Secret Society are aided by the fact that "he"

shares many objectives with V.V. As for Cornelia, who's independently tracked down the Geass Order as part of her dogged inquiry into her sister Euphemia's death, even V.V. isn't quite sure what to do with her other than leave her imprisoned.

Just then Lelouch comes on the intercom, having hacked into the Geass Order's networks. He seems to be broadcasting from Ashford Academy, and has a question or two for V.V. Was it indeed he who abducted Nanaly during the Black Rebellion, and who watched over Lelouch's showdown with Suzaku on Kaminejima? Yup. Lelouch openly admits that he's got his memory back, and V.V. assumes that that means Lelouch has C.C. with him too. He offers Lelouch his freedom if he but hands C.C. over, but just then an explosion rocks the base. The transmission starts skipping, and it becomes clear that it was all a ruse.

The Zexis troops are alarmed at the scale of the Geass Order's secret underground base: Zero seems to have called it correctly that these folks could pose as big a threat as Arrows. Most of the team are busy causing a diversion outside, and with V.V. fooled by the fake broadcast from Ashford, the initiative is with Zero and the infiltration squad. The order is to capture V.V., after trashing the defenders and in particular the special A.T. at the center of their formation.

Zero's had some of the information bureau folks helping out raid the office space, and he orders them to kill any doubts they might have. Despite appearances, this is a military base, Britannia is creating immortal soldiers here, and everything must be burned to ash. Period. As the team, led by Jeremiah and Rolo make their way through, Jeremiah runs into General Bartley, bleeding to death in the aftermath of a nearby explosion. Bartley laments that nothing good has happened since he got mixed up with C.C., and tells Jeremiah that "He" is up ahead. Jeremiah ought to hate the general for giving him this cybernetic body, but he has to respect Bartley's true fealty to the royal family.

Rolo and Jeremiah, who now treats the handle Orange as a sign of his undying loyalty to Zero, show up to join the assault -- somewhat to the Holy Blades' dismay.

When Kiriko starts whaling on Ypsilon, Rochina shows up just as the Red Shoulder march starts playing. Nobody but him is quite sure what it means other than that it has something to do with Kiriko, and Ypsilon, annoyed at all the interference, tells Kiriko to follow him somewhere where they can finish their duel in peace. Zero lets Kiriko go, telling C.C. that Kiriko is very much like he himself: unstoppable by anyone.

The war isn't over yet though: V.V. appears in the Siegfried, only operable by someone with cybernetics... or with a unique nervous system. It's going to be a bitter grudge match between Lelouch's forces and the source of all the Geass misery. Or at least, that's what Lelouch thinks.

You should go to a spot 3 squares down and 12 left of the upper right-hand corner with Lelouch. There he'll find a DM Adaptor -- proof of just how many pies the Geass Order has its fingers in.

V.V. proves extremely hard to kill, and Zero orders Rolo to grab onto the Siegfried: he's got a plan! Well, that plan involves detonating explosives he's hidden in Rolo's mech, but Rolo -- unaware of this -- is determined to truly give his all for his "elder brother". V.V. belittles the efforts of the "failed" Geass experiment, scoffing that Rolo's powers require stopping his own heart, but Rolo nevertheless manages to latch on.

Before Lelouch pushes the button though, a new combatant zooms in from nowhere and hits the Siegfried in its one weak spot. The pilot is none other than Cornelia, who is not the weak, fragile hostage V.V. seemingly took her for. She declares that the Geass that ended her sister's life is to be ended now, and that gives Lelouch the opening he needs to trash the Siegfried once and for all.

However, waiting nearby is Charles, who V.V. always figured was his last hope. He admits to Charles that he sent assassins to kill Lelouch, though they got turned against him. He tells Charles that Lelouch has his memory back, and that he's even got control of Nanaly. Charles coolly replies that V.V. is lying, and when Lelouch zooms in for the kill, he gets caught in the same light that got him at Kaminejima...

Goat and his friends have been dragged along by Rochina to look after Fiana, while Rochina watches Kiriko's final duel. Rochina is still cagey with Aron and Gran about how he found them, and what the whole Red Shoulder march business is, saying only that everyone will find out soon. He tells Fiana that he desperately wants to know how Kiriko can fight on equal footing with a Perfect Soldier, though it seems there's something else he's not telling her as well.

As Kiriko and Ypsilon square off, Ypsilon demands to know how Kiriko's been able to keep fighting him all this time. Kiriko initially thought it was simply because Ypsilon was chasing him, but has realized since that it's all because he wants Fiana... which come to think of it is probably Ypsilon's own motivation too. Ypsilon protests that in his case, he and Proto One are the only ones of their Chosen kind, and totally different than Kiriko. Ahh, but what was he before entering the PS program? Ypsilon screams that he has no past, just like Proto One, and wants to know why the hell Kiriko keeps calling her "Fiana".

Even Kiriko himself has no good answer for that. Maybe there is no good answer. There will, however, be a definite end to this otherwise-unending battle, when either he or Ypsilon falls. Fiana implores Rochina to stop this, to keep Kiriko from having to experience the sorrow she has, but Rochina tells her that Kiriko must have realized his Destiny by now. But what could that be? Some greater flow that's swept up the Red Shoulders, the PS's, and everything else.

Ypsilon finds himself hating both Kiriko and Proto One, hating them for not sharing the pride he feels in battle. Kiriko replies that there's nothing about fighting to be proud about -- any pride Ypsilon might feel is just his own personal hang-up. Seeing Ypsilon's mania about PS-dom deepen ever further, Kiriko finds himself pitying the guy. Certainly Ypsilon hasn't somehow transcended humanity or anything...

When Kiriko strikes the final blow, Rochina reaches a startling conclusion: Kiriko must himself be a PS. How could a mere human defeat the perfect Perfect Soldier? It would explain a lot, and even Fiana buys into it. She runs over as Kiriko prepares for the coup de grace, yelling that Kiriko, a fellow PS, will have to go through her first. At first Kiriko attributes his victory to his customized Mission Disc, but come to think of it that disc is completely burned out... while he's still fine. But how the hell could he be a PS when nobody's ever modified his body? Ypsilon is sure that Kiriko must be a PS, else his fading pride would never allow him to die in peace.

Fiana murmurs to herself that she may be the real cause of Ypsilon's death, and at this rate of Kiriko's as well. Rochina asks Kiriko if he wants further proof of his PS-dom, and tells him to go visit Quent -- which conveniently

is now part of this solar system thanks to all the dimensional upheaval. Rochina will even make the travel arrangements, provided that Kiriko leave Fiana with him for the duration.

Kiriko has a decision to make, and lots about his victory to doubt. But Zero stands as an example of someone who knows their fate and is doing everything they can to confront it head on. He resolves to do the same, and go on this voyage of self-discovery.

Zero and the Shinkirou are nowhere to be seen, and Rolo is nearly beside himself with panic. There's little to be done though but continue searching. C.C. meanwhile has gone to see what's left of V.V., telling him that she's been unable to escape her fate after all. He tells her he'll take that fate upon himself, and C.C. realizes that V.V. has actually passed his Code on to Charles right before the burst of light. Why would Charles choose now to steal the Code from the brother he loved so dearly? C.C. realizes that V.V. actually loved Marianne, and her children, far more than he let on...

Lelouch meanwhile has found himself outside his mech and standing on the platform at the base of the Sword of Akasha. Charles announces to his prodigal son that the Time of Redemption is at hand, but Lelouch has questions that need answering. Like why Charles didn't do anything to protect Marianne despite knowing how much the other courtiers hated her. Charles answers with his oft-stated maxim that people aren't created equal, and tells Lelouch to try to use his Geass to make him answer.

Lelouch instantly distrusts this invitation, knowing that looking into Charles' eyes would mean Charles looking into his in turn. How to solve this quandary? The answer is to fire one of the Shinkirou's reflector missiles by remote control, using its numerous mirrors to direct his Geass before Charles could react. He orders Charles to die, and Charles obliges and shoots himself in the chest. Holy shit, did Lelouch just win? It instantly feels hollow, with so many people deserving of an apology from the now-deceased tyrant.

...Who it turns out isn't deceased after all. Charles intones his disappointment that his son would try to do him in with cheap tricks: come like a KING, if Lelouch really wants to inherit the King's Power. It seems that Charles has exchanged his Geass for immortality, and Lelouch instantly senses that he's screwed. Charles then offers (insists, really) on showing Lelouch what the world is really like.

Lelouch demands to know what the hell is really going on around here -- for starters, just what is the Geass, anyway. Charles scoffs at a lying child should ask him for the truth, and demands to know what the Zero facade has bought Lelouch. PLENTY, if you count the fact that it's let a mere high schooler build a private army and whatnot. On the other side, it cost him Euphemia, and sundered his ties with Nanaly and Suzaku. Lelouch won't let Charles judge him on that basis, saying that everyone lies to each other to make life livable.

Charles counters that people are simply afraid to know their true selves, and cover the gap up with lies. There's no need for that though, since Charles is Lelouch and Lelouch is Charles. Say what? Charles declares that there's always only ever been one person in this world for all of history, and refuses to elaborate on the theory that the holder of the Black Knowledge gets to make the rules.

C.C. then enters the picture, telling Charles that playtime is over and that Lelouch is of no further use to her. Charles says he'll grant her wish, and the fact that he knows it in the first place is a nasty shock. She tells

Lelouch at long last what her wish is: to die, to have her existence extinguished permanently. It turns out that those whose Geass has progressed to its final phase can inherit the Code of their maker, gaining the ability to kill them. None of C.C.'s several previous Geass recipients was able to go that far, even including Mao. But hey, Charles is here, and he's clearly full-fledged!

Lelouch is struggling with the concept that she's been living only to do, and she tells him that that's the whole point of "life" in first place. He counters that the point of "life" is to be alive, and that there is some deeper meaning behind being born into the world in the first place. She counters that a "life" with no death isn't living at all, but just one more "experience". She challenges him to kill her if he's got a reason to live -- doing so will make him equal to Charles. He can't begin to bring himself to do that, and she bids him farewell, telling him he's too kind. She does something that allows Lelouch to escape this place, and then poses Charles the question why he stole V.V.'s Code. Is that question even meaningful, given that she's about to die?

Lelouch finds himself in another place, hearing C.C. explain that it's her inviolable memory. This C.C. doesn't recognize him, and tells him to behold those memories, including images of her as a young girl when she first received her Geass. C.C. was a very ill-treated orphan then, who found herself at the mercy of a nun who inquired if she had a reason to live. C.C. didn't know if she had a reason to live, but she certainly had no wish to die. The nun conferred on her the power to go on living, in return for granting the nun's own wish someday.

C.C.'s Geass was to be "loved" by all, probably because it was her deepest wish to have someone's affection. The problem was that so many people gave her so much love that before long she no longer knew what real love was. The nun, the only person not infatuated with her, wasn't much help, eventually telling C.C. it was her turn to inherit the nun's curse of eternal life. Far from being an act of benevolence, the nun's selection of C.C. for Geasshood was just a stratagem to end her own life. Suckage.

This C.C. suspects that Lelouch must have been important to her future self, though Lelouch tries to deny it. After all, the future C.C. probably sent him here for his own protection, and that must mean that in the present C.C. is in some terrible danger. Oh crap!

Back in real time, C.C. says that everyone she's ever hated, everyone who's ever treated her with kindness have all been carried away by the eternal flow of Time. Charles thinks those days are about to end, but Lelouch rematerializes by his own power. Charles is astounded that Lelouch was actually able to operate the Logic Elevator, and if there's one thing Lelouch will not have, it's Charles killing his woman! He demands to know why C.C. didn't confer upon him her curse of eternal life, choosing Charles to kill her instead. Is it out of pity?! She IS NOT going to die with that sad look on her face. He vows that when her time comes to die, he'll make her have a smile on her face. And by the way, Charles is NOT going to steal anything else away from his son!

He opens fire on the mechanism of the Sword of Akasha, and dashes over to grab C.C. He tells her he now knows of her Geass, and of her real wish, and the two of them make good their escape. Only one problem though: C.C. has lost her memory, reduced to a compliant, borderline terrified peasant girl....

Back to Karen, who's imprisoned in one of the more unique holding cell systems ever invented. Her only visitor is Nanaly, who is of course now revealed to be a princess and not the mere sight-challenged classmate Karen might have thought her to be. Of course, Karen wasn't exactly the picture of an urban terrorist either. Karen has figured out quickly that Nanaly's life could be forfeit if Charles learns that Lelouch's memory is back, and has reached the same conclusion that Lelouch did: Charles must go.

Outwardly, she praises Nanaly for actually restoring the Japanese people's smiles, but the words probably sound hollow to both girls. Nanaly replies sadly that she's well aware of being a figurehead, but adds that she means to do what she can anyway as a devotee of Queen Rilina. Karen may not be the foremost expert in Absolute Pacifism, but she does suppose that fighting would be more likely to cease with gentle folk like Nanaly on the case. She then asks what kind of brother Lelouch was, and Nanaly allows that for all his stubbornness, Lelouch was always as kind to her as could be. Karen's brother was much the same...

Their conversation is interrupted by Suzaku, who insists politely but firmly on having a word alone with Prisoner #107, on a matter of "strategic" importance. Suzaku is determined to get Karen to divulge Zero's identity, and she is equally determined not to. Negotiations at an impasse, Suzaku announces that he'll do whatever he has to, and that means using drugs to force her. Karen has good reason to fear drugs after what they've done to her mother, and her increasing panic doesn't stay Suzaku's hand. He does stop at the last minute however, when he realizes that he's doing precisely what he accuses Zero of.

An intruder alarm sounds at this point, and as he runs off Suzaku promises to resume the questioning and get the answers he wants, one way or the other! No sooner is he gone than Sayoko shows up, announcing that Lelouch has ordered her to free Karen. That seems somehow out of character, but Sayoko isn't interested in debating the issue just now. She takes Karen to the hangar, where the Guren awaits.

While all this has been going on, Wiseman has been steadily leaking more data about Arrow's brutal suppression of Catalon. Ribbons hasn't been sitting idly by however, and has been able to narrow Wiseman's location down. He's in no hurry to attack, despite how the chaos throughout the Federation is growing on a daily basis. Grace isn't thrilled by this, and credits Rilina as the only thing keeping the powder keg from blowing wide open. Ribbons scoffs that Rilina is just a figurehead, and that humanity shouldn't be allowed a gift like Absolute Pacifism until far more time has elapsed. Perhaps so, but isn't it a shame someone besides Ribbons has arisen with the ability to chart the course of humanity?

Grace isn't trying to provoke him though -- she's trying to help him. She's got a dramatic way of getting rid of Rilina, and catching Zexis up in it to boot. All she wants in return is the opportunity to try a little experiment... one that might mean Cinq Kingdom vanishes for good from the world. Ribbons permits this, and promises her the necessary firepower, but after she hangs up he admonishes her to not get too greedy. She only need help him perfect the system for leading the common people around by the nose...

Meanwhile, news has come from Liu Mei that the Britannian emperor has vanished, which is sure to provoke some kind of reaction from the legions of Britannia loyalists. Given that someone matching Charles' description was spotted near the battle in the special forces facility (where Zero vanished), it stands to reason that he might have actually been caught by the same phenomenon. Many doubts still linger about that operation, which took place in what felt more



like a dormitory than a military base... then again, soldiers AND Secret Society types led the counterattack, so the military must have been involved somehow. Zero's description of it as some kind of secret agent training ground is probably accurate.

Speaking of Zero, he's been locked away in his room caring for C.C.'s wounds. Setsuna is adamant that this is not a case of love affecting Zero's judgement, though he doesn't himself know why. Amuro and Quatro know why, however -- Setsuna's awakening as a Newtype, with all the powers of perception, has begun thanks to the Double-0.

Kiriko meanwhile has abruptly left the team, and Renton is rather depressed about it. Or more accurately, he's depressed that he hasn't been able to get his own girlfriend back through battle as Kiriko has. Tifa tells him she thinks he may just be seeing Eureka again soon, but it doesn't take precognition to anticipate Hiiro's reunion with his theoretical love interest. They are heading to Cinq Kingdom after all. More than anything, Tifa loves how Rilina is fearless about expressing the desire for peace that everyone's buried deep in their hearts despite all the violence.

Rilina certainly didn't strike Duo as the queen of a generation when she was a student at Ashford Academy. She was a very composed, very genuine person. Not that Hiiro will admit to any of it. Zexis mission for now is to go guard Rilina as she delivers a speech meant, it's thought, to calm the world's nerves in the wake of the Wiseman Shock. Wufei distrusts this, fearing that she might voice support for Arrows, and Hiiro has already decided that if Rilina endorses a false peace, he'll kill her.

Back in Insalaum's science section, Unblown has just finished her last study on her stable of Singularities, who believe that they're not about to be set free. Eureka is of course eager to return to Renton, and Mome equally eager to return to Kei. Unblown isn't sure what she sees in the brash pilot, and Mome huffs that Unblown just doesn't understand Kei. In a surprisingly unguarded moment, Unblown admits that she's never known a man's love, having invested her whole life into Science(tm). She sounds like she regrets now the end result of all that searching, frittering away the best years of her life for a goal she couldn't even see. Eureka tells her she mustn't give up yet, that if there's anything Renton's taught her it's that one should always give one's all for the happiness of those one cares about.

Unblown can't bring herself to thank her enemies for this kindness with words, but she does give them a little something anyway. On a map of the world, she's indicated where Zexis is -- heading for Cinq Kingdom. Something strange is emanating from Cinq's capital: dimensional waves that resemble nothing so much as breathing. She interprets this as the presence of a system for controlling dimensional boundaries in the city, and whatever's going on, Orson and the others know they've got to hurry. Unblown uses her authority to open the hangar doors and facilitate the Singularities' escape. Watching them go, Unblown thinks to herself that she's already decided who she lives for, and who her Dimensional Science is devoted to: Yuusar.

Delmeier is receiving some bad news from his daughter: his tendency for military persuasion has fallen out of step with the times. It's plain to see that the UN Assembly prefers Rilina's approach, and in case Delmeier gets any funny ideas, Dorothy points out that he'd be at the top of the list of suspects in the event any misfortune were to befall. By the same token, Dorothy doubts Rilina's Absolute Pacifism will go over too smoothly, especially since Milliard's White Fang folks are getting frisky up in space. She reckons that this Absolute Pacifism will ultimately just cause more fighting, and whoever can suppress that will be the ruler of the world.

She advises him to cool his heels and maybe even learn a thing or two from Rilina until he's needed again. Delmeier grits his teeth and smiles when Rilina comes in, informing him that she's personally brought the ceremony's opening act to the hall. Sheryl is suitably impressed at the decor, befitting the peaceable new heart of the Federation. Sheryl, frankly, is a bit startled to have received the invitation to open, noting that she's not been that much of a headliner of late. She has been busy with humanitarian work, however, and Marina at least would dearly love to here Sheryl sing again. Delmeier is starting to wonder just who the hell Sheryl is that she knows multiple members of the world's power elite on a first-name basis.

The fact is that Sheryl's songs have gotten deeper, informed by all the people and all the songs she's encountered in the depths of her personal despair. She's found renewed passion in the idea of singing for someone else's sake, and no longer cares where she does it so long as there are those to listen. She means to give her all at Rilina's event, knowing that she doesn't have that much time left...

That gadget Unblown thinks is near Cinq's capital? Totally a Fold Wave transmitter, put there by Grace to bring "Them" into this world. She'd actually rather have the world in upheaval, and in that sense Rilina is in her way. "They" turn out to be Vajra, and the plan is to get rid of Rilina and Sheryl in one fell swoop. Sure to send despair throughout the world!

But first, there's Zexis to worry about. They're concentrating on taking out the unwanted Vajra visitors, and on going to meet Eureka (wherever she is). Kei tells Atena that he's pulling for her in her romance with Orson, and she predictably snaps that he should concentrate on the battle. Grace is actually looking forward to Zexis winning, thanks to what she's got planned next.

As Rilina and the others hurry toward the shelters, Delmeier curtly orders Sheryl to shoot down the Vajra -- isn't that what the Twinkle Project is for? She refuses, and Delmeier snaps that they should have gotten Ranka instead. That has to sting, but Sheryl is determined that her songs not be used as some sort of weapon...

After dealing with the Vajra, a bunch of Mobile Dolls appear. Is Arrows really brazen enough to attack Zexis despite Zexis' defense of Rilina?? Maybe not, in which case these might be someone else's forces -- Quatro is suspicious of the fact that none of the mecha seem to have pilots, which violates standard operating procedure for the Feds. The Feds, you see, always have at least one piloted mech in the mix with the Mobile Dolls, to clean up the mess in case something goes haywire with the Mobile Doll command system.

Hot on their heels are Orson and the others, bearing dire tidings of some kind of Dimensional Science-based trap in the city. Marin can detect that a Quake will be coming soon, and it would seem that a) someone REALLY hates Rilina, that b) that someone was able to somehow engineer the Vajra showing up on cue, and c) that Zexis totally fell into this entity's trap. There's no way to evacuate Rilina or the citizens with all the Mobile Dolls around, so the team's got to crush them within the five turns before an unavoidable Quake occurs. Grace isn't pleased with Orson as she watches from the sidelines, but it's still her belief that Zexis won't be able to avoid her "Dimension Eater".

Just to make things a bit more interesting, a bunch of DBs show up, making it seem as though Unblown's helpfulness was just an act. Delmeier makes the very very bad mistake of trying to flee in the chaos, merely getting himself

shot down by the DBs in the process. It's looking grim in the evacuation shelters, as even Rilina finds herself unable to quell the children's fear. But Sheryl can with her singing, which more than anything else she'd love for Alto to hear.

Alto does indeed hear her song, coming faintly but distinctly from Sheryl's earring. Basara says he can tell it's Sheryl in his heart, and if Sheryl can keep singing despite all the terror, Alto can damn well keep flying. At about this point Karen hacks and slashes her way onto the battlefield in what turns out to be a heavily-modified Guren: the "Guren S.E.I.T.E.N. Eight Elements edition". As all the model collectors in Akihabara get busy cleaning up all the spooge from this revelation, Karen gets busy making up for lost time. She always new Zero would come for her, and immediately forms the vanguard of one hell of a counterattack.

Unfortunately, Grace's little toy doesn't stop, and even if Zexis manages to get clear, the rest of the city and its people are about to be cast into an abyss between dimensions. That would leave Grace and her cronies to become the new queens of the age. What Grace hasn't counted on is yet another singer, in this case Eureka singing the song that once restored her memories. In response, a herd of Emerge show up (weren't they on vacation somewhere?) and dispel the dimensional distortion.

Eureka's friends are pretty wonderful, but unfortunately she won't get to spend any time with them. Marilyn shows up, tickled pink at Eureka's miraculous powers, and grabs her in short order. Seems that letting Eureka go was just another experiment...

Lloyd's been having a pretty rough time of it, having lost both Lakshata's KMF and the captive pilot who goes along with it. He admits to Schneider that he didn't think to guard it all that fiercely because he expected that only Suzaku was equal to piloting it in the first place. Oh well, at least he got some nifty data to feed back into the Lancelot, whose Energy Wings have just been completed. Schneider keeps his chat with Lloyd short, given that Dorothy is in his office. Dorothy suspects that Schneider went along with this plan in order to destabilize the Area Eleven government, believing that he, like her, isn't content with the current state of peace. She's resolved not to cry over her grandfather's death, and in fact is overjoyed that Rilina pulled through the chaos okay.

The question is, if Dorothy values Rilina so much, how come she's sided with Schneider? Well, for one thing she admires his scheming mind, capable in theory of establishing a new world order. And it seems to be Schneider's temperament to make that order a peaceful one, even if it's a false peace. And for another thing, she feels obliged to say a formal goodbye, preferring to side with a certain other person as they work on realizing the sort of future Rilina desires. Gee, could that be... Treize?

Dorothy, it must be said, is dangerous. The only way Schneider seems to know for dealing with such unhinged sorts is overwhelming force, which is where Nina and her F.L.E.I.J.A. weapon comes in. The thing is still in testing, but both it and Damocles are inches from completion. Schneider has Kanon hurry preparations -- with Charles still absent, Schneider may have no choice but to take matters into his own hands.

As Karen greets her teammates, Lakshata finds herself staring at the newly powered-up Guren. She recognizes the handiwork of "Earl Pudding" (her Britannian nemesis, as it were) and his assistant Cecil. She assures the team that "Pudding" has his shit together and that the mech will be a combat monster. Karen wonders where Zero and Kiriko are, and Crow advises her to go

get some rest -- they'll fill her in on the full details later. At least Lelouch should be glad to hear that Nanaly's doing well...

Orson tells Kei that his folks have been here quite a while, having been sucked into the Abyss not long after actually confirming its existence in the first place. Roger figures they probably got sucked in due to their Singularity factor, and wonders if this is anything to do with the "Stigmata" Eim mentioned. By the same token, if Eim is right about there being some single will behind all the teleporting, why didn't that entity see fit to bring Orson along at the same time as the rest of ZEUTH?

Good question. All Orson knows is that Unblown was most curious about the Singularities, and about Eureka's contact with the Emerge. It's really interesting that they can be summoned by song, that which (says Liina) transcends space and time and resonates with the soul. All Eureka's done is to reenact the South Polar incident where she got her memory back, and Tifa thinks that the other Emerge have effectively returned what Eureka gave them then. In any event, Eureka needs rescuing from these Insalaum jerks, and there'll be plenty of pilots lining up behind Renton to make it happen when the time comes.

As Rilina's speech finally begins, Hiiro is off on an "errand". Rilina's speech opens with musings on the nature of intra-human conflict, concluding that mankind must become completely "one" for the fighting to stop for good. That may sound idealistic, but unless people have ideas to head toward, revolution can never occur. She then asserts that any armed force which would turn its arms on the people must not be allowed: what the world needs now is coexistence, not conflict. And once true harmony is achieved, all weapons can finally be cast aside. She hopes Hiiro is somewhere listening to this, and in fact he's a lot closer than she knows.

The other Zexis pilots are watching with Hiiro, and though they admit that there are some overly idealistic tenets here, the basic idea seems attractive to nations throughout the world. If her ideals can become reality, then even the bitterly contested colonies will have a chance to enter the Federation on equal footing. And it'll be the job of an outfit like Zexis to fend off any external enemies who try to start static. Hiiro seems satisfied, and encourages Rilina inwardly to give it her best shot. He'll kill all her enemies for her.

Sheryl is once again grateful for Alto's protection, and tells her the feeling's mutual. Her song as it came through that earring was really inspiring! Of course it was, she grins, who does he think she-- She collapses on the spot before finishing the sentence...

#### CHAPTER 41. [Route Split]

Lelouch is having Jeremiah and Rolo coordinate the search for the rest of the Geass Order forces... and for Cornelia, who managed to escape the previous battle despite her injuries. With Charles apparently still hanging out in the Sword of Akasha, it seems like Nanaly should be safe for the time being. With Karen now safe, everything seems to be going his way... unless you count C.C., who is so amnesiac that she a) can't tell when he's joking, and b) doesn't even remember what pizza is. At least that latter part can be readily fixed, and Lelouch has Saji recommend a flavor for her to try. He's confident enough that he can finally leave C.C. alone for a bit and get back to conferring with the other commanders.

The topic du jour is Wiseman, who from Liu Mei's info seems highly unlikely to be hanging out on the Earth's surface. Wiseman's unnecessary provocation of

world events has gotten beyond a level Zexis can ignore. There's also the Gilgamesh and Valalant forces massing around the "Neo Planets" brought by the Quake -- though Rochina swears they'll be smoothly integrated into the Federation army, Zexis has plenty to doubt. It sounds like a detachment will be needed in space, especially given Wiseman's spooky use of the Red Shoulder March. And that detachment will need to include the Frontier forces, which are being requested for a major anti-Vajra offensive. Meanwhile, the Tower will be headed to Japan for some serious maintenance on all the super robots in advance of whatever major fragdown will happen with Insalaum (et. al.). Crow as usual will get to choose which way to go, with plenty on his mind.

Traia's been on the lookout for rumors about Carlos and Gaiou, but nothing concrete's hit her desk. She has been very busy figuring out how the ZONEs work, and has a scheme for rendering them inoperative if their tuning knobs can be accessed. How to do that is still anyone's guess, as is Eim's whereabouts. Eim has not come calling to the only remaining free Sphere-bearer the way Crow figured he would, and that's just fine with him as it gives him more chances to perfect his Sphere mastery. If he's lonely for anyone, it's Esther. He isn't getting much payment this time, but at least he's not too depressed: money isn't everything.

[To go to Japan, head to Chapter 41J. To go to space, go to Chapter 41S.]

Sheryl wakes up in a room aboard the Ptolemy-2, en route to the Frontier fleet. Elmo is on his way to pick her up, and after a moment's reflection she decides that that suits her fine. Alto starts to protest that she ought to rest, but she's adamant that she's going to spend what life remains as she sees fit. Then, with an expression he's never seen before, she implores him to help her check out something aboard the Frontier...

#### CHAPTER 41J. Grudge Match! Kurogane-Ya's Longest Day

Tsubasa is outside, watching the moon... one so nice it's almost as though Dr. Hell doesn't exist. But then she gets a visitor: Tsurugi Tetsuya, who is supposed to have died back on Bardos Island...

The Mazinger team return to the Photon Power Lab for the first time in God-knows how long. There, she's amazed to hear that the Mazinger army -- Million Alpha-1, Billion Beta-2, and Daion Gamma-3 -- are all ready to rock and support Vyunas. Professor Yumi wants to get right to work overhauling Vyunas, noting that Kouji isn't on the scene. Of course, he's gone to Atami to see Tsubasa, who seems to have undergone some kind of massive turn for the worse.

She doesn't speak, and gets weaker by the day. The doctors have no clue, and her subordinates are worried sick. Kouji is pretty worried too, which is an unpleasant surprise to Shiro. Isn't Kouji supposed to hate his mother for killing his father? Kouji isn't quite that kind of guy, but as he gazes on Tsubasa she suddenly speaks up, apparently speaking to Tetsuya and telling him that she won't let him get "it" back.

Just then Ashura shows up out of nowhere, gloating over how Tsubasa is tied up talking to Tetsuya's ghost. It seems Ashura's been on the run from Dr. Hell ever since the Gedora incident, and (s)he explains that Tetsuya's ghost has possessed Tsubasa, draining her life force at an alarming rate. After a bit of thought, Kouji's concluded that the possession was spurred by the glimpse of Tsubasa's former priestesshood among the Mikeene. His own glimpse of Ashura's memories -- and Tsubasa's -- has provided very valuable insight.

Kouji's tentatively willing to share some of that insight, but he starts with the "confession" that Tsubasa is his mother.... which totally surprises no one else. For starters, there's a strong family resemblance to their faces and voices. That there's blood ties certainly makes the other pilots predisposed to help save her.

He explains that his father and grandfather, Tsubasa and Dr. Hell were all involved in exploring the Mikeene ruins on Bardos Island. This led to Tsubasa and his father getting married and having him and Shiro. Tetsuya turns out to have been his father's best friend, and the test pilot of the prototype Photon Power-driven robot. His skills are legendary, apparently. Anyhow, Grandpa Kabuto and Dr. Hell discovered a giant robot in the Mikeene ruins, which they modified into the first of the Mecha-Beasts. They also found the mummy of Ashura, and the Gedora, which scared the other party members shitless and led them to try to flee the island.

This failed though when Kouji's father betrayed them, nervous system already compromised by the Gedora. Tetsuya used the prototype robot to face Dr. Hell and Kouji's dad in a bid to save Tsubasa and Kouji's grandfather, sacrificing himself to immobilize Kouji's dad. Tsubasa fired the gunshot that pierced them both, after Tetsuya herself told her to fire.

Shiro's overheard the whole thing, and Kouji assures him it's the whole truth. Kouji himself has taken a long time to finally accept it, and Shirou isn't likely to manage the same feat quickly. The closest target for his rage is Ashura, but Kouji tells him to stop -- Ashura's the only one they can count on now, regardless of Ashura's role in their grandfather's death.

Ashura tells the team that the curse was placed by Pigman, and there must be something nearby that's concentrating or amplifying its power -- something with deep associations to both Tsubasa and Tetsuya. Destroying it will save Tsubasa's life, but that could be easier said than done with Pigman himself getting in the way. He appears as a hologram to taunt the team, though Takeru sees through the ruse right away. Pigman claims that no one can stop him with the Power of Darkness overshadowing the world, since that's the very thing that fuels his power anyway.

He says he's here to actually dispel Tetsuya's ghost, but even he can't do that until Tetsuya's last wish is fulfilled. What's the last thing he saw? The greatest of all the Mikeene treasures: the Arm of Zeus! Apparently lots of people are interested in it, including Nia -- who shows up out of thin air. Her plan is to eradicate the thing, on the theory that it's a power too great for the Spiral Lifeforms to possess. Corwen and Stinger are on the scene too, lamenting how mere humans can't comprehend what the Anti-Spirals are thinking.

Metarl also shows up without warning, making me either doubt the writers, or the team's powers of perception. This Arm of Zeus thing must be pretty important, and Pigman snorts that if not for it, Tsubasa would never have been cursed in the first place. Kouji yells that Pigman has no right to say that, and Pigman counts that Tetsuya himself does. Oh, and there's one other person on tap with something to say too...

Tsubasa/Tetsuya summons Energar Z from the ocean -- very similar to Mazinger Z except for small details. Aboard it is none other than Kenzou himself, back for the Arm of Zeus that Tsubasa stole. The robot had been sunk along with the rest of Bardos Island, but it's back now. Tsubasa, recovering her own will, drags herself up to survey the scene. Pigman tells her that if she simply hands over the Arm, Tetsuya and Kenzou will both simply vanish. She's not trying to hear that noise; in fact, she'd rather hear something like Sheryl's singing if she's going to die anyway.

Nia vanishes as the Tower appears, along with a horde of Dr. Hell's troops. Kouji scrambles to launch, ordering Shirou to keep Tsubasa safe -- whether or not he's prepared to accept her as his mother. The Energar Z has the same weapons as Mazinger, and quickly disables Kouji's Jet Scrander. Still, Kouji insists on facing his father alone while the rest of the team take out the small fry: only a Photon Energy-powered mech can prevail against another one here.

If Kouji visits his house, he'll find Ankokuji lurking around. He's got a present for Kouji, which turns out to be a Hyper Jammer. Just why he's got one of those is more than a little suspicious, but he tells Kouji that he's counting on him.

Kouji handily pummels Energar Z, but rather than just collapse it starts to overload, building up to what will surely be a devastating high-yield blast. Tsubasa meanwhile seems in no hurry to hand over the Arm of Zeus, looking up instead at the sky and thinking it's a nice color to die beneath. However... it's "Ashura's" day to die, not Tsubasa's! Or should we say... Pigman, who's been dressed up as Ashura all this time. How'd she find out?!? Tsubasa starts snickering, and busts up laughing -- Pigman really needs to get out more, doesn't he? It wasn't Sheryl's song she heard during the Gedora incident: it was Ranka and Basara!

Oh noes, foiled by his own faulty pop music knowledge! And if it really was Ashura and Ashura had equal pop cultural suckage, oh well! Tsubasa totally expected someone to come after the Arm of Zeus, and everything clicked when she saw Tetsuya's ghost. She'll even tell him where the Arm is, and he figures it out for himself: it's amidst the Japanium alloy used to make Mazinger Z. The best place to hide a twig, after all, is in a forest.

Meanwhile, it turns out that Brocken's the dude pretending to be Kouji's dad. He razes the ground around Energar and flees, leaving the team unable to directly go in and stop the blast. Or... not, thanks t Tsubasa's little present from Juuzou to Kouji. It's the God Scrander, the final and greatest wings for Mazinger, which in its entirety was born of the Arm of Zeus.

Nia and friends show up, planning to take this remnant of the God of Light away from the humans, but this time Dr. Hell himself tells them to stuff it. He's got words for both Kouji and the Baals: all Photon Power is his!! He knows of the Baals from the Black Knowledge, data that apparently spans the Universe's timeline from its creation to its eventual destruction. Nia and friends aren't pleased that the humans've gotten yet another useful piece of info, and they focus their attention on Mazinger Z. Which is exactly what Tsubasa was hoping for, since it makes it that much easier to get rid of them all at once. She shouts to Kouji that this is his big chance to protect his brother, and a strange face shows up on the screen to agree. It's the "Ultra-Gorgeous Computer" Grandpa, created to help out Kouji in the worst exigencies, and Kouji loves it on sight. As he gets busy trying to stop that blast, Tsubasa thinks to Tetsuya that this is what he bought mankind at the cost of his life. See what the Arm of Zeus can really do!

As the team comes to grips with Energar Z, Apollo finds himself mumbling to the God of Light that he will inherit His power.... and not remembering what he said afterward.

Kouji remembers his grandfather telling him that Mazinger could become a god or a demon, depending on how it's used. And if Kouji's got anything to say about it, Photon Power will never be used for evil! Is Nia impressed by all of this? No, just mildly peeved, which she shows by ratcheting the mankind

destruction system up to its next phase. Corwen and Stinger had better get their own plans in gear or they'll miss the party! Dr. Hell actually praises Kouji for how well he's using the Arm of Zeus, planning to pull out for today. But don't forget: he is the lord of Photon Power.

"Grandpa" goes to sleep for now, promising to wake up again when the time is right. Ankokuji too is impressed, telling his employer that it seems there's no need to worry for now. About the only person in Atami not happy is Pigman, who's been transfixed by Tsubasa's Super Alloy-Z needles and immobilized. Pigman uses his last resort, tearing off his skin to reveal another body underneath. Tsubasa reminds him that he's going to suffer greatly if anything happens to her, but Pigman has already decided that a double-knockdown is in Dr. Hell's best interest.

Shirou intervenes at this moment, trying to keep his promise to protect Tsubasa despite his diminutive stature. Kouji shows up and diverts Pigman's attention, letting Shirou actually make contact. Overwhelmed, Pigman flees, and Shirou tells his "moms" that he doesn't need any thanks. Shirou scurries off, leaving Kouji to talk with his now-acknowledged mom alone. He's still struggling for the right words, telling her that he's incredibly impressed with how she put her own ass on the line to defeat Pigman. He doesn't believe her when she calls herself a "fragile" woman, and tells her he knows that Tetsuya was actually her brother, raised by separate parents. She found that part out well after she actually shot the guy, and Kouji finally understands why she's been training him so hard: to keep the same thing from happening to him and Shirou. She tells him she's got nothing more to offer her son, now that he's a full-grown man and that she's handed over Juuzou's final memento. One thing's for sure: Dr. Hell is going to bring it for real now that it's clear where the Arm of Zeus is. And when he does, Kouji means to finally settle the Kabuto/Hell feud once and for all.

Tsubasa means to get busy preparing for the fragdown, and tells Kouji that Kurogane-ya is going on a little hiatus. She leaves her five servants, and the Boss gang, to Zexis for the time being. She'll keep Shirou with her for now, and assures Kouji that she's not so old that he has to fuss over her. Just a little time and her body'll be back to normal. Tsubasa means to get good and plastered tonight, and means to have Shizuko join her. But they won't be alone -- they'll have the moon to listen in on all their secrets, as well as Tsubasa's do-gooding younger brother. Gonna pour some brew for his dearly departed ass and PROPER.

Back on Bardos Island, Metarl comes to congratulate Dr. Hell on getting his hands on the Black Knowledge. He asks if Metarl means to make good on his former promise and become his true ally, and Metarl knows Dr. Hell now knows his real identity. If not, Dr. Hell would never dream of seeking out their help. With the Baals in motion, Dr. Hell figures that Zexis is the only real obstacle to his plan. He means to set the Baals on Zexis, and swoop in once they're depleted to finish Zexis off. Metarl agrees to include Dr. Hell among his number as the ruler of Earth, but Hell himself says that it's not time for that yet. Only once he acquires the full secrets of Photon Power will he be worthy of that name. And when that happens, he'll need Ashura's powers once more. Some day very soon, he will truly become the ruler of the world!

#### CHAPTER 41S. Triangular

Sumeragi calls Michelle and Klan into a private briefing: she's got something she doesn't want Alto -- or rather, Sheryl -- to hear. From what examination the Ptolemy-2's medical apparatus can conduct, it seems Sheryl is not suffering from exhaustion. The diagnosis is V-type Contamination, a disorder



caused by contact with the Vajra, usually through exchange of bodily fluids. If Michelle and Klan aren't aware of it, odds are good that Alto doesn't know either. Evidence suggests that Sheryl has progressed well past the point where treatment is possible, and even the medication she's been using to keep the symptoms under control looks like it's hitting the wall.

Michelle knows how direly this will affect Alto, and asks that everyone keep this from Alto. Sumeragi assures him that she has no intention of intruding into the team's private lives, and leaves the pilots alone. Michelle notes that Sheryl herself didn't -- or probably couldn't -- bring herself to tell Alto. Klan protests that she's a woman too, and it's feminine intuition that they ought to notify Alto, but Michelle says that there are some things so important that they transcend the must-notify level. That's not to say that there isn't anything they can do for the two...

Back aboard the Frontier fleet, Cathy shares her suspicion with Ozuma that the weapon which nearly destroyed Cinq Kingdom used Fold Quartz. Ozuma and Luka concur, and Cathy notes that this world's Superdimensional science has been basically frozen since Limonecia (where the DEC is mined)'s downfall. And given that Fold Quartz is only made inside the bodies of the Vajra (and thus realllly hard to come by), it stands to reason that someone from their world is behind the mess. The signs point to Mishima, and Ozuma promises to keep up investigations as Ranka's next concert draws near.

Cathy and Ozuma's relationship is clearly still strained, not the least because Cathy is still technically Mishima's fiancée. They've quarreled over Ozuma's seeming lack of ambition in the past, as well as Ozuma's childish obsession with pop stars. Cathy knows that Ozuma's cooked up an excuse to go visit Zexis in order to see Basara, going through Bobby so she supposedly wouldn't find out. But then she's known he's always been the obsessive type, and is prepared to forgive him his fandom... especially since she also knows he's not actually gotten to meet Basara due to a litany of logistical problems. It's kind of like the legendary girl with the bouquet who never gets to give it to Basara at the Fire Bomber concerts, which Ozuma mentioned to her once. It's okay though: even if he doesn't get to see Basara for now, Ozuma will always be a fan, and always have Basara's blazing music in his soul.

Sheryl turns up at the concert ahead of time, looking for a little time alone with Grace. She brushes off Grace's claims that she's been worried sick about Sheryl, especially with the mess in Cinq Kingdom, and asks her "why". Why did she become Ranka's manager? Why is she trying to tie Sheryl to the bed (so to speak)? Why does Ranka's singing affect the Vajra? Why... why is it her and not Sheryl herself?!

Grace muses that it's a pretty pitiable thing. Call Sheryl an "artist", a "singer" or what have you, but at her core she's an "idol", a graven image for others to look at. Sheryl protests that she's come this far entirely on her own steam, but Grace claims that if she'd not pulled Sheryl out of the Galaxy slums, she'd still be there to this day, covered in filth. But "Sheryl Nome" is about to die, Grace says, admitting that she knows Sheryl is suffering from V-type Contamination. Sheryl, however, doesn't seem inclined to just fall over dead from such a proclamation.

Elsewhere, Zexis' pilots are conferring about this new operation to get rid of the Vajra. Whatever it is, Ranka's singing is presumably involved, and that means today's concert may be the last the public gets to hear of Ranka for some time. Lacus just hopes that that's by Ranka's own choice. Shinn hates to see Lacus so downcast, and tells Kira to do something to cheer her up... like, tell her he loves her or something. Is that what Lunamaria does for Shinn? Nope, because she knows he doesn't need her words to know she loves him. Kira

figures he'll do the same with Lacus, and when Aslan asks what all the whispering is about, the group fall silent.

The concert starts, and Lacus explains that "songs" are the embodiment of the feelings the singer has for another. They aren't a weapon as such, but rather a means to stop fighting. This doesn't compute for Setsuna, and Lacus continues that it takes more than power alone, more than feelings alone, to make the world go 'round. If Zexis is the "power", someone has to be the "feelings" -- someone like Marina for instance, who also has been known to sing on the battlefield. Amuro likes that Setsuna is starting to understand, and is sure that everything will become clear some day soon. In the meantime, Crow and the others mean to chill out and enjoy the music.

The concert's taking place at a school, and in one of the classrooms Alto and Michelle are hanging out for a little confab. Alto says he was able to see Ranka briefly before the show, and as one can hear from the singing outside, she's plenty pumped. Michelle gets down to why he called Alto out alone: isn't it time he make up his mind? Look: several songs in Ranka's set are obviously aimed at Alto specifically, and the same could be said of Sheryl. The last thing Sheryl would want to do is worry Alto, but Sheryl's in fact in very bad shape. This startles Alto, and he demands to know what Michelle knows. Michelle can't come out and say it directly, and he admits that he's a coward of sorts -- combat pilots can die at any time, and the thought keeps him from getting serious.

Sheryl comes in at this moment, and Michelle makes a show of leaving the two of them alone. Sheryl loved what she saw of the stage, but says she felt no desire to go out there and sing herself. She's kind of tired, after all, and doesn't think she's got long left. Alto tells her to stop lying: there's no way Sheryl of all people would cast away the desire to sing. How else did her songs touch so many people? Alto knows for sure the difference between an authentic performer and a charlatan. Just then, Ranka comes in, having planned to tell Alto how she really feels. But seeing the two of them together gets things totally flustered, and she runs off again...

Michelle had Klan bring Sheryl, and Klan has serious doubts whether she did the right thing. She asks where Michelle's love is at, but instead of answering he directs her attention to a little problem: a Vajra incursion! The attack is ongoing both inside and outside Island-1, so the regular army won't be in time to help save the citizens. Alto pleads with Ranka to sing and quiet them on the citizens' behalf, but she totally doesn't feel like singing now. She's had enough of being used as a tool against the Vajra, and is on the verge of crying when Sheryl slaps her. Certainly feelings are needed to sing, as Sheryl knows better than most. But Ranka's a pro, and pros do their job. There's a power in Ranka's voice that Sheryl herself lacks, no matter how badly she wants it, and as Alto pleads too Ranka gets the fire back into her eyes.

Hearing Ranka singing, Basara shouts that she's doing it wrong. Ranka's heart is paining her immensely as she sings, and the result seems to be that the Vajra's attacks are getting fiercer. Alto hastily leads the two singers toward safety, running into Michelle and Klan along the way. As they're about to head to the nearest S.M.S. shelter in search of weapons, Nanase runs over, relieved to see that everyone's okay. She herself doesn't stay okay for long though, as an explosion throws her to the ground in a heap. And that just after telling Ranka that she's everyone's hope. Hope, huh, thinks Sheryl, and she tells Ranka and Alto to leave Nanase to her. They need to go do something about this mess. After all, who does Alto think she is?

That's encouraging for a change, and Alto takes Ranka's hand as the two run for it. Ranka senses that Alto's hand is very very warm, warmer than

anything she's experienced since... her brother's...?

Why the hell wasn't the Vajra attack detected ahead of time? Could it be that the Vajra are nesting inside Island-1? Anyway, there are no workable mecha on hand, but there is some Valkyrie-style armor and ordnance, AND a Zentraedi bigifier. That's good enough for Klan, but before she throws herself into harm's way, she wants Michelle to answer her question about love: where is it? He says that he's been searching for it ever since it went "missing" -- if in fact it existed in the first place.

Yep, that's a cowardly answer if she ever heard one. She decks him in the face, then -- blushing furiously -- tells him directly that she loves him. Why now, he wonders? If not NOW, when?? She tells Michelle and Alto to get this through their thick skulls: no one afraid of dying can ever truly be in love. Michelle kisses Klan just as she heads to the bigifier, impressing everyone present. Love really is a battlefield, huh?

Actually, it is -- a Vajra larva breaks into the room while Klan is still transitioning: she's completely vulnerable, and Michelle throws himself in harm's way to keep the Vajra at bay. He in fact manages to protect her, but he lays down his life to do it. Klan emerges from the device just a second too late, and she is PISSED OFF. I wouldn't want to be a Vajra based on what happens next.

There's nowhere near enough Vajra for Klan to kill to satisfy her, but when Luka radios in to tell her that Zexis is working on a general counterattack, she manages to control her anger and head to the scene.

The plan, according to Luka, is to lure the Vajra into Island-3 and detonate a Fold Bomb, the latest weapon to come out of L.A.I. Basically everything within a 50km radius will get cut off from this universe and presumably reduced to A-level maths. The similarity to what almost happened to Cinq Kingdom is NOT lost on Cathy. Originally this was supposed to be done somewhere out in deep space, but with circumstances this dire President Howard has decided to do it right in the middle of the fleet. The question of course is... how are ALL the Vajra to be lured to one place at once?

Luka looks mighty uncomfortable at this point, as it of course hinges on Ranka. This is the last thing he wanted to do, but the sad fact is that Michelle is now dead, and Nanase in a coma, thanks to the Vajra. The Frontier fleet will be finished if this goes on, and Luka says through clenched teeth that this is mankind's one chance to fight back: kill, or be killed. Ranka surprises Alto by agreeing to sing, for "everyone's" sake.

Zexis job will be to keep "Cinderella" safe during the five turns or so required to lure the Vajra to the scene. Alto is with Ranka, promising to keep her safe no matter what. Ranka's sure she can properly sing this time, and as Alto leaves to get into the cockpit, Brela tells her she needn't sing if she doesn't want to. Her songs are her heart, and her heart is her own. She thanks him but says she's okay, thinking that she'd rather do what the one person she most wanted her songs to reach, wants (that's Alto, BTW) than remain silent.

Meanwhile, there's a very uncomfortable meeting between Grace and Lacus. Grace tells Lacus she was blown away when she first heard her songs, a perfect blend of sorrow and strength. Many people must have been very moved. Would Lacus consider joining Twinkle Project when this is all over? Lacus tells her that songs aren't some sort of tool for Grace to wield as she sees fit. Lacus is sure that Ranka and Sheryl will yet show Grace what the true power of singing is...

As though Alto needed more motivation to defend Ranka, Ozuma comes on the radio to add his plea... not as Alto's commander, but as Ranka's elder brother. Alto means to lay down his life if that's what it takes. Ranka begins, and the team are immediately struck by how sad her song is. The Vajra must be kept far away from the stage so as to not disturb Ranka -- much less kill her, in which case the entire Frontier Fleet could be wiped out. Crow and the others are still coming to terms with Michelle sacrificing himself for the woman he loves -- it's both quintessentially him, and not.

Though there are a lot of Vajra inside Island-3, they're not infinite; in fact, there's precisely 100. Once they're vanquished, word comes in that the remaining Vajra outside are converging on the scene. One of them shows up sooner than expected, and as Klan prepares to mount what may be a suicidal counterattack, a sniper round comes in and hoses it. Yes, it's Michelle, not quite as dead as reported. There's no time to talk, so Michelle tells Alto to grab Ranka and bug the hell out. In fact, there's no need for that even, as Lacus is on the case.

It turns out that Michelle was saved by Ozuma, who found him while heading to help Ranka out. The rapid first aid is what kept him alive, though he claims to be slightly amnesiac. In fact, he's just a minor sadist, wanting to keep things vague between him and Klan just a little longer before going into full love-love mode.

Word comes in that Ranka's made it home safely, though Alto suspects that she was somehow pushing herself. Basara is clearly not thrilled, and when Alto pushes him enough Basara demands to know just who decided that this was a kill-or-be-killed scenario. Did the Vajra fucking declare in as many words that they want to destroy mankind?! Basara spits that Alto ought not to decide other people's feelings for them, and Gamlin intervenes before it comes to blows. Basara's got his way of doing things, and the soldiers have theirs, is Gamlin's explanation. Basara stalks off, and Gamlin tells Alto he's pretty sure Alto must be having some doubts of his own. Alto admits as much, knowing that Ranka is somehow forcing herself to sing, and Gamlin advises him to keep one thing in mind: if he's going to fight, he ought to do it for the sake of those counting on him for protection.

The Vajra mess will have to be tabled, however: the Gilgamesh forces are up to something big around the Neo Planets, and Zexis is to go and investigate. Among those Neo Planets is Quent, and every indication is that Wiseman must be somehow involved. The commanders are concerned enough that permission has been granted to use Reactive weaponry, as well as the newly-developed MDE rounds. Reactive weapons are essentially "clean" fusion weapons, using gravitons as the explosive agent, but the "Micro Dimension-Eater" rounds come from a totally different lineage. This must be something to do with the Cinq Kingdom mess, given that they're Fold-based, and Alto has to wonder if this accelerating conflict is really for the best.

Surveying the wreckage in Island-1, Sheryl inwardly bids Alto farewell. If Ranka sings from hope, she's decided to try singing from despair, meaning to put what little life is left to the best possible use...

#### CHAPTER 42J. Inheritance From One's Father

Marin is man enough to admit that the Bardeos overhaul isn't going smoothly without Dr. Queenstein, in particular the subspace entry/separate/recombine sequence acceleration. God Sigma is having similar difficulties. Watta's only difficulties are being forced to do his homework, and he's managed to get a

little free time to go fishing with Apollo and Jiron. He'll be staying the night at his own house for a change. Meanwhile, Shotarou and his friends are busy training Black Ox at Domeki's place, even as Domeki herself has come to deliver the Great Knot Punisher. It's an expensive weapon, and the paperwork authorizing it had to go all the way to the top of 21st Century. Domeki tells the team to think of it as a memento of Ookouchi, who's about to retire soon and leave the reins to Nishijima (according to rumor, anyway). Nishijima has engineered a takeover of Takeo General Company as the means to ascend to the throne, and indications are that even Watta hasn't heard about. Mind you, the proceedings have been going on since the Breaking.

The Takeo representatives have gathered at 21st Century, and Nishijima isn't surprised that their child CEO is absent. Probably busy with homework or whatnot, he figures, and truth be told 21st Century's CEO isn't here either. Who is here is Dokujima from the Federation army, since Nishijima plans to cede Dai Guard and Trider G7 to the army upon his coronation as CEO. Dokujima would be in charge, and Watta would be expelled from the cockpit... and the rest of the management team from Takeo would be given "suitable" posts within the joint company.

Nishijima thinks that tossing in \$20M will sweeten the deal so much that Kojiro and the others will forget their loyalty to Watta, but his faith in the power of the almighty dollar is, shall we say, misplaced...

Meanwhile, Black Ox's training is going smoothly. TOO smoothly in fact, and Watta recommends calling Mackie up and going on a date in Odaiba. Shotarou protests that Mackie is his girlfriend, but just then the two boys notice a man being accosted by a Gishin Esper. The man is no ordinary fellow, in reality being the Robot Empire's top scientist Navaron. The Esper's been sent to capture Navaron and put his mind to use for Gishin's war effort, and Navaron refuses outright. He wants to make genuine robots now, not tools of war to be mass-produced and tossed out like yesterday's diapers when broken.

Shotarou sends Black Ox to save the guy, and Ox seizes the Esper and tosses him far out to sea. As Kappei goes over to see if the man's alright, Navaron sees telltale signs that Kappei has Bialy blood in him... That was enough for Kappei to bring the guy back to the Tower, despite not yet getting a straight answer about who he is. The fact that Gishin's after him is enough to make him worth protecting, for now at least.

The man is interested by the synergy between Zexis' awesome robots and its equally awesome pilots: this is the answer he's been seeking! Kappei wants to know why he recognized his heritage: nobody in his own world's ever known that before, much less anyone from this alternate world. The man relents and says that he's seen data about the Bial and Gaizock war, and says that he's designed a robot based on Bial's final weapon's plans. He's referring to Zanbot 3, and specifically it's variable geometry system -- though he claims his days as a scientist are long past.

Kojiro walks up and actually recognizes the guy: Umemaro! It turns out that he is the one who designed Trider G7, back when he was friends with Watta's father. He's saddened to hear that Michitarou passed away, but gladdened to have a chance to work on Trider again. Kojiro gladly gives him permission to check on the team's other robots too. As the old guy heads off, Atsui explains that Watta's dad took Umemaro in after finding him drifting in space. Umemaro made Trider in gratitude, and upon its completion set out on some kind of quest... though for what, he wouldn't say. Kojiro meanwhile asks Umemaro to power up his shuttle, saying he's got \$20M on hand to finance things. Does that mean he gave in to Nishijima after all?

Umemaro's done amazing stuff with the mecha, and Watta only wishes he could have met the guy. At least he and his guests had a great meal at his mom's place! Word of the merger seemingly hasn't reached him, and the other pilots don't want to be the ones to break the news to him. Fortunately(?) there are Mecha-Beasts to fight, and even Kojirou agrees to show the team what his newly modified shuttle will do.

Dr. Hell's forces include some Gishin units, recalling his alliance with them during the Breaking. The team's not worried though: for all that Brocken's forces have grown, so too have their own warpower. Takeru has a very bad feeling about this battle, but he knows that he mustn't just cower in fear either. Kojirou asks Crow how much each of the enemy are worth in salvage, and tells the team that it's time to earn some serious dough. In fact, he needs to earn at least \$35k before the battle ends for a Skill Point...

Metarl shows up, and Shotarou finally persuades Takeru to tell the team about the Devil Ring... except that Metarl does it for him. Metarl gloats that God Mars has become the death of Takeru, due to how it draws upon his psychic powers and thus drains his life, but the Rose Knight shows up again to assure Takeru that God Mars is his Protector. It is, in essence, Takeru's father's heart made manifest, and Watta has finally gotten sick of Metarl's cowardly babbling about how scary this Power of Darkness crap is. It's all about what parents pass on to their children, something the Dark dudes have no clue about, and Kojirou pledges to be right by Watta's side as he fights the good fight in Trider.

Takeru's rejuvenated now, much to Metarl's annoyance, and the only thing left is an outright brawl.

Kojirou's debts are pretty easy to pay off (being a measly 35k). After the battle, Watta calls out to Umemaro, thanking him for giving him this wonderful memento of his father. He vows to keep fighting for peace with it, and Umemaro in turn thinks that it's he who should be grateful for what he's seen here today. He's looking forward to a day when he and Watta can sit down and chat in peace.

The other pilots are supportive of Takeru's resolve to keep on fighting, though Kouji tells him (from first-hand experience) not to do anything that would make Takeru's mother cry. Meanwhile, Watta finally gets to learn of the proposed merger between his company and 21st Century -- the dowry for which Kojirou seems to have already spent on Shuttle upgrades. Watta breathes something like a sigh of relief when he gets all the info: unlike his teammates, he is 100% sure that Kojirou will not sell the company. All Crow's jibbering about the mass pile of money won't make him trust Kojirou any less.

Indeed, Kojirou delivers a firm denial for this and all future attempts, on Watta's behalf. Nishijima's line about putting a grade-schooler in harm's way does not face Kojirou one bit, especially since he trusts Watta and Trider to weather any battle in the future. And if that's not enough, all Takeo's employees have his back. Dokujima expected nothing less from his old mentor's (former, since Michijirou himself is deceased) employees. He's had his perspective expanded quite a bit since the Breaking, watching numerous ordinary salarymen and women do extraordinary things to help defend the peace.

Oh, and about that \$20M? Kojirou had that much squirreled away in numerous banks for a rainy day, and has Banjou bring the whole amount in in small change. Poor Nishijima, all outmaneuvered by a kid and his elderly butler. Ookouchi shows up at this point, informing Nishijima that \$20M is waaaay beyond his personal signature authority. He orders Nishijima into virtual house arrest until a formal decision is made about what to do with him.

Well, that's that. Kojirou will earn back the rest of the \$20M in no time flat with his upgraded shuttle... assuming of course he can make it off the bench. Dokujima heads off just as the Zexis pilots show up, relieved to hear that the merger is off. Watching all this Ookouchi thinks to his departed friend Michijirou that the seed he's planted is maturing very nicely indeed.

No time to reflect, though: word has come in that a bunch of Moon WILL troops are en route. This should have been caught immediately, but Wiseman has interfered. In fact, he's been broadcasting a declaration that he's now the ruler of the world. The Red Shoulder march plays in the background, and the world's information networks seem paralyzed by the hacking. Between Wiseman and Moon WILL, it seems Metarl's proclamation of everything coming together at once is underway.

#### CHAPTER 42S. Super-human

Evidence points Ribbons and cronies to suspect that Wiseman's base is out among the Neo Planets, and Ribbons has sent in a battalion of Astrageus forces. He actually kind of hopes that Wiseman trashes them, as the Astrageus folk -- who seem capable of nothing other than fighting -- are of no use in the future he's got planned. Rijeene sniffs that Ribbons seems to be even more pissed off at the Secret Society than he thought, and Ribbons smirks that he's got no use of subordinates who act on their own -- even special ones like the PS's. Seeing that they've chosen to act apart from Arrows, it seems highly likely they're somehow in cahoots with Wiseman.

Ribbons insists that Rochina has no ties with the other Astrageus folks, but given that even Ribbons himself hasn't figured out how Rochina rose to General, it's safe to assume he's also somehow connected to Wiseman. What the hell is Wiseman up to, one wonders. Ribbons figures Wiseman fancies himself a god, and suspects Wiseman has something Ribbons wants: the Black Knowledge. Neither of which is permissible, especially since it turns out Veda's uttermost depths are still protected by codes Ribbons can't break.

It's been 72 hours since Kiriko touched down on Quent, and Rochina is expecting him to come back with some kind of information any minute. Rochina seems to have an uncanny way of predicting what Kiriko will do next, and is in NO hurry to explain how that works. He's rounded up pretty much all Kiriko's friends as "insurance" -- hostages, really -- with the promise of something more valuable than money as recompense. They will, in Rochina's words, get to witness something far beyond their imagination.

Fiana doesn't like any of this, and asks again just what Rochina knows. He finally tells her that he's been acting according to a certain plan since long before the Astrageus folks came to this galaxy. His ruler has bent all his will toward Kiriko, through Rochina's time in the Gilgamesh army, his Arrows work, and newfound independence. This Ruler is a mysterious will born of the 85,000 years of Quent history (a "will"?), and it ordered Rochina to keep watch over Kiriko -- since before the first time Kiriko ever boarded an A.T.

Yikes, very ominous. Fiana and Kiriko will get to see what this will thingie really is soon enough. At least Goat and friends have accepted Kiriko's lady into their motley little band, though that offers little comfort given what incredible fate Kiriko seems burdened with...

As Zexis heads toward the Neo Planets, speculation runs rampant about who this Wiseman character really is. A super-hacker? A justice-mongering journalist? No true journalist would sow this much chaos with their reporting,

so maybe this is some maniac bent on world domination? Yeah, but that'd take an army even bigger than Insalaum of Dr. Hell's. Whoever it is, they've pissed off both Zexis \_and\_ Arrows, and given the Red Shoulder March, have certainly attracted Kiriko's attention. And attracting Kiriko's attention is often a good way to die.

Among the Neo Planets is a... Death Star, or a Unicron or Iserlohn, take your pick. It's been concealed by stealth till now, but Wiseman has apparently decided that the time has come to reveal himself. Goodman is on hand to see it, but before he can order his troops to take the thing over, a lone A.T. flies into the area. It's Kiriko, fresh from an encounter with that great will thing on Quent. It told him to come here, so here he's come.

Zexis shows up too, and Goodman immediately orders an attack to keep them away from the Death Star. Kiriko keeps heading for it, ignoring friend and foe alike, and Zero tells the team to honor Kiriko's wishes for solitude. With Goodman leading from the rear, with reinforcements at the ready, Zexis will have to fight the enemies right in front of them.

Goodman's forces are hilariously unsuited to faces Zexis, and the way before Kiriko is cleared in no time flat. As he approaches the Death Star, he abruptly vanishes in a flash of light -- the same light that teleported Zero back on Kaminejima! Who the hell is this Wiseman, if he's hold up in an artificial moon^Wbattlestation with \_that\_ kind of power.

While Kiriko is putzing around inside the Death Star, an Arrows squadron shows up, with Innovators in the lead. Lockon is ready to exact cold-blooded vengeance for Anew, but the real quandary is Saji and Louise. Louise is resolved to throw her past away, but that could be a taller order than she thinks.

And just to make this battle more complicated, Milliard^WZechs shows up. He means to punish Arrows and Wiseman for sowing discord throughout space, and is prepared to take on Zexis too if they won't play ball. Hiiro \_totally\_ won't play ball, telling Zechs that he doesn't believe for a moment that Zechs actually thinks his actions will bring the Colonies peace. He denies Zechs' very being, and Zechs joyously challenges Hiiro to stop him if he can. Bushido figures that Zechs is nearly at the summit, and means to use his new sword, the well-named "Susano-0", to help. Wiseman-hunting will have to wait till all these yahoos are dealt with.

Bushido has a pretty good attitude actually: he declares that his defeat will make him stronger! The question on Setsuna's mind is, just where is it Bushido is trying to go? Louise is a much more interesting case: she's blinded by the belief that Saji and Setsuna have been deceiving her all this time, despite Saji's best protestations to the contrary. Setsuna however has been growing in spiritual sophistication all this time, and he can now sense that there's.... "somebody" overshadowing Louise. The best they can do for now is neutralize her as a combatant. When her mech's weapons are disabled, she feels like her head is going to split in two, and while fleeing yells that she'll never forgive Saji... like, EVER. Amuro and Quatro can only watch grimly as yet another misunderstanding causes yet another battle to unfold.

Andrey is another interesting case. Pieres demands to know if Andrey \_really\_ thinks his father would stage a coup d'etat, and isn't fazed when Andrey points out that she's defected to the CBs. She's Sergei's super-soldier, and she \_will\_ have revenge! The two Innovators mainly experience disbelief as their supposed superiority proves to be nothing of the sort.



The Innovators have yet more reserves hiding in the wings, proving just how important Wiseman is to them. As the battle rages outside, Kiriko finds himself teleported outside his cockpit and into the middle of the Death Star. Fiona is there too, as are Rochina and co. They have been Summoned, as Rochina puts it, by his Ruler -- the one Kiriko must have sensed on Quent given that he's come here. Rochina even has some idea who Kiriko's mystery benefactor is, a so-called Super-human born on Quent.

Long before the modern Astrageus race arose, the ancient, unrelated Quent culture flourished. Its zenith was around three millennia ago, when their ultra-technology gave rise to a New Humanity, the Super-humans. Those super-human abilities caused them to be exiled from Quent, and predictably set out to conquer the galaxy. Thus was mankind torn between two ruling factions: Gilgamesh and Valalant. The Super-human is Rochina's "Ruler", and turns out to be Wiseman in the flesh. Rochina points to the Death Star as proof: the Innovators and their precious Veda are all but powerless before such advanced technology.

Wiseman is calling Kiriko, and Rochina wants to know why. Does Wiseman intend Kiriko to defend his followers, the Secret Society, in the PS's stead? Wiseman's certainly called the Secret Society leaders (who were busy watching Zexis' battle) to the scene as well. Rochina introduces Kiriko to Kiry, the leader of the Secret Society, who's pleased as punch to meet the man even mightier than the PS's.

Wiseman then starts speaking directly to Kiry, Kiriko and Rochina, in words that sound like random static to everyone else. Interestingly, Wiseman has something to tell Kiriko alone (much to the faithful Kiry's dismay), and despite Fiana's misgivings Kiriko heads off to find out who he really is. Kiriko wants to know why Wiseman chose him, and the answer turns out to be his 1-in-25-billion genetics -- remember, he's an Abnormal Survivor. He is, in fact, a natural-born PS, like Wiseman himself: the end product of the entire arc of Astrageus' history.

What Wiseman wants is a Successor, and Kiriko agrees to shoulder that responsibility. Looks like the Secret Society's usefulness is at an end, and Kiriko simply kills Kiry off. As Fiana watches in horror, Kiriko tells the scientists that they're working for him, the child of God, now. He's headed to Quent alone to meet Wiseman in person, leaving Fiana and Rochina behind.

He's got the good grace to notify Zexis that Wiseman is about to blow up the Death Star, turning all those who tried to steal or stop Wiseman's power into space dust. He tells Zexis that their deaths won't be in vain, as he heads off to be one with He who ruled Astrageus from the shadows all these many years. Wiseman is beneath Quent's surface, waiting these three thousand years for his exiled children's return.

Zero frantically orders the Ikaruga towards the Death Star at ramming speed, even as Sumeragi tries to get the rest of Zexis to flee. What the hell is this Wiseman guy thinking??

Zero's quick thinking let the Ikaruga grab Goat and the others moments before the explosion, saving them from disintegration. They're struggling to come to terms with Kiriko's conversion to demigod, and Fiana in particular is in pretty bad shape. Rochina managed to bug out on his own, skilled as always at saving his own skin. One thing that strikes the team as odd is why Kiriko would need to go see Wiseman if he's already His Successor. Another odd thing is why Wiseman would have pulled the Wiseman Shock.

It seems incomprehensible to Zero that a man like Kiriko would have given in so

easily to the lure of godhood. Maybe Lu Shakko can shed light on it, as he calls in from Quent. He tells Zexis to come to Quent, promising to tell them everything about Wiseman even as his people prepare to stop Kiriko. Karen promises to help Fiana get a good explanation for all of this from Kiriko, and it so happens that Fiana will even get a mech to pilot from the hold of the abandoned Secret Society ship. What Goat's people know for sure is that Kiriko's expression was exactly the same as he wore when they first saw him: he must have had something really important deep inside. The question is... what?

#### CHAPTER 43J. The Fangs that Cleave Darkness

Moon WILL's forces are hours from Dragons' Hive, intending to finish off Earth WILL once and for all during the uproar at the Neo Planets. Even Queen Rilina won't be able to quiet the people's fear after seeing what those troops leave in their wake -- the menaces facing the world today all seem to prefer psychological insinuation over outright clashes of power. On Quent, meanwhile, Zexis is in hot pursuit of Kiriko as he goes to pow-wow with Wiseman... the ancient Astragean "god". At least one "shadowy figure" doubts that Kiriko has actually become infatuated with inheriting this god's powers, and that shadowy figure's arrival signals that the "fangs that cleave darkness" are assembled. Now it's just up to WILL.

Kurara is taking Moon WILL's attack philosophically: since Zexis barged into its front door last time, it seems to be mainly returning the favor. All the members of Team D are pumped to face their arch-enemy, but Shinobu is uncharacteristically quiet while watching his "underclassmen" pose. He and Ryou both sense a dark, familiar presence threatening them all -- someone beyond just Moon WILL's pessimistic malice. Fortunately the Dancougar forces won't have to face this menace alone: the Gran Knights have their back, as do the rest of the squad.

Moon WILL is leading its troops personally, and as always is quick to claim that humanity is too stupid to arrive at the truth of the universe. Zexis' pilots are equally quick to tell Moon WILL to get stuffed, not buying into the smokescreen of unintelligible jargon. That, Moon WILL declares is even more proof of mankind's folly -- just like that Kiriko with his pretensions of godhood. Don't the humans at least realize that Wiseman is trying to remake their world? Doesn't Moon WILL realize that humans don't give in to evil that easily?

Well, some of them seem to. Moon WILL sees in mankind a group of cowering sheep, waiting only for the Almighty to punish them. And of course, Moon WILL claims to be that Almighty presence. With nothing more productive to say, Zexis set up their defensive lines and get busy fending Moon WILL's forces away from Dragons' Hive.

Of course Moon WILL gets pummeled, and of course it can't believe it. It pleads with the omniscient, omnipotent ones to grant it power, and Sayuri and Metarl (showing up out of nowhere) to agree. They grant Moon WILL even more power than before, and Moon WILL names his saviors as those with the Black Knowledge. It won't be beaten by animate bags of water and protein, and tries to prove it by eluding the team and blasting Dragons' Hive.

In Moon WILL's view, the ultimate fate of the universe is pitch darkness. If so, far better to sign up with the Dark beings who would be the universe's custodians. What the Black Knowledge shows is that the world's future is one devoid of all light!!!

That's too many exclamation points for Sandman, who dramatically appears on one of the parapets. Along with him are F.S... and WILL, who's apparently ready at last to settle the score with its sibling. If Moon WILL has the Power of Darkness, Earth WILL now has the Power of Truth, and with it F.S. has him convert Dragons' Hive into...

...one fucking huge dracoform battleship. Good on F.S. for somehow keeping this monstrosity hidden. The God Sigma Gravion is also on hand, with Sandman at its controls. He means to be the fangs of the fangless, and not to be outdone F.S. declares that Dragons' Hive and Max God Nova can combine their might to produce something called "Absolute Nova Beast", which sounds pretty dire if you're a bad guy.

It's even more dire than that. Moon WILL is forced to implore the omnipotent ones for more power, but Sayuri has seen enough. She thanks him for buying some time, and then finally showing her real colors informs him that it's about to get sent to sleep with the fishes. No wait, that's wrong. Moon WILL is getting sent to sleep with the undead demonic types in the Darkness, who will be continuously feasting on its soul.

Apparently Sayuri's body has been expropriated by the real bad guys, who needed a vessel to incarnate a God through. Wouldn't you know it: the culprit turns out to be none other than Muge Zolbados, who's having the dickens of a time rebuilding his body after the original Dancougar team atomized it. Sayuri's body will just have to do in the meantime, though strictly speaking Muge doesn't need it. He is, in fact a pan-dimensional being with delusions of literally being synonymous with space itself -- greater, in other words, than the Black Knowledge itself!

The plan will be to bring the team to his world, and utterly defeat them there. But until that happens, they'll have other minions of his to play with, and the loss of Sayuri to lament. One of those other minions turns out to be Saotome, who's just turned up with Shin Dragon in the skies over the Pacific. Since the other half of Zexis is on the way back from defeating Wiseman, the plan must be to reunite and bring the noise as one.

All the Getter Rays produced don't go unnoticed by Gaiou, still on his hotdog-munching world tour and still wearing the cool shades. He's been waiting for this to happen, and reckons the Baals are sure to react somehow. Gaiou tells Carlos that it's not time to get personally involved yet, so Carlos heads off to pass along Gaiou's instructions on how Revive Cells work. Carlos has done his best to lecture Gaiou on every last detail of this world, leaving judgement about it up to Gaiou. He invites Gaiou to devour this world if he truly finds it worthless, as he and Gaiou both drop their smiling facades. Neither of them is permitted the luxury of leisure, or simple companionship, or normalcy of any sort. Carlos tells Gaiou that he's the best friend he's ever had while bidding him a final-sounding farewell. Gaiou's experienced the loss of friends before, but none, he reckons, as big a loss as Carlos. Nor will there ever be...

The pilots come together for a what-happened-on-the-other-path session, and in addition to Alto's worries whether he's doing the right thing, there's Kiriko. It's kind of true that he was a God's inheritor, given that the joint consciousness of ancient Quent's supermen was pretty godlike. That is, until the team blew the crap out of the computer that was maintaining the whole shebang. How precisely the team took out a being capable of manipulating thousands of years of history is an interesting question, but Zero smoothly says that degree doesn't matter. What matters is the result, which is that the whole Wiseman Shock incident is over. End result: Kiriko chose Fiana over life as the new god.

C.C. too is back online after a little amnesia incident. Her concerned teammates ask how she's doing, given that she supposedly got badly injured at one point. Kiriko seems to be basically unkillable, but she's nearly as indestructible, and now has a renewed understanding of the system Charles is trying to build. Sara too has a lot on her mind about Sayuri, but Shinobu manages to get her back on task (that task being Shin Dragon's destruction).

#### CHAPTER 43S. Ashura

The recent turn of events has caused the Zexis pilots to reappraise Kiriko. Grim Reaper. Badass. Wolf, among the starving curs of the ghetto where Goat found him. Unexploded bomb. Hihiro puts it best though: at first, Kiriko was purely a soldier, nothing more, nothing less. It was Fiana who changed him for the better, as often happens when men and women [or shall we say, gender-compatible N-somes] get together... though it seems Chiba hasn't yet made much headway with Toudou. His recent relapse, triggered by Wiseman playing that Red Shoulder March, is hard for many on the team to fully fathom.

But Crow can empathize, having spent part of his own past as a studiously-emotionless soldier and having worked VERY hard to put that behind him. All the pilots agree that they'd rather have their comrades evince a human side: power without empathy is mere violence. The million-dollar question is whether Kiriko will really become Wiseman's successor, and presumably continue the campaign of destabilizing the world. If so, Karen is adamant that Zexis be the ones to take him out -- because of how much she likes him. Not in a boy-girl kind of way but, umm, you get the idea.

Basically, there's just something about the guy that nobody can take their eyes off. Call it concern, call it that deep-seated desire to watch horror movies, whatever. Fiana certainly felt her heart seeking him from the very first moment they met. Now, the whole team is on the trail, hoping to get some info from Shakko when they reach Quent.

Shakko relates how he brought Kiriko to his village after the showdown with the Geass Order, summoned by his elders to give an accounting of conditions on Earth. No worries about the Heim farm though -- Shakko was sure to hire some hands to keep it safe in his absence. Those would be their former squadmates, who had about a week of nothing much happening till Shakko summoned them all to Quent. Shakko wanted all Kiriko's old mates to hear about his rather unusual situation.

Kiriko's trip to Quent was in search of his real identity, after Rochina's natural-born PS speech rekindled his curiosity. It was only in the depths of Quent's oldest ruins that Kiriko encountered the will of Wiseman, the "Superhuman". Shakko defines superhumans to be spontaneous mutations with the ability to merge their mind with computers, which explains how Veda fell prey to him. This power promoted the development of many of the fundamental technologies of the old Quent society, which turned out to be less blessing and more curse for Shakko's ancestors. This led them to expel not just the superhumans, but virtually all forms of technology, from their world... or so they thought. In fact, the superhumans continued to lurk on Quent, and from it fomented war on a galactic scale.

Shakkos' brought everyone to meet Mej, the eldest and wisest of the Quent at the ripe old age of 200+. The guy looks very much like a mummy, and spends his days in an otherworldly trance. He's also got a special sort of telepathy that lets Shakko serve as his mouthpiece, and explains in this way that there's a reason the ancient superhuman has chosen now to reveal himself. That

reason is inscribed in the Black Knowledge, something which no one in the party could have heard of (and yet, Crow gets the oddest sensation at the words.

Zero asks what this Black Knowledge is and what its connection to Wiseman might be, and Mej tells the Bearer of the Power of the King to ascertain it for himself. Lelouch is of course astonished that someone from another galaxy would have any clue about Geasses, much less Lelouch's specific one. Mej has it that the awakening of the Baal's has made the superhuman decide to pull up stakes and move to another universe. This requires recruiting a Child of God to help decide this universe's fate, though precisely how that works even Mej isn't sure.

What he is sure of is that Kiriko is headed for the Gomor desert, an area rich in ancient Quent ruins. Zexis needs to get there fast, since another Wiseman Shock has just rocked the Earth Sphere again. Even Rilina can't keep calming people forever, and it's no stretch to imagine outright war erupting -- just as the superhuman wants. Zero orders everyone to get their asses in gear and head to this Gomor place: Wiseman must be dealt with, and fast!

Meanwhile, C.C. is in Zero's room reflecting about her new master. He seems to be a really busy man, coming and going frequently and scarcely eating. But unlike her previous masters, he doesn't hit her or hurt her -- and she's really glad he's taken her in! Just then some sort of electronic noise pierces her consciousness, and her memories of more recent history return all at once. It appears that she can't run from her fate that easily after all. Nor can Kiriko, or Lelouch...

It seems Arrows is trying to keep Kiriko from reaching his goal... which mainly has the effect of increasing the amount of junk scattered across the countryside as Kiriko cleaves on mech after another in half. He knows Arrows couldn't have forecasted his course this perfectly, meaning that one of the Secret Society must have been feeding them information. Two, in fact, though they don't agree on how to handle Kiriko's violent ascent in their order. Aron in particular doesn't like the prospect of being a disposable asset the way Girya was, something he didn't have to worry about under the old "god" whose power was evident from all the historical tempering he did.

Hell, Wiseman is huge enough that he might have actually been responsible for the original Breaking. Aron'll be damned if that power passes to Kiriko. Or at least shot ignominiously, when Kiriko -- or rather Wiseman -- summons reinforcements. Kiriko is merely Wiseman's mouthpiece at this point, and nothing Gran can do at this point could deceive him. He's come here for the final challenge standing between him and Wiseman's throne...

...which would be his friends. Shakko asks if Kiriko is serious about all of this, and he's in fact deadly serious. Kiriko insists that the world needs to be ruled, that battle and death is the driving force behind all the progress there ever was. And given that war is indispensable to mankind, it ought to be regulated... but one, solitary, god. And who, but Kiriko, who's been forged into a man by all this battle, is suitable to take on that mantle?

Kiriko has definitely changed for the worse, now full of himself and claiming to be protected by God. Or at least God's Mobile Dolls, which for Wiseman is easy-peasy to arrange. This is more than Fiana, Shakko and Goat's crew can handle alone, so of course Zexis will have to step up too. They're far from happy to see what Kiriko's up to, which is plunging the world farther into war, and Kiriko claims he's just doing what Wiseman wants. Wiseman says that the Innovators lack the power needed to chart the world's future -- a future in which neither Zexis nor Arrows will have the victory... or anyone else for that matter.

With Kiriko unwilling to listen to his friends' or even his lover's pleas to stop, warfare is the only answer. Fiana is kind of crushed, but soldiers on.

Kiriko is SUPER hard to kill, and that immortality is part of what Wiseman has been seeking for a very long time. When he speaks, the entire party can hear his voice in their heads. Wiseman implores Kiriko to make the whole world his enemy, and reach him under his own steam.

Kiriko's down with that plan, and he manages to elude Zexis' combined efforts to stop him. Only Fiana can even get close, desperate to know if Kiriko really wants Wiseman's power that badly. She tells him that if he really wants that world of perpetual warfare that badly, she's going to have to kill him, even though she'll die in the process. Kiriko scowls that she can die on her own, and easily blasts her mech away from him.

Just then C.C. appears in her mech, telling Zexis not to get in Kiriko's way. She adds a shot of her own to prove her point, and tells Zero and the others that it's not her they should be worried about. That would be Ali and friends, whose employer is desperate to get their hands on Astrageus' mystery ruler. Kiriko vanishes in the chaos, and explosions ring out all around.

Gran wonders if this is the end, and Rochina tells him that he's to be commended for his loyalty to Wiseman these many years. If Gran's role was to be Wiseman's hands, Rochina's role was to be his eyes -- and he'll witness Kiriko's ascension in Gran's stead. He blows Gran away, looking on the chaos as precisely what Wiseman wants.

Kiriko makes it to Wiseman, and certainly says all the right things about wanting revenge on all creation, perpetual war and infinite sequels, etc. Wiseman manifests a glowing ball of light to illuminate Kiriko's path, telling him that his flesh has turned to dust long ago. Wiseman's will however is just fine, perfectly preserved in the giant computer Kiriko is standing before. It is no mere memory bank, but rather a thinking, living machine.

More precisely, it's a machine that's accumulated the consciousnesses of all the supermen over the past three millennia -- and can transfer all that power to Kiriko in an instant. Yea verily, the selfsame power that cast the planet Monad into the abyss between dimensions, teleporting part of Astrageus to this world in the process -- all of it was Wiseman's doing. And now it'll be Kiriko's job to keep all of mankind mired in doubt and desire and warfare, so that eventually the day will come when mankind masters all the Fundamentals, even the power of the Spiral. That will be the true dawn of mankind, the moment when man overcomes the despair spoken of in the Black Knowledge.

All Kiriko has to do is stretch out his hands and receive the baptism. Instead he stretches out his gun and shoots the transfer device, having guessed correctly that this innermost chamber lacks any sort of defense. For all its wisdom, all its power, Wiseman simply couldn't comprehend why anyone wouldn't want what it has. Kiriko, however, has no desire to live in darkness, and starts shooting every sensitive spot in sight.

Rochina rushes in to try to get him to stop, but Fiana is hot on his heels, knowing full well that Kiriko and C.C. both deliberately avoided hitting her cockpit. She understands fully now how Kiriko trusted Zexis enough to leave them behind and come here alone, and tells him to strike the final blow. This he does, leaving Rochina a screaming wreck.

Outside, Wiseman still retains enough of a personality to sortie a few A.T.'s

in a bid to make sure Kiriko perishes too. This isn't looking likely, as more Zexis units show up to help. Kiriko's deliberate near miss on Fiana, and C.C.'s repetition, removed all doubts from Zero and the team's minds. It was tough to keep up the act in front of Wiseman, but the team's gotten used to stuff like this by now. Just how C.C. knew what Kiriko is up to is unclear, and Wiseman is furious that the Code-bearing Witch would defy him.

He then starts playing the Red Shoulder March, declaring that it's one of the numerous subliminal things he planted in the depths of Kiriko's psyche. Fiana is another one of those, their meeting having been arranged in advance. This explains why Kiriko somehow knew her name from the start. Wiseman claims credit for "humanizing" Kiriko, giving him a tangible reason to live and fight on, and declares that Kiriko seems to have changed even more than anticipated. Rather than suffer under the weight of the sins he's done, he seems to glory in them. The Red Shoulder March is his proud past, and Wiseman commands him to either embrace it and Wiseman himself, or perish.

Kiriko though doesn't take orders from anyone, not even a god. Especially an imperfect god, which is what Wiseman finally admits to being in its final moments. In fact, it was hoping to entrust its powers to Kiriko precisely to make up for that imperfection, and to enable mankind to evolve as it must if it is to overcome the Baal onslaught. Wiseman revealing himself to the world was a calculated risk, hoping that the discord sown would spur mankind to evolve faster than the it would bring the Baals forward, and whichever side won, the immortal Kiriko would still inherit Wiseman's knowledge. See, the petty revolutionaries of this world are starting to become content with their little walled gardens, ignorant of the end the universe as a whole is hurtling toward. The world must be bathed in flame, if the Black Knowledge is to be put to use and anyone is to actually survive.

As Wiseman flickers out, it tells Kiriko - puny, limited little lifeform that he is -- that he's just made an irreparable mistake. And then, Wiseman stammers that it is afraid, so dreadfully afraid. Kiriko has no mercy, telling it to begone. C.C. on the other hand believes that Wiseman was doing its best to live up to its responsibility as a bearer of the Black Knowledge -- its main error was in picking a man who valued something more than godlike power. She tells Duo that she's come with important news: Shin Dragon has appeared over the Pacific, and Zexis must reassemble to fend the damn thing off.

Crikey, that sounds bad. Zero figures that the ruins should probably be blown up to prevent anyone getting funny ideas about using Wiseman's lingering powers, but Rochina won't have it. He accuses Kiriko of cowardice in not shouldering the responsibility of rulership that Wiseman bore, and Kiriko merely tells the team that it's time to go. Rochina, he figures, will mop things up for them. This system is very similar, C.C. thinks, to the one Charles has at his fingertips... As the team leaves, Rochina's real angst comes out: he wanted to be a superhuman, and is beside himself that Kiriko slew the very power he himself desired.

See the other path for Carlos and Gaiou's conversation.

F.S. tells Sumeragi what's been going on on the other path, and she agrees that Zexis will get back together as soon as possible. Meanwhile, Kiriko actually tells his fellow pilots "thanks" for sticking with him, even smiling when Crow makes a joke about money. Of course, the war isn't miraculously over yet -- Wiseman is but one of the ringleaders of the mess the world finds itself in. Still, it's an improvement. Gregor and the others will follow Kiriko into the next round of combat, while Goat and friends will burrow into war-torn society and try to build themselves a bona fide home.

Off to the side, Shakko is gazing at C.C., and not just because of her nifty outfit or physique. He states that she too is a superhuman, and C.C. admits that that's accurate enough. Her path seems very different to him from Wiseman's though, and when she says that she's not in charge of it, he vows to watch how she travels her path. With something between a smirk and a sneer, she notes that she can never tell when the Quentians are joking or being very subtle. If the guy wants to get out there and kick ass on the battlefield, he should just out and say it. Shakko obliquely admits that he's kind of bashful about certain things, and C.C. says that she like shim for it. Zero observes that she's gotten a bit nicer since getting her memory back, and she deadpans that she's only nice to certain people. Maybe she was better as she was, muses Zero, and C.C. asks if that means Zero's got a thing for the compliant, maid-type ladies.

Nearly laughing at that, Zero says he's relieved she's fully back to normal. However, even C.C. might wish that she'd remained in blissful ignorance after the fragment of Wiseman's memory she saw when her own memories were restored. She now has an inkling of what the Black Knowledge has to say about the world's fate. All Kiriko knows is that he won't be able to stop fighting till warfare is gone from the world -- and he intends to bust ass (with Fiana by his side) to bring that about sooner rather than later.

He and Fiana are to live in a world where god is dead, nor does he regret his choice even though despair may await. The most important part is that he chose it for himself, and that he's got Fiana and his companions by his side. He'll go on fighting through the flames -- today, and tomorrow, and the day after...

#### CHAPTER 44. The Devil Who Calls Forth Armageddon Appears!

[Though I liked the space route, I kept the Earth route.

The clone of Lowgenome is certainly still sharp, noting that the recent spate of bad guy attacks must signal The End(tm). If the Black Knowledge has taught him anything, it's that mankind requires a ruler to have any chance of survival. Or do the humans think they really stand a chance as they are now? In any case, the curtain is rising on the final act...

Kinon has turned in his resignation to Roshu, meaning to help Zexis save the world and all that good stuff. He leaves Kinon to tend things while he's gone, and tells Kiyaru to take good care of Kiyou and Anne -- surely Dayakka will be a bit too busy to manage it on his own. He's still the same old reckless dude who once led the Gurren Gang's shock troops, and his friends wouldn't have it any other way. Dayakka gives him one final present: the key to a hangar outside town where his old "partner" awaits. And with him will go Youko, still her old self too and still happy to pitch in.

Shin Dragon has apparently taken up residence a kilometer below a small volcanic island, surrounded by defensive lines of Invader forces. This last detail seems very very odd, given that Shin Dragon was basically made to be the leader of the Getter forces that fight the Invaders. Kouji's noticed that the Invaders have appeared to be seeking Getter Rays all this time... what the hell are Getter Rays anyway, and what do the Invaders mean to do with them? Ryouma has a general idea, but can't bring himself to talk about it now. Better, he says, that the team feel Getter Rays with their own bodies. Ryouma's starting to sound like Gou, and Gou is very afraid.

Ryouma and Gou can both sense Shin Dragon's rhythm, and the implications are dire. Alarms go off at this point, and word comes in of three man-sized



shapes appearing on Shin Dragon's island. That must be Corwen, Stinger and Saotome, who are busy trying to wake Shin Dragon up. Zexis makes their way through the Invader defenses just as Saotome offers himself up to become part of Shin Dragon, to sound the clarion roar of Evolution and usher in the world's final day.

This is the part where it gets more than a little sketchy, as Stinger and Corwen begin to moan in pleasure as "genetic material" starts flowing backwards into them. "Evolution", as apparently they call it in their neck of the woods, feels extremely pleasurable. Apollo tells the team to burn this image into their eyes: this is what happens to those who lose sight of Evolution's true purpose. Out of the volcano's mouth comes the new and improved^Wevolved Shin Dragon.

Shikijima explains that the real point of Getter Rays isn't their energy: it's their ability to make life forms evolve. \_That\_ is why the Invaders sought them, and Saotome's original plan was to lure them in and destroy them with Getter Robo... whose Getter Beam represented too much "Evolution" for the Invaders to absorb at once. I believe the term is "Too much! Too quickly!" The problem is that Shin Dragon has evolved in a totally different direction from what the plan called for, into a beautiful, terrible god of death. Will the Earth be remade in the Invaders' image? Not if Zexis can help it, though Gou seems to be having some kind of foreboding.

Formidable though Shin Dragon is, it seems its awakening was a \_tad\_ premature. There's an opening to destroy it once and for all, but Gou is wavering between doing the right thing, and following his father's instruction to come and help wake up Shin Dragon for reals. Kei swings into gear, vowing to be the one to protect Gou this time, but she too is momentarily swayed when Saotome calls her "Genki". Fortunately Ryouma is on hand to keep her from getting demolished, seeing in her stricken, sad expression a vision of her younger self.

Neither Getter is in shape to continue fighting, so both have to retreat to the Tower. But before the Invaders can revive Shin Dragon, Nia and a bunch of Anti-Spiral forces show up. Nia notes that it's so sad that mankind chose intellect and evolution, instead of staying ignorant and safe. It's those Getter Rays to blame for all of this, and Saotome thinks he's got the answer for how Evolution \_ought\_ to work. Higher, faster, huger, and above all... stronger!

If that's all the Invaders mean to do, slaughter all other intelligent life on instinct, then they deserve no quarter at all. Nia notes that these beasts will never be anything more, and yet they're useful enough as part of the Spiral Nemesis vision of utter despair. This is where Kitan and Youko show up, announced by a direct hit on Nia's mech from Youko's ultrasonic rifle. And if this newer, meaner Nia is the real one, Youko will just have to blow it away so the kids will have somewhere safe to play again.

All very well and good, but the blah-blah has given Shin Dragon time to recharge. Guess it's time for the Tower to use its trump card, huh?

Inside the hangar, Shikishima is hastily checking Gou's neural functions, which frankly are off the charts electrically. Is this what Saotome needs to properly control Shin Dragon? And what the hell did Saotome do to Gou to make him end up this way? Whatever the case, Gou was born for Shin Dragon, not the other way around, and Shikishima tells Gai and Kei to take Gou and get the hell out of dodge: Hayato is about to do something \_big\_.

That turns out to be a gadget that actually absorbs Getter Rays, and they

actually start using it to absorb all of Shin Getter's power. Shikishima shouts in glee that this energy, this Quickening, is life itself. Of course, there's that Too Much/Too Quickly business to worry about, but Shikishima orders Hayato and the others to get themselves to safety and leave him behind to finish his work. He sees a similar pattern in the energy to Gou's, but how could that be when Gou's was due to abnormal synaptic activity?? Suddenly it all makes sense to him, but he's too busy cackling in glee to actually spit out the real purpose behind Shin Dragon and Gou.

The Tower explodes, though all the other personnel from it are safe. That includes Hayato, who's reluctantly resumed his seat in Getter's cockpit. Saotome isn't impressed, and as Shin Dragon burrows underground again he emerges with Corwen and Stinger inside Shin Getter, or rather Metal Beast Getter as it's now been modified. Ryouma tells the rest of Zexis to concentrate on the Anti-Spirals and leave Saotome to his team. Saotome yells back that Ryouma's about to feel the wrath of the \_ORIGINAL\_ original Getter Team... since, like, they're the ones who actually built it and stuff.

Saotome seems to be sinking further into madness as the combat proceeds, beginning to laugh his head off. It strikes him funny, you see, that the very same people who killed his daughter and let their own friend be killed would be challenging him. OH NOES TEH DESPARES IT BURNSSS USS!!1 Really, it takes nothing more than one sentence to throw them off their game by this point??

Cue Michiru bitching about how "It hurt so terribly, awfully much when I was squashed between Dragon and Liger". No actually it didn't because it happened in a fraction of a second, but that would make for bad television -- just like Musashi whining to Benkei about not abandoning him. Fortunately, this foolishness gets rectified when the REAL Slim Shady^W^WSaotome Michiru interrupts the psychic onslaught. She tells her teammates that she had already been parasitized by an Invader at the time of her death, and deliberately loused up the combination timing in order to purify her flesh. That it's tormented her teammates all this time is unfortunate, but she's always kept on believing that they can bust through to the \_true\_ future of Getter power.

Musashi too.

Arewedoneyetokaygoodandaboutgoddamntime. Bad luck for the Invaders, really, since Apollo was on hand to pierce their little mindfuck-space with a bit of science. Apollo tells the Baals that they've proved themselves nothing more than animals. Unfit to embrace the son, they are to be destroyed utterly by the mecha-angel Aquarion henceforth. It's the humans' turn to dish out a bit of comeuppance, and Apollo tells his comrades (of a distant, pan-dimensional struggle, which makes no sense to them) to unite the Suns within their hearts with the Getter rays. This is all rather high-falutin coming from him, and as he sort of regains his own senses he stammers that he means for everyone to just go and kick ass.

Okay, so we're clear that the battle will be decided by whoever deals more damage while avoiding taking it? Good. Where it gets interesting is when Crow tangles with Shin Getter. The Invaders are furious that the Key-bearers are on Earth (referring to the Spheres, of course). The Spheres are what decided the course of their evolution, and as such their Bearers are enemies to be hated and feared. Crow doesn't need them telling him that.

Just to show how far off his rocker Saotome is, he tells the Getter team that Michiru and Musashi are waiting for them in Hell. Unlikely, one might say. The real question is why the other Invaders aren't coming from space to help like Saotome expected. Surely with all of them together Zexis wouldn't stand

a chance!

Too bad for him the White Fang forces have shot down all the inbound Invaders before they could make planetfall. No matter though, they think: surely their infinite power will carry the day anyway? They wait for what they think is an opening in Getter's stance and launch a "sure-fire" transform attack of their own. What they don't count on is just how well trained their combat proteges are. There's a big difference between designing something and living it.

As Ryouma prepares for what will be the final duel, he hears Apollo and Gou in his mind, telling him to remember the Sun -- that is, "Stoner Sunshine". If they can truly think and feel as one, the Getter team can do it! And what's more, marijuana is even legal in several states now! The result is more damage than the Invaders can regenerate. In his final moments, Saotome seems to regain his sanity, telling the Getter team that they're awesome and more than suitable to entrust the future of mankind to.

As the explosion reverberates across the land, Nia demonstrates her command of the obvious and notes that, you know, humans can be kind of dangerous. Time for some next-level shit with Phase Two, whatever that means. Meanwhile, Gou has decided to actually go to Shin Dragon, and his teammates will go with him to what turns out to be Shin Dragon's cockpit. They unite their minds, fusing mind and body with Shin Dragon and sensing the immense power it wields. Gou tells them to believe in themselves and in the power of Getter-ness.

This is good for halting Shin Dragon in its tracks, but also results in Gou entering some kind of deathlike state. His heart has stopped, but cellular and neural activity continue. There's no telling what Arrows might do if it got its hands on Shin Dragon, so Kei and the others decide to stick around it and keep watch as Gou slumbers. Meanwhile Ryouma and friends will use Shin Getter to help save the world. There's no way now to know if Saotome had in fact avoided total infection by the Invaders, so all the team can do is proceed along the "rails" Saotome said he laid for them to see what awaits at the end.

No time to reflect though: word comes in of another ZONE manifesting. Is it finally time for Crow to lay down his life for mankind? There's no telling till the team actually gets to the scene. Kei struggles to muster a smile as she sees her (adopted) father and friends off, recalling one thing she felt when synchronized with Shin Dragon: all these things are moving toward the end of all things...

Well, that's the starting Demons of Destruction defeated, in Lowgenome Mk.II's view. Since he's a clone, this Lowgenome has no personal enmity toward the people who took out the original; on the contrary, he figures Zexis is to be commended for standing up in the face of terrifying odds. They've got enough power to fend off Phase One, but of course Phase Two just started. Roshuu can't bring himself to break the news to the Federation, and Lowgenome sneers that he'd better be grateful that Wiseman didn't leak this mess to the public. Roshuu tells him that he's going to be getting the Space Daigun ready, and Lowgenome sneers even harder that he's quite a  mensch . Roshuu snaps back that mankind  must  survive this, even if there's only one human left! And if that means casting away his own emotions, so be it!

#### CHAPTER 45. Dimensional Power

Unblown reports Zexis' victory over the Invaders to Yuusar. He's heard of the concept of "Baal"s, enemies of all intelligent life in the galaxy before, which surprises Unblown greatly. He asks if she knows why the royal family

outlawed Dimensional Science (she does not), hastening to add that he's not trying to blame her anew. He and she are both to blame for violating the taboo, and their best penance will be to and the Insalaum people victory. Yuusar knows that Eim was using her to get at the Insalaum royal family's deepest secrets, which are mixed up with the so-called Black Knowledge.

Yuusar only knows those portions of the Black Knowledge stored in the royal records, but even those make mention of the Baals. He warns her sternly not to seek that information for herself, not because he considers her unworthy as such, but because he believes only the royals should have to bear that terrible burden. What he wants her and the Arcsabers to do is to give the people a place to settle pronto -- nothing more, and nothing less.

ZONE, by the way, has the improbable expansion of "Zodiac Of New Energy", which has all the earmarks of a forced retronym. What's more, there's a finite number that can be emplaced on Earth -- and the last one under the quota is now undergoing final tweaks before activation. That it's the last one available led Unblown to put it in the most central, pivotal place possible: the very spot where Gaiou appeared in this world. This place, Limonecia, bears the most resemblance on Earth to Insalaum's own capital...

After their little tete a tete, Yuusar goes to chat with Esther some more. He tells her that a new battle is beginning, one that he's got to win, and takes her disapproval in stride. After all, it's not like he's got somewhere to return home to. Wayne comes over at this point, with news that Federation forces are approaching the Zone. He assures his lord that he's got the back of anyone who's willing to fight, and Yuusar replies that there's been so much fighting already. But the loss of so many precious comrades is not yet enough: the world is not yet ready for renewal. He gives Wayne command of the first defensive line, expecting Zexis to strike the ZONE directly instead of joining the main Federation assault force. Wayne wants to be where he can best protect Yuusar, though he won't deny that he'd like to settle the score with Crow in the process.

Yuusar will leave the main force's protection to Marilyn, who's been eavesdropping with Yuusar's tacit approval nearby. She's not just prepared for the assignment, but positively giddy at the prospect of an old-fashioned bloodbath. She will be the one to have to face Crow, and promises to be faithful "in her way" to Yuusar's ideals. She glomps Wayne and drags him off (against his protests) to get ready to launch, and Esther seems very displeased. Of course, she's got reason to dislike Yuusar too. He tells her it's time to go become the real king of Insalaum...

The Limonecians flee the wrath of the Luke Adamon, who Marilyn really hopes is up to executing Unblown's oh-so-clever strategy. She isn't intending to let Crow or his friends get anywhere near the ZONE, though Zexis immediate worry is the Luke Adamon and not her per se. With the ZONE up and running, the team is on the clock: five turns till matter in the vicinity starts to crumble. The real question is what fiendish second wave is lying in wait for the Luke Adamon's defeat, but this isn't the time to fret about that.

A nasty surprise is in store for the team: this Luke Adamon has the ability to do a localized version of the Dimensional Overload Bomb effect that Eim mentioned. It seems his lies contain a kernel of truth. This attack is impossible to avoid, so in the words of Sandman, destroy the source sooner rather than later!

Marilyn doesn't do a very good job of defending the Luke Adamon, which stands little chance against the combined might of Zexis. The ZONE is another matter however, and Crow exchanges a few brief words of goodbye before

moving to halt it. Eim, however, has other ideas. He's seen how the ZONES have elevated Crow's Sphere abilities, and vows to make Crow "his" today. Crow tells him to take a number... unless he'd rather deactivate the ZONE and thereby clear Crow's calendar?

With no such action forthcoming from Eim, Crow heads to the ZONE, telling the others to take care of Esther in his stead and to keep his creditors at bay. One of those creditors is waiting in the wings however, and refuses to let Crow commit "bankruptcy". He's brought a new weapon from Traia, conveniently called the "ZONE Breaker". It seems Traia's figured out how to disrupt the ZONE's delicate tuning, and in a way that doesn't rely on Sphere power any more than Insalaum's D-Extractors do.

Eim tells him to stop this foolishness, warning that a price must be paid for using a D-Extractor to the extent required to stop a ZONE. Carlos won't say precisely what he means to do, other than that he's risking his life -- the ZONE Breaker is less of a production item and more like a pre-prototype. He ignores Crow's pleas to stop, telling Zexis that they're all too nice for their own good. Maybe it's fitting a "bad" guy like him do this, then. And let this be a lesson to Eim that not everything goes his way -- though Carlos desires revolution, he does not desire ending the world outright. And getting back at Eim isn't quite as fun as he might have hoped, given that he won't be around to see it change with Traia.

Eim simply can't comprehend why Carlos would sacrifice himself for something like this: surely he's got the intellect to turn any situation to his advantage. Crow for once is forced to agree, realizing that what Carlos did he did to save Crow's life -- burdening Crow with a new debt he'll never be able to repay. But if there's anything Crow can do, it's to master the VX and kick Eim's ass with it. Eim isn't one to die easily, desperate to see the new "awakening" that Crow's power can bring.

Yuusar shows up at this point, telling Eim that though he's Insalaum's enemy, he'll let Yuusar off the hook for today as thanks for the fortifications he's brought to the Arcsabers. Eim waxes thankful to receive a portion of Yuusar's famous benevolence for his people, and Yuusar tells him to get lost instead of bandying creed words. As he leaves, Setsuna feels a strange sense that something is out of place. The other Newtypes have felt that already, and it's proof that there's yet more to Eim's Byzantine schemes.

Yuusar apologizes (sort of) for interrupting Crow's duel, and warns Crow that the life of Insalaum's prince won't come cheap. He then formally announces to all of Zexis that he's come to face them with the Seiou-Ki and the royal sword Coalbrand now that they've stopped the last ZONE. His forces' morale is high, and Yuusar seems like a totally different leader from before. Esther is also to be seen among the Insalaum forces, and Zexis agree to help Crow capture her so she can't be made to fight any more.

Oddly enough though, when Esther is disarmed Yuusar steps in himself and tells her to get back to safety. He claims that he "needs" Esther, and doesn't care what Crow makes of that.

The truth is that he's not exactly king of the battlefield, for all his hit points and annoying Double Motion antics. He damn near gets himself killed by the time Wayne and Unblown arrive. Unblown sends Wayne to protect the Seiou-Ki, diverting the Palace's energy into the ZONE. It acts as an amplifier, and Unblown means to toss Zexis into God-knows what dimension. Crow isn't having any of that, and blasts the ZONE's control system, inadvertently destabilizing the entire shebang.

The result is everyone getting thrown into a land of dead dust. Insalaum itself, as Margret explains when she conveniently shows up.

Meanwhile, word of the mass departure from Limonecia reaches the Scott Lab, where maybe Traia can take small comfort in the fact that her ZONE Breaker seems to have done its job. Coming up with it was sort of a side effect of her VX research, spurred on by an interesting trinket she was given to play with. The lab's computers get busy trying to figure out where Zexis went, and Traia sure hopes they're okay -- Crow in particular. Once left alone however, it's clear who she's really vexed about: Carlos. How could he go and try to settle his score like this?!

#### CHAPTER 46. The Lost Holy Kingdom

Gaiou has done about the smartest thing possible, which is to put his head together with Anemone at the Vodala Shrine. Between the two of them, they've pieced together pretty much all the missing gaps in his memory, and it's now clear what his Duty(tm) is. The question now becomes, is he feeling duty-bound these days? It's an ingenious paradox, because on the one hand he knows no other way of life... and on the other hand, he's doing what he does of his own free will. Anemone sees hope in him, but he corrects her that he's someone who protects hope. Or at least, he used to. Anemone asks him to take The End along with him on his journey, which should help ease the loneliness oppressing him. The End isn't sure he(?) likes this plan until Gaiou feeds him a hot dog, and Anemone wishes him a truly fruitful journey. Impressive that Gaiou, the general of Dimensionality, could go on fighting despite all he's lost. Perhaps one day the whole of the Multiverse will know true peace, and let him rest...

Back aboard the Dragons' Hive, Margret relates her failed peace mission and subsequent incarceration. She escaped during the Palace's destruction, but of course didn't get far when the ZONE went out of control. Her guess is that Unblown minimized the damage by steering everyone towards the most familiar dimension she knew, and that would be Insalaum itself. The degree of ruin leaves no doubt: it was ZONES themselves that laid it waste.

She recounts the Gaiou's assault and the Arcsabers' defeat, after which many civilians died and one seventh of the Arcsabers became DBs. That much can be laid on Gaiou's account. But it was an out-of-control ZONE that did the real damage, apparently when it ran out of Dimensional Energy to siphon away from Zexis' world. Margret explains that Insalaum's prosperity stemmed from research into the technology of its predecessor culture, but that by royal decree the most fundamental elements (the Dimensional Science) were forbidden to explore or use. Still, its descendants fuelled quite a lot of prosperity until Gaiou's arrival.

The Lord of Destruction's power transcends culture, ecosystem, pride -- and any other classification one could name. With no other available option, Unblown violated the taboo and sought a remedy in Dimensional Science, devising the ZONES as a means of extracting large amounts of energy from the world's meridians to power weaponry. Guess what happens when you concentrate energy without fully knowing how to control it? Yeah, oopsie.

After all this devastation, and after Gaiou and Eim left, there were half a billion Insalaumians left. They've all been moved to makeshift colonies situated in the rift between dimensions, forced to battle despair while their leaders try to find them a new place to live. Unblown doubled down on her Dimensional Science exploration, gleaning from Eim the knowledge necessary to perfect the ZONE and to fortify the Arcsabers' weapons. Unblown, Margret says,

has shifted the blame for her own atrocities onto Gaiou, and manipulated the prince into invading the Earth, all to satiate her craving for ever-deeper Dimensional Scientific knowledge.

Every new weapon needs a battlefield to test it on. And every rule set to restrain her access to remnants of the progenitor culture must be gradually broken, by weakening the royal family's hold. Frankly, Unblown would rather see Yuusar die in battle, if Margret is any judge. F.S. notes that this Dimensional Science, which confers no boon on its users, seems to have been taboo for a pretty good reason.

The Insalaum forces are apparently hunkered down around 100 clicks away, clinging to what's left of the Palace. There's no better time to go strike Unblown down and hopefully end the conflict, but there's something to do first. Eureka and Esther have got to be saved! Xingke will lead the rescue team, with Crow and several others along for the ride. If Crow learned anything from Carlos, it's to pay his bills with his own hands. Renton, despite his initial lack of confidence, will of course be going too, with the hearty backing of his teammates. Takeru figures that he can amplify Renton's feelings for Eureka and use that to locate her more quickly, Devil Ring or no Devil Ring. Margret will be playing tour guide, especially since Palace Insalaum is currently resting on what used to be the capital city.

Unblown is going to have a very rough day, since Marilyn and her troops were not caught up in the teleportation and hence are in the wrong dimension to offer help. Zexis has the perfect team to make a distraction, letting the infiltrators readily penetrate to the Palace's bridge. Any guards in the way get swatted aside pretty easily, ample testament to how Zexis' strength isn't limited to piloting skill. Margret goes to strike Unblown down for her crimes in her lord's stead, but Wayne shows up to block her sword thrust at the last moment.

As Unblown is rushed to safety, Margret tries in vain to follow: a level of distraction that nearly costs her lift until Crow blocks Wayne's next sword strike with a knife. Wayne recognizes Crow from his voice, and Crow says he hopes his looks are even better than advertised. Well, he's either the world's smoothest badass, or its biggest moron, but in either case he cuts a nice figure in Wayne's eyes. That means Wayne will have no further hesitation in killing him!

Viral can tell that Wayne is seriously handy with his swords, and given that this is Wayne's turf, it might be best to stage a tactical advance to the rear while the actual swordsmen on the team buy him time to find Esther. Among the others holding Wayne off will be Margret, who poses the interesting question of which of them is the real traitor to the Insalaum cause. Wayne informs her that she's wrong on at least one point: this whole fight is precisely what Yuusar wants!

Crow does find Esther, who indicates that she still understands his speech. Before he can let her loose, Yuusar shows up in person, having heard plenty about Crow. After a tense interchange of pleasantries, Yuusar says that he will "entrust" Esther to Crow, on the theory that he's the only one capable of saving her. Eim said the same thing at one point, and Yuusar reckons that only one who's actualized Sphere power has that potential.

Oh and Renton manages to rescue Eureka too. Isn't that nice?

Of course it will take a little while for the rescuers to make it to the battlefield, so the rest of Zexis will have to keep the bad guys occupied. Eureka and Renton fail their stealth roles, but interestingly The End shows up

and fends the nearest DB off long enough for Nirvash to help. Renton is totally pumped, and vows to do everything and anything to protect Eureka. Unblown doesn't mind seeing Eureka go, publically claiming that her research usefulness was over anyway. She orders the troops into battle, and Zexis will just have to buy enough time for Crow and Margret to take the field.

Insalaum should count itself lucky they've got so many former citizens to feed into the wood chipper that is Zexis. Once enough of them are lost, however, Yuusar is forced to take the field himself, with Wayne by his side. He tells Wayne that letting Crow on the loose is his final act of weakness -- with that out of his system, he can concentrate fully on Insalaum's resurrection.

However, let's not forget that there's a Negotiator on the team. Zero is just as happy to let Roger try to find a peaceful solution to Insalaum's problem, based on what Margret's told them about Yuusar -- he and F.S. are both convinced that the less unnecessary fighting mankind must endure, the better.

But unfortunately, Yuusar has -- by his own choice -- become precisely the sort of evil ruler who's not interested in peace. He tells the Arcsabers that Rogers words are a craven, devious attempt to avoid facing his noble self head-on. Roger protests that this battle won't profit either side, but Yuusar is convinced that it will profit him and his people, as he charges out in the Seiou-Ki and prostrates some ass. Roger is now in the difficult position of having to decide if negotiations have, in fact, failed.

But then something new happens: some force begins to warp this area's dimensional boundaries... or rather, to destroy them! This can only herald one thing: the arrival of Gaiou. He's come to spectate on the ensuing battle, saying that he's personally responsible for setting up the whole thing. And whoever wins will get the honor of becoming his servants! That is, if they will if they want to survive the True War -- what the humans like to call the Black History!

That's got the ZEUTH members' full attention, but Unblown pipes up first, telling him that he's not going to get his way. He tells her to stuff it, and Yuusar has both her and Wayne stand back. He means to bring Gaiou to account for all the death and misery he's wrought on Insalaum, and at long last he's able to draw Coalbrand, proving himself to be the true King of Insalaum. And when he does, it appears that he's able to blow Gaiou away completely, to the shock of everyone watching.

Everyone except Eim, who's got a little business with Yuusar: the Inexhaustible Water-Bearer. Uh-oh, that means Yuusar too is a Sphere-bearer. In fact, of all the Spheres Aquarius turns out to be one of the hardest to get to activate, and Eim has gone through some serious shit to orchestrate it. In fact, Yuusar's Sphere factor might even be more powerful than Eim's thanks to the fragdown with Gaiou, and that concept has Eim tickled pink.

Dorothy, meanwhile, seems to have had her memory jogged by Gaiou's words. It seems the seal on Roger's Megadeus' memory has begun to crack, and Roger and Dorothy agree that Eim must be stopped, and FAST. Roger unleashes Big O's full power, damaging Eim's mech enough that he's forced to retreat. Even he didn't predict that Gaiou would help unseal a Megadeus. Still, he fully expects to win in the end, and exhorts the Inexhaustible Water-Bearer and the Swaying Scales to strengthen each other as best they can.

Roger apologizes for intervening in Yuusar's attempt to strike down his enemies, and Yuusar says that he's merely acting as the king, meaning in the



best interests of his people. At this point Crow, Margret and Esther emerge, and Yuusar orders Wayne to convey them safely back to their ship.

Crow and Yuusar have a newfound respect for each others' Sphere powers, and Crow proposes that they try a little joint experiment. Crow tells Yuusar Esther's name, and together they focus their power on her. What they experience is the primordial order of the multiverse, and its many manifestations [gentlemen, start your kanji dictionaries!]: points, surfaces, volumes, time, parallel worlds, teleportation, tempero-portation [that's time travel to our audience at home], vacuum, absolute temperature, imaginary numbers, Tremors... all of it controlled by the Law of Destruction and Creation. And, in the case of the artificial Revive Cells, reversible.

Witness the power of Origin Rho, and have an Esther as a souvenir! Wayne acts quickly, telling Yuusar that he's got more important things to do than tangle with Zexis here. He has Unblown take Yuusar away, and Yuusar promises Wayne that he'll be waiting in a renewed future.

For reasons I can't quite fathom, Wayne still seems determined to fight Zexis on Insalum's behalf, and he's dangerous enough that the team can't just ignore him. Even Esther insists on pitching in, resolved to protect those she cares about. Crow is glad to see that she's changed for the better, and notes that everything in the world must change too. And if Wayne wants to get his ass beaten in this badly, Crow will just have to oblige!

Margret asks Wayne where Yuusar is headed, and he tells her with a half smile that she's not entitled to know now that she's left the Arcsabers. She retorts that she's still fighting for the Insalaum people, knight or not, and if Yuusar insists on dragging those people into this war, she'll fight him too! And THAT, Wayne exclaims, is what makes the Pearl Knight such a bad-ass woman!

Get Margret to the old palace treasury (2 down, 9 left of the upper right corner) and she'll find the Jewel of Insalaum. Perfect for a crusader of Justice like herself.

Wayne in fact can't beat Crow, but he's got a little insurance. Insalaum's ZONES are still active, and still trying to obliterate everything nearby. This battle has provided fuel for them, and though Wayne had intended to go rejoin his lord before Insalaum was swallowed entirely, he never counted on actually losing. If Wayne had to lose to anyone, he finds himself actually rather glad it was Crow, the same guy who did his master in. Crow vows to carry the memory of the Knight of Knights graven in his heart.

Wayne's sorrow touches Eureka, and a bunch of Emerge helpfully show up so Zexis can escape. Even Wayne has a chance to escape, but he actually elects not to go, and to let the Diamed and Insalaum's capital be his grave. Crow honors this wish, and he and the rest of Zexis make tracks. Wayne is glad he saw Yuusar become king before he died, and in keeping with the ancient law of Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust, he leaves only a prayer for a better tomorrow behind.

Zexis find themselves teleported to Limonecia, where Dr. Hell is waiting to greet them with Bardos' Island's mightiest Mechabeast: the Mechabeast Baron Ashura(tm). Dr. Hell doesn't mean to throw down just yet though: he's merely come to give formal notice that shit WILL get real in their next battle. What better time could there be for a showdown than now, with so many of the Earth's menaces gone? (Not counting the numerous ones still present, of course...) Saying that he doesn't want to damage Mother Earth any further, Dr. Hell proposes that the two sides have a formal duel, at the Photon Power Lab in five days' time when the Earth is at perihelion. Kouji accepts this

challenge standing up, and the race to prepare is on!

Dr. Hell probably has something sneaky planned after all, but all the team can do is face him as best as they can. And if their victory over the Knight of Knights is any indication, their "best" is pretty darn good. Esther seems more or less back to normal, and is willing to take orders to rest until tomorrow before hearing what all has been going on in her absence. Crow meanwhile is locked in his room, no doubt fretting about Carlos' sacrifice and no doubt back to himself by tomorrow.

As soon as she's out of earshot, Esther resolves to not rest quite as much as all that. Margret's waiting down the corridor, and asks what happened during her time in Insalaum. What does she make of Prince^WKing Yuusar...?

#### CHAPTER 47. Life or Death! Dr. Hell's All-Out Assault

The final fragdown with Dr. Hell draws nigh, and for now all Tsubasa can do is wait and see how he'll jump... Oh, and quiz Ankokuji on what the hell he's doing sneaking around in her garden. She knows both he and the Gamias are on the scene, and those only come from one place. Ankokuji is the kind of old school dude who doesn't just divulge that kind of information, and that's fine with Tsubasa: she'll have plenty of time to smoke him out once Dr. Hell is dead. Ankokuji finds Tsubasa's ferocity entertaining: as they say, "Once in love, one thousand times in hate". She takes that remarkably well, even offering to go with him to the Photon Power Lab to spectate on the first round of the Hell-Kabuto feud's climax.

Dr. Hell meanwhile is ordering his lieutenants to attack the Photon Power Lab at once, and they vow to stake their lives on success. Among them, Ashura is in a funny position, having been hypnotically ordered to not die so long as Dr. Hell still lives. Dr. Hell, it seems, values Ashura's services very highly indeed... or at least that's what he tells them. His collaborators Metarl and Sayuri figure they're fit for little more than the guillotine, but Dr. Hell needs them at least as part of his plan to fend off the Baals. And if worse comes to worse, he's still got Bardos to help him control Ashura... a ticking time bomb if you ask Metarl.

If anything, Dr. Hell wants to know why they haven't tried to enlist Ashura's help and resurrect their old comrade, the "Savage God". They claim no interest in the past, now that Dr. Hell has inherited the Black Knowledge, and he explains that his confrontation with Zexis should cement their loyalty. Therefore, he orders them to stay out of the battle, and trust in the special surprise he's got prepared -- using Bardos Island itself! Metarl warns him to hurry: they've precious little time left now that the Shadow Moon is in motion...

The Federation Army shows no signs of aiding Zexis in its battle with Dr. Hell, though thanks to Ootsuka they probably won't come in to finish off the weakened victor either (assuming Zexis is victorious, of course). Ootsuka has managed to get everyone in the projected path of Dr. Hell evacuated, so the team can start blasting to their hearts content. Sayaka tells Kouji not to push himself too hard, finally showing a bit more courage toward her (would-be) boyfriend. Esther loves to see all the romantic progress that's gone on, though she herself maintains stoutly that she and Crow have nothing going on. What about Margret? FLUSTERED DENIALS TOO, and it gets worse when a bunch of the team's tomcats take that as an excuse to advance on her.

Aslan has to step in and tell them all to go jump in a lake, since their "humorous" attempts to get Margret to loosen up are obviously having the

opposite effect. It seems even he is making progress on the human relations front, in his way. Off to the side, Esther promises to deck any guys who make further unwelcome advances on the former Arcsaber. And, one suspects, former love interest for the prince. Margret knows as well as Esther does that she and Esther have some tricky relations going on regarding both Crow and Yuusar, and tells Esther that despite all of that she's looking forward to fighting by her side. Yay, I guess. Crow then tells Esther that he's sent Traia email regarding Esther's un-monstering; he didn't call her voice since she's still mourning Carlos. The guy might have had a lot wrong upstairs, but it's clear he wanted to change the world, and for that Crow vows to remember Carlos from time to time along with the other people fallen for the cause.

Time to see just how much Kouji has grown. All Dr. Hell's forces are on hand, including Pigman who seems perfectly comfortable without a mech of his own. Brocken on the other hand has gotten his own personally-styled mech, the Brocken V2 Schneider. Dr. Hell's forces have brought more of those kamikaze bomb mecha, but the biggest concern is probably Ashura -- it's done on him/her that its hatred of Kouji is every bit as important as its love for Dr. Hell. Kouji meets this challenge head on, and it's not like the rest of Zexis won't have plenty of bad guys to blow up. Dr. Yumi's got contingency plans in case things don't go well, but... hopefully things will in fact go well.

[Note the tricky victory condition, which stipulates that Ashura, Brocken and Pigman must be shot down in the same turn. Also note that Boss, his lackeys, and the Kurogane guardians can pick up a Super-Alloy Z from Tsubasa if they go to the spot she's spectating from.

Brocken turns out to be quite the pervert when it comes to battling the fairer sex, and the female pilots quickly draft a long list of terrible punishments for him before he even has a chance to do anything.

Pigman is a different story, as he dashes inside the Photon Power Lab as soon as he's "shot down". He means to destroy the place from within with his dark enchantments, but Ankokuji and Gamia-Q aren't about to let that happen. Pigman can't immediately figure out why Stroheim's automatons would be helping the enemy, but suddenly it dawns on him. "He" has decided to rub Pigman out, and given Ankokuji very special bullets that can rot Pigman's body from the inside out. Pigman frantically tries to flee and let Dr. Hell know, but Ankokuji's got more bullets and nowhere else better to aim them.

Dr. Yumi asks who the hell Ankokuji really is, and Ankokuji will only tell him that his life is complicated. Anyway, the lab's safe for now -- he just hopes that Yumi won't have to use "it", the lab's real secret. Ankokuji thinks to "Blade" that he didn't need his help today. Yumi tells the team only that the lab's "defense system" carried the day today.

Ashura's got his/her own drama -- when shot down (s)he ejects and starts lamenting how nothing ever goes his/her way. Maybe if (s)he can just get back to Dr. Hell...? Ankokuji shows up to arrest him/her, but just then Gaiou appears too and tells him to cut it out. It seems that "Tristan" and "Isolde" recognize Gaiou a little bit, so he jogs his/her memory completely. Tsubasa meanwhile now has a better idea of what Ankokuji's been ordered to do.

Of course, Dr. Hell's ambitions at world domination haven't ended with the loss of his subordinates. This is his cue to emerge in a TRULY enormous-ass mech, which has the lions' share of Bardos Island's gadgetry in it. He demonstrates this by going over and burninating the Photon Power lab, saying that he's only interested in the lode of Japanium buried underneath.

Recall that Japanium is the stuff that generates Photon Power, and Dr. Hell states that he must have it. Why he must have it involves the Black Knowledge, so he's almost sympathetic to Kouji not buying it.

See, Photon Power is the light that once lit the world during its fight with the Baals: the power of the Old Gods! That would be the Mikeene, and it's an interesting shock that they too had Baal to fight. Dr. Hell asks if anyone knows why the Dimensional Quakes led to two Japans appearing, then answers his own question by saying that the Arm of Zeus kept the two from superimposing upon each other. Yes, Photon Power is to thank/blame.

Dr. Hell is doing all this to prepare for the True War to come, and claims there is no other but him equal to the task. Yumi however isn't buying that for one moment, saying that anyone who would misuse science that badly is totally unfit for any such thing. He unleashes the "seal" on the Photon Power lab, which falls away to reveal a huge fortress underneath. It's got Photon Powered armor, and can travel the land and the seas: a fortress of Photon Power, by Photon Power, FOR Photon Power. It is: the Science Fortress Laboratory.

...Which is about the most uninventive name possible, made all the worse by Yumi's histrionics about how he never wanted to use Photon Power for war. Oh, like, no problem on that front: Zexis will do all the warlike stuff for him. And the fact that Dr. Hell's shown up in his ultimate base means that said ultimate base is now available for pulverization.

It's as though Dr. Hell can't understand why Kouji might want to kick his ass. Like, DUH! Hell is proud of his mech "Gordon", which is powered by Dimension Energy and thus capable of prodigious regeneration. However, not everyone else is equally impressed, including the artist formerly known as Ashura. To Dr. Hell's horror, it turns out that Ashura has gotten his memory back, and is no longer content to be Dr. Hell's lapdog. He breaks Dr. Hell's control device, and vents the fury of the gods of old Mikeene on the eminent (and blue-skinned) scientist.

So, just what is it Ashura has remembered? Well, his/her time as priest(ess) of Mikeene, for one. For two, the time when Dr. Hell had the bright idea of fusing two perfectly fine sleeping people into one messed-up lackey, using all kinds of drugs to atrophy away half of each. He had Tsubasa fuse what was left, then implanted the whole "saving Ashura's rotting ass" story to make him/her into one more tool for world domination. Ashura was the perfect guide to all that Bardos technology.

But now, Ashura is hyper-pissed off at Dr. Hell stealing everything, including the two missing halves of Ashura's shattered self. So pissed off in fact that he's got little to do but laugh at the ludicrousity of it all. Ashura begs Kouji for help in defeating Dr. Hell once and for all, and as Dr. Hell tries to regroup, Kouji's Grandpa computer awakens and yells that it's go time. Yumi gets ready to fire all the spare Rocket Punches the base has, even as Ashura pinpoints the location of Dr. Hell's Dimensional Converter.

How many Rocket Punches is that? Many. Kouji's even got Silent Chuujou's Big Bang Punch, and he uses it to obliterate Dr. Hell once and for all. Peace on Earth tiems aren't quite here yet though, since Corwen and Stinger are still alive and still bent on messing things up for everyone. Since their plan to lure their fellows using Shin Dragon fell through, they've turned their attention to the Power of Light slumbering within the Earth -- the same power that vanquished their people's ass back in the day. Surely it will bring their fellows!

It seems the Kabuto family's problems are only just beginning. Ankokuji knows far more than he's letting on, and tells Tsubasa only that she'll know the upcoming doomsday when she sees it. He strides off, telling her to help toast Zexis' victory for now, and she wonders furiously where the hell Kenzou is and what he's doing. In any case, if more Invaders show up in search of Photon Power, Kouji will simply help bash their skulls in like always: all his Photon Powered death weapons are for purely peaceful purposes, of course!

Meanwhile, in Shin Dragon's cockpit, Gou breaks his catatonia long enough to mutter "They're coming". Which is totally not ominous or anything.

Now where the hell did Ashura get to? Hanging out with Gaiou as it turns out, and resolved that "Tristan" and "Isolde" are as good as dead. Ashura's got at least one task left, and it'll have to wait till the Invaders actually invade. Hell, if the Dimensional General succeeds, maybe Ashura won't even need to do whatever it is. One can only hope, right? Maybe not, seems to be Gaiou's thinking...

#### CHAPTER 48. Godbless Universe

Peace on Earth ain't in fashion yet, what with Arrows and anti-Federation forces (especially White Fang) skirmishing and the looming Insalaum threat. That more Invaders might be on the way only makes things worse. Japan has so far been holding onto the independence it enjoyed before the Federation's founding, but Ootsuka's already had at least one attempt made on his life -- he won't be able to hold off the clutching hands of Arrows forever. Even if he is far handier in unarmed combat than his middle-aged girth might suggest.

Perhaps the biggest worry is Muge, whose agents (including Sayuri) torment the living even as he apparently resurrects the dead. It would sure be nice to be able to concentrate on more mundane foes like Arrows.

Takeru's mom has heard about the Devil Ring and sits him down to talk about it. He admits that the pain is gradually getting worse, and since the Ring isn't a physical device it can't be removed via some sort of surgery. Takeru assures her that he means to lead his (remaining) life right, keeping his promise to Marg to defend universal peace as long as he's able to stand. She won't try to stop him, but asks him to remember that she'll always love him.

Elsewhere in Japan, the Twinkle Project is back to holding concerts -- outdoors no less. Shinobu finds this more than a little ironic, but most of the rest of the Dancougar folks are prepared to enjoy the fruits of their labors... even if the credit for said labors has all been publically given to Arrows and the Federation. Isn't it cool to be the secret agent types who actually get things done? Not if you ask Shinobu, and Aoi has to admit that his old-fashioned way of doing things is pretty hot. Sara huffs a bit at this, and when Crow tries to calm the two "lovebirds" down, Sara tells the "X-Brothers" to shut up and stop bugging the other concert goers. Huh? Well, Shinobu's got "slanty" eyes, and Crow's got "droopy" eyes: combine for an X!

Bizarre humor aside, the team has to marvel at the Twinkle Project's ongoing popularity, given that Eiyda's graduated and Sheryl's totally MIA somewhere. Ranka has been hailed as the anti-Vajra Messiah, but it seems that's about to change. As she takes the stage and approaches the mic, she finds herself unable to sing. She murmurs an apology to the vast crowd, who's ecstatic anticipation immediately toggles to near riot-level anger.

Fortunately Basara has been hanging around, and he strides on stage and tells Ranka (nicely) to make room. The other Fire Bombers assure Ranka that everyone

has days like this, and convince her to let them hold down the fort. Pierre for one is about ready to totally jizz on everyone and everything nearby at the sight of his idol performing live. Riot averted, the question turns to why Ranka can't sing.

Lacus can answer that one! Songs are like a mirror that inevitably reflects the soul. She's noticed something changing about Ranka's singing lately: a blossoming of love -- not just for Alto, but for all those who enjoy hearing her sing. And for the singing itself. Unfortunately, anxiety and sorrow have also been creeping in, and Alto finds himself wishing he's noticed sooner. Shinobu's pouting a bit at all this talk of love, sniffing that he doesn't get that stuff at all. Sandman pipes up, grandly proclaiming that even wild beasts know how to love each other. Maybe he should be more honest with himself! Oh and Sara, maybe she should try being a bit less afraid to love others too! Holy smokes, is this guy Dr. Phil? Sara asks to be alone a bit and walks off, leaving Shinobu the choice of whether to follow.

Shinobu grouses that Basara chose to open with "Dynamite Explosion", after which every one of his other songs would just be a letdown. Believe it or not, Shinobu's been a band himself, so he's got a fine ear for this kind of stuff. He tells the others he'll be back after this song is over, and heads off after Sara.

Ranka's now huddled in her dressing room, with Grace apologizing for not noticing how anxious Ranka's become. Grace tells her to take some time for herself to calm down, internally calculating that Ranka's emotional level has fallen too far to be of use... bad timing, given how long it's been taking to decipher the Vajra's networking protocol. After the door closes, Ranka speaks to the absent Sheryl and Alto that there's no way she can sing when she's in pain like this. The door opens just then, but it's not Alto here to rescue her...

Sara thinks that she might be able to open her heart to Shinobu if he opens his to her, but her thoughts are disrupted by Sayuri showing up. Sayuri claims to have escaped from Muge, who's held up in the Central Information Control center. Actually, when Sayuri said "escape", she meant "came as a saboteur", and zaps Sara to sleep so she can carry her off. Shinobu runs over at this point, aghast at seeing Muge/Sayuri in person. Muge explains that Sayuri's last wish was desire for Sara, but with that over he plans to craft a new world, using Ranka's power. And by the way, it's too late for Shinobu to stop a new dimension from being built!

[We apologize about the chapter title BTW; "Godbless" is honestly written as one word. Loan English can be a very strange thing...]

That new dimension has half-superimposed itself on this one, recasting the surroundings into a nightmarish Muge-scape that emanates from that CIC Center. Muge shows up to taunt the team with how he and Sayuri are now fused, and how awesome his evilness is. Ranka's role in this is to sing, of course. See, her songs normally overflow with the light of life, but wherever there is light, there's also darkness. And with a little help, Ranka's heart can be plunged into Darkness (with a capital-D) and make the conversion to a new world complete. And to power it all, Muge means to use "Information Energy", a concept that actually kind of exists in real life. What does not exist in real life is the massive computer hacking that can even outmaneuver Veda's attempt to contain it.

In any case, there's a simple fix: save Ranka. That will mean fighting through a legion of Muge's troops, but hopefully while Zexis is doing that Shinobu and friends can sneak in the back and effect the rescue. And since the team has

Basara, who also sings with Life, that shouldn't be thaaaat hard.

Well, except for the part where Muge's dark powers are inexhaustible. In theory. After vanquishing about fifty of the bad guys, Zexis' pilots start tapping their feet in impatience.

Inside, Sara is all strapped to <insert fiendish contraption here> by Sayuri, who tells her (unconvincingly) that her only interest is in saving her. Sayuri has it that the foolishness of humans requires an absolute ruler to rein it in. And conveniently, teh Intarwebz can do just that, now that she (that is, Muge) has started broadcasting the mother of all worms from the CIC. And lest we forget about Ranka, Sayuri has her strapped to another <insert fiendish device here> waiting to be reborn as the DARK IDOL SINGER(tm). Sara yells that she won't let Muge lay one filthy finger on Ranka, which apparently exhausts Muge's patience with Sayuri's last lesbian wish. Better that Kishimo use Sara as bait for the intruders, while Ranka gets corrupted by Muge/Sayuri's tender mercies.

[Pause while you go look for doujin scans of that.] Back to business though, as Takeru prepares to risk his life in a desperate attempt to defeat Muge's lackeys and let Shinobu and co. forge on ahead. Insofar as Muge stands at the pyramid of all these dark forces, defeating him is one of Takeru's top priorities... and no, he doesn't mean to actually die, in case Shinobu was worried. After the others hurry ahead though, Takeru finds himself alone and confronted by Metarl... who means to strike the final blow as a twisted sort of benevolence.

Shinobu gets separated from his teammates when he hears what he thinks is Sara's voice. He's not wrong, and comes face to face with Kishimo, who's holding Sara hostage. Shinobu does the most sensible thing anyone's pulled all month and fills Kishimo full of lead with a machine\_gun, but sadly Kishimo's been made a cyborg by this point. Any other guy would die from Kishimo's counterattack, but as Sara tearfully pledges her love, Shinobu finds new reserves of strength and rebuffs Kishimo till the rest of the team arrive.

One machine gun may not be enough, but several do the trick. Finish off with a rocket launcher strike and Kishimo has had it. Shinobu will have to get used to his teammates recognizing him and Sara as lovers, but right now there's still battle raging. Alto has joined a "collaborator" and headed toward the CIC's core.

That would of course be Brela, who vows to do everything including lay down his life to get Ranka back. Alto yells at Muge to vacate Sayuri at once, and Muge gloats that his mind simultaneously dwells in this world and in cyberspace... much like Grace here. He's not surprised that all this is beyond Altos comprehension, but one thing he won't do is hand over the Dark Idol Singer(tm) now. Muge hasn't counted on Basara though, who sings at him loud enough to louse up his plans. Plus energy canceling out Minus energy or whatever pseudoscientific gibberish.

Muge tries to grab Ranka and run, but Ranka's pet Ai finally transforms into a mini-Vajra and starts machine-gunning his ass. Nothing for it but to retreat in disgrace, as Ranka tries to convince Alto that Ai isn't like the other murderous space monsters. Grace orders Brela to get Ranka out of here and leave the rest to her. As the three others flee, Grace can't help but admire how Ranka's tamed a Vajra already. Hell, even that Dark Idol Singer(tm) has a certain ring to it. Surely this Muge dude has the answers she's been seeking, like how to take control of the Vajra's network...

Meanwhile, Metarl has sensed Muge's forced retreat, and to his annoyance the

Rose Knight shows up to gloat. The power of LOVE will always prevail! The knight tells Takeru to live on and find a way to defeat the Devil Ring, and bring peace to the Universe! That gives Takeru a clue as to who the knight might be, and with a bit of the knight's power Takeru blasts Metarl something fierce. Destroyed utterly? Maybe, in which case the knight's immediate role is over.

The knight turns out to be Rose, who's been willingly possessed by Marg's eternal soul. Marg's told her that when the Light defeats the power of Darkness, the Devil Ring will vanish. That's a bit cryptic, but Takeru vows to go on fighting anyway. That's good, because Muge has just accumulated enough energy to resurrect his proper body, meaning Sayuri is of no further use.

The Real Slim Muge is human-sized, but with vast rump-shaking action that Earth WILL is wise to fear. In Muge's view though, both he and all the annoying humans need to be messily killed. Shinobu takes a different view, and with Takeru and Roze on hand to help, Alto won't even be needed right now (this lets him go fetch Ranka). Muge isn't fazed, saying that he's got all the Earth's power at his disposal and is about to become a true god over all the universe as a proper apostle of the Black Knowledge. Ryouma reckons that Zexis will need that Black Knowledge too to properly fend off these boss characters, but that sounds somehow wrong to Crow.

Sayuri's unconscious form gets recovered by the 21st Century folks, so the team can show Muge the full power of love. And as they sometimes say, "Love hurts."

Muge sucks up a decent amount of damage before starting to gloat. That there's a second Dancougar on the scene doesn't faze him one bit; in fact, it fills him with glee. Cause: Aoi has unresolved psychological issues stemming from her youth as an orphan, making her the weakest link. However, Muge is surprisingly amateur at these psychic attacks, since Aoi's teammates can all chime in to cheer her up. It turns out that what's really going on is that she's a bit shook up over Shinobu ending up with Sara -- but if Shinobu can't be her lover, he can still be her role model.

And Shinobu's always been good at role-modeling ass demolitions. Aoi declares to a shocked Muge that she's more than capable of using her past pain as fuel for her inner fires. She and Shinobu charge forward and pull off "Dan-Kuu-Sou-Ga-Ken", the "Twin-Fanged Air-Cleaving Sword" for those keeping score at home. Who knew that was hiding in the works?

It makes a great photo op for Isabelle, who's managed to get cozy enough with Ootsuka to be briefed on the Dancougar pilots' identities. Ootsuka in fact has specifically brought her here so she can broadcast Zexis' valor to the world in the brief period before Veda resumes control of the Internet. This is all part of Ootsuka's master anti-Arrows plan: the "Zexis Movement". Rather than just laying Arrows' misdeeds bare, this way the public have an alternative candidate they can actually root for.

Ootsuka is more than capable of keeping Isabelle safe while the rest of the team kick Muge's ass. This is over in no time flat, and Zexis can record another major win for mankind in the books. Besides the Dancougar folks, Basara deserves a lot of the credit for motivating the team, even if he is kind of a waste of roster slots under normal circumstances. It would certainly appear that all the Power of Darkness dudes are now toast, making it case closed once Alto brings Ranka back.

Alto finds Ranka looking out over the city, hugging her tame Vajra with Brela



by her side. Ranka asks what originally motivated Alto to want to fly, and he slowly relates how his mother was always frail by the time he could remember her. The two of them would spend hours gazing at the "skies" of their colony, and on one particular occasion she murmured that she wished she could see the \_real\_ sky: endless blue to the horizon, with little fluffy clouds. To Alto, born and raised on a colony ship, that sounded like a fairy tale.

Everyone wants their freedom, Ranka supposes. She tells Alto that she's started recovering pieces of her lost memory, and as scary as it is to say, she suspects that today's fiasco may be the fault of her songs. She's decided to go to where the Vajra are, if for no other reason than to return Ai to his own kind. Alto protests that this is obviously a BAD IDEA, given how their two species are locked in a life-or-death war, but Ranka's mind is made up and Brela is more than happy to play enabler. Ranka earnestly tells Alto that she was hoping to go with him at her side, telling him she loved him right before taking off.

Alto gets the thankless task of breaking the news to the rest of Zexis. Even Grace herself doesn't know if Ranka's search for her roots is for the best, but she's got plenty of juicy data from Muge to pore over. Her plans are now ready, and she need only wait for the insect queen to appear. And then it's Showtime(tm)!

If Ranka's gone to the Vajra, she's probably headed to the Neo Planets -- Frontier recon has concluded that the Vajra nest is likely in that area. Mishima's stated plan was to use Ranka as the core of an expedition to wipe the Vajra out once said nest was pinpointed, but that's going to be rather harder now. The alternative is a full-scale human assault, but that would require getting Arrows and White Fang to bury the hatchet... a task that only Zexis seems capable of. Many among the military are waiting for something like the Zexis Movement to galvanize their actions, and with the recovered Sayuri helping stymie Veda, it all is starting to sound plausible. And if Arrows loses support and implodes, the Federation as a whole will become vulnerable to Zero's final plan.

One. Problem. Word comes in that Rilina is being removed as queen, presumably by the Innovators. This strikes Zero as an absurd move, given the amount of chaos sure to follow the loss of so charismatic a leader. Why is Arrows so eager to slide their own neck into the noose? Perhaps something to do with Rilina's replacement: Emperor Charles. Yikes!!

Charles gets on the mike, and the first words out of his mouth are that not all men are created equal. Nor are they raised equally, etc. etc. Basically, humans exist to be segregated, which causes the friction and infighting that powers progress. Equality, he declares, is the true evil, and no one who shuns fighting is entitled to even be born into this world! Let all who hear fight to the death, to gain or lose it all! Godbless the Universe!

#### CHAPTER 49. Zero and Lelouch

In case you were wondering how the current and former head of the Federation get along, you're about to find out. Sitting comfortably on his throne in the Britannian capital of Pendragon, Charles tells Rilina to her face that she's incapable of shouldering the burdens the current world presents. She freely admits that she alone isn't equal to the task, but adds that the world's future is to be decided by more than any one person. She expects the hopes and dreams of the masses to prevail, but Charles is in way too much of a hurry for that. He declares that \_he\_ alone can change the world, and Rilina asks if he now styles him a dictator. He makes no reply, so she demands further

to know what he's done to Lelouch and Nanaly.

Charles begins to get irritated at this point, but Lady Une conveniently shows up to insist nicely that Rilina go and rest. Scowling alarmingly, Rilina snaps on her way out that the Britannian emperor would do well to remember that this world wants peace, not war. Once she's out of earshot, Charles muses that Rilina is one entertaining girl, and all the more for not cowering in his presence. Still, her ideals won't wash in this world of lies.

Charles' next annoying guest is Ribbons, whose favor-currying Charles takes as a sign that the Black Knowledge has still eluded his grasp. Ribbons allows that there've been a few "difficulties", and Charles scoffs that a task like merely ruling the world could be called "difficult". Ribbons smirks faintly and says that ruling such an assemblage of idiots is beyond him, which doesn't make him foisting the Federation off on Charles sound all that good. Charles warns that putting him in charge will make the world more chaotic, not less, but Ribbons sounds fine with playing guide to those who fell through the cracks in Charles' announced worldview. Charles clearly thinks Ribbons is an idiot who doesn't know how the world should be led, and Ribbons has much the same view of any human. But once Charles fails spectacularly, and he will, Ribbons plans to swoop in and fix things with Grace's system. He takes his leave, to watch the chaotic world from the sea of stars (and maybe get some payback on Zexis in the process).

Once Ribbons is out of earshot, Charles says that Ribbons is not going to get his way. For instance, Charles knows all about Ioria's plans and thinks himself quite capable of carrying them out.... in his own way!

Meanwhile, Zero is frantic over how to save Nanaly. Charles is immortal and immune to Geassing, and not likely to respond favorably to hostage demands over Cornelia. What the hell to do? C.C. doesn't know how Charles managed to escape C-Space, but observes that his power seems to have exceeded even her imagination. Faced with no other option, Lelouch decides to use his last resort and pulls out his cellphone.

He phones Suzaku, who after a moment asks if indeed Lelouch is Zero. Zero admits it, telling Suzaku that Charles is holding Nanaly hostage to use against him. While he doesn't expect Suzaku to honor any of his requests, even one to help Nanaly, he's asking anyway for lack of anyone else to turn to. After a moment, Suzaku agrees to protect Nanaly... IF Zero comes alone to Area Eleven, to the Kururugi Shrine. Lelouch agrees...

Meanwhile, word spreads among the pilots that Arrows and the Knights of the Round are massing in Area Eleven, spurred on by the worldwide fighting keyed by Charles' broadcast. Arrows' swift move to crush remaining dissenters is the exact opposite of Rilina's Absolute Pacifism, though it seems that the Innovators have actually withdrawn from active governance. The resolute, unhesitating show of massive force has all the earmarks of the Britannian emperor. The real problem is that the huddled masses still need a leader, and the very chaos Charles has provoked is ironically bringing those afflicted closer into his fold. Rilina may have been a constitutional monarch, but Charles will soon become an absolute monarch at the rate things are going.

Hiroyuki says that it's obvious what Zexis needs to be doing, and it's not playing hide-and-seek with the missing Rilina. It seems that Charles isn't the only one without hesitation in these parts. Esther needs a bit of cluing in, so Hiroyuki tells her they're going to strike down anyone who brings warfare to the people.

Charles probably means to make an example out of the area that spawned the

Black Knights, despite all the peaceful progress the resistance movements there have made by working with Nanaly. They're still resistance movements though, and Charles has a poor track record with tolerating such things. So to Area Eleven Zexis will go, and conveniently enough Zero has headed there "ahead" of the team, to get things ready for battle. AND he's done so alone, leaving even C.C. behind. Crow is sure the hyper-cautious Zero will be just fine, but Karen knows that Lelouch must be having fits over Charles' resurgence. The question is, what does he mean to do about it?

Lelouch hasn't seen the Kururugi Shrine in eight years, since he and Nanaly were taken in by then-prime minister Genbu. That's where Lelouch met Suzaku, possibly the world's most stubborn individual -- and Lelouch's first real friend because of it. It's that friendship Lelouch is hoping will carry the day... assuming Suzaku can accept Lelouch. Lelouch can only wait and hope he doesn't have to use his "insurance" instead.

Suzaku shows up and starts the conversation on a suitably acerbic note. He's mildly, ironically impressed that Lelouch had the guts to show his face in front of Suzaku again. Suzaku doesn't sound much inclined to place any stock in any promise Lelouch might make, so Lelouch asks why Suzaku, too, has come alone. Suzaku says he's tired of lying, having already lied to Nanaly just as Lelouch has. He blames Lelouch for betraying not just him, but Nanaly, the student council, and even Euphy.

He asks if Lelouch Geassed Euphy, and one thing Lelouch never does is make excuses for the consequences of his actions... even when excuses might be justified. Lelouch says coldly (and precisely) that it was his Geass, and his order, that led to Euphy slaughtering the Japanese. He explains it by claiming that the Special Administrative District would have led to the Black Knights' collapse, attempting to accept the blame for everything in return for holding Nanaly blameless.

Suzaku finds mention of Nanaly exceedingly unfair, but Lelouch then gets down on his hands and knees to beg Suzaku's pardon. This is the first time in his whole life he's ever bowed his head to another, saying he doesn't even need or want his Geass power if Suzaku will see to it that Nanaly stays safe. Suzaku yells that if Lelouch is that sorry, he should use his power to bring Euphy back to life THIS INSTANT. If he's that sorry, let him use his evil to bring good to the world, THIS INSTANT! Isn't he Zero, maker of Miracles?!

Lelouch protests that those miracles were all just smoke and mirrors, that "Zero" is just a mask to hide behind while lying. So what?!, snaps Suzaku: if lying is what it takes, then he should lie the rest of the way to the truth! Lelouch murmurs that there's no way to repair the mistakes of the past, and Suzaku demands to know why Lelouch Geassed him "to live" back on Kamine-jima. Does he have any idea how much that Geass has perverted Suzaku's ability to live as he sees fit?

Lelouch says that he simply wanted to survive. And as for why he saved Suzaku when he was to be executed for murdering Clovis, Lelouch claims it was all to gain the Japanese's trust. Saving the students from the terrorists at Mt. Fuji was a propaganda move for the Black Knights. Etc. etc. The thing is though, Suzaku recognizes the look in Lelouch's eyes -- the look of someone who would rather be punished than to divulge the truth. Suzaku knows that feeling well, as it's what drove him to enter the Britannian army in the first place.

He tells Lelouch that there's but one way for him to atone for his sins: to make his lies reality. Since he's lied and claimed to be an Ally of Justice, he must now become one for real. In Suzaku's view, that means making Zexis cease its resistance, irrespective of the fact that Zexis is far from Lelouch's

personal plaything. If he does, if he can stop the fighting, Suzaku will protect Nanaly by reforming the Federation from within... with Lelouch by his side.

Lelouch is in the process of agreeing when Schneizer's agent Kanon emerges from hiding. She's well aware of Lelouch's secret identity, and orders Guilford to arrest him on the spot. It all looks like Suzaku meant to sell Lelouch to his enemies from the beginning, and circumstances proceed too fast for Suzaku to set the record straight. Kanon thinks that this is her chance to take Zexis down, and Zero yells in fury that Suzaku's betrayed him.

Meanwhile, the other Knights of the Round are all assembled, and clearly not the best of buds either. Luciano isn't thrilled that Charles would supposedly send the "traitor" Suzaku on a special mission for the crown, but there's little time for them to bicker as Zexis show up. Toudou is somewhat dismayed to see the Knight of One on hand, and Ougi knows that this will be effectively the final battle versus old Britannia: win here and he and "Chigusa" can live together in peace. Zero is still absent, and C.C. tells Karen privately that she's got no choice but to honor his wish to not follow him.

Nanaly hears all this with considerable anxiety from the castle. Roemeyer tells her that Schneizer is off on some crucial mission with Suzaku... something or other to do with Zero. Bismark, the Knight of One, orders all the loyal troops to strike down the traitorous Zexis and prove their fealty once and for all. Meanwhile Alto is gritting his teeth and putting concerns about Ranka aside for now. Crow can only hope that when Zero shows up, he'll have some magical way of turning the tables as a souvenir...

As the battle rages on, Lelouch has been taken to a car, where his brother is waiting to chat in a private little teleconference. Schneizer expresses sorrow that the royal family's serial killer is one of its own; nevertheless, he reckons he can make amends with Charles enough to at least save Lelouch's life. Lelouch snaps back that he's opted not to believe in people anymore... not after having his friendship betrayed.

Guilford clucks his tongue at this impudence toward a high noble, but Lelouch informs Guilford that he's his knight now. He orders Guilford to set him free, making Suzaku wonder what the hell is going on -- when did Lelouch have a chance to use his Geass? Long before this little meeting, Lelouch announces: a little insurance in case someone betrayed him! As Guilford spirits him away (with Suzaku screaming his name), Lelouch has a moment of sorrow for the loss of his first, and last, friend. The Zexis troops notice the upheaval from a distance, and Karen clings to the belief that Zero will return if she keeps up the fight on her side.

Zero rushes back to his mech and takes the field, announcing to Zexis that his plan has failed and that a frontal assault is the only option left. Not something you'd hear Zero say often. He tells Jeremiah and Rolo to help out, as there's no turning back now. Why "Orange" is piloting the giant, umm, orange-colored, orange-shaped mech is anyone's guess, though Lakshata at least knows that it's called the "Knight Giga-Fortress". Apparently Jeremiah now claims "Orange" as a token of fealty to his lord, which is good enough for the other Zexis pilots.

As expected, Suzaku takes the field too. Schneizer and his people have suspected something fishy going on between Suzaku and Zero for some time, and the transcript of his little chat with Lelouch has brought everything into focus. Schneizer "apologizes" to Suzaku for mistrusting him, and Kanon adds that though she can't punish a Knight of the Rounds, she really wishes Suzaku had saved everyone the trouble and just come clean at the

outset.

It's now up to him to find a way to make amends for what he's done, and break these chains of love^Wsadness. Schneizer has even shown up on the battlefield "in person" (really, in his flagship), indicating how sure he is of victory. Such hubris, thinks Zero, must be punished \_severely\_ up the ass. He blames himself for trying to count on emotion, and now believes that he's got to be totally dispassionate if he's to have any hope of saving Nanaly.

Sayoko's been sent into the palace, and Lelouch is sure that a chance will come to extract Nanaly safely during the battle. Lelouch calls to all the Zexis units to follow him and show the Britannian emperor their might. That strikes Suzaku as arrogant, but the fact is that the vaunted Knights of the Round don't stand a chance in hell versus the death brigade that is Zexis. Bismark, vaunted Knight of One, hies him hence to warn Charles of the approaching danger, while Luciano simply loses his psychopathic life -- that he holds most precious.

Anyu has a more interesting reaction: something unknown within her stirs at the sight of Zero. What could it be? The real prize is Suzaku though, infuriated beyond measure to be forced to retreat in Zero's sight. He's got good reason to do so though: Schneizer means to defeat Zero with a F.L.E.I.J.A., fired by none other than Suzaku himself. Of course, that would also wipe out most of the Tokyo Settlement, but Nina tells him that most of the civilians have been evacuated anyway. Suzaku growls that that's not the point, but has little choice but to retreat anyway. Lelouch vows to complete their duel once he's rescued Nanaly.

Schneizer doesn't fare any better, though it seems he half-expected to lose anyway. At this rate they'll have to call for reinforcements, though Schneizer tells Kanon that there's no way Charles himself will ever take the field. Or does she think that Charles cares anything for "today"? In any case, Schneizer holds all the trump cards, and it's just a matter of figuring out when and where to play them. Zero isn't happy to have him on the loose now that Schneizer knows his identity, but the top priority is Nanaly.

Once all the guards are gone, Sayoko finds Nanaly being loaded onto a shuttle. Zero orders Jeremiah and Rolo to keep the shuttle from taking off, and Rolo is happy to comply in the interest of \_killing\_ Nanaly and thereby securing (he thinks) his place in Zero's affections. Suzaku then retakes the field, figuring he's got to \_make\_ Zero atone for his sins. He warns Zero that he's equipped with UBER-strategic weapon, and orders everyone to cease fighting. It's unclear that a KMF could even carry such a thing, but assuming it could, is Britannia prepared to actually sacrifice Tokyo to stop Zexis? Zero however is done listening to Suzaku, and orders Karen to strike Suzaku down.

This time Karen has the upper hand, and it becomes rapidly clear that this duel can only end with someone actually dying. Crow orders the rest of Zexis not to interfere: this is the path that all of them have voluntarily chosen to walk! Suzaku is \_really\_ reluctant to withdraw to safety, despite his mech's disadvantage, and no amount of calling him a dumbass by Lloyd and Cecil will change that. Karen tells him that she bears him no personal ill will... but any enemy of Zero's is an enemy of hers!

Nina screams at him to use the F.L.E.I.J.A., the whole point of which was to get revenge for Euphy's death. He counters that its value is as a threat: were he to actually \_fire\_ it the consequences would be too dreadful to imagine. He prepares for his own death as Karen bids him farewell, prepared to pay the price himself for what he's done... but then the old Geass kicks in,

and his body decides on its own to live to fight another day. He reflexively fires the projectile secreted at his waist.

Lakshata is aghast that Britannia has finally completed the F.L.E.I.J.A., a limited-range nuclear weapon! Sumeragi yells for everyone to get as far away as possible, and Lelouch rushes to try to save Nanaly... only to have Guilford (still convinced Lelouch is his mistress Cornelia) forcibly haul him to safety. He can only watch helpless as everything dissolves into light.

At least the Ptolemy-2 got far enough away. The aftermath is dramatic: everything within the F.L.E.I.J.A.'s radius has been completely obliterated. The Tokyo Settlement is done for. All Zexis members are accounted for, except for C.C., and Zero has returned to the blast zone...

Zero asks Rolo where Nanaly is, saying that he can't contact her, or Sayoko, or C.C. Rolo tries to tell him that they weren't in time, and all vanished in the light, but Lelouch brushes this off -- all he wants to do is talk with Nanaly. Rolo gets more direct, saying that Nanaly is dead, and again Lelouch tells him to stop lying. Just a moment, just an instant of talking with her will do...

Elsewhere nearby, Suzaku gets to survey what he's done. Jeremiah was nearby and spotted him, and has come to chat (no hostilities intended). He means to thank Suzaku for saving him back when, and smiles ironically at the fate that seems determined to make them enemies. He takes his leave to search for Nanaly, though Suzaku is pretty sure Nanaly's been atomized. Not far away, another person is regretting getting such good grades in theoretical physics. There's nothing Suzaku can say to comfort Nina of course, and with nothing else to do, he breaks into maniacal laughter, which echoes through the vast, spherical crater...

How does all this strike Diethart? Awesomely. He thinks that broadcasting this will bring about a whole new type of chaos in the world, one ordained by God himself. His rantings are disrupted when he discovers Cornelia, in the process of escaping in all the chaos. Diethart calls for the guards to aim for her legs, meaning to use her to further advantage, but this gets back-burnered because of a ship approaching the Ikaruga. It's Schneizer, come with a peaceful request of parlay with Zexis. Holy crap!

Lelouch has returned to his room by this point, and the last thing he needs now is Rolo trying to play sibling to him. Hasn't he figured out yet that Lelouch hates him? He yells at Rolo to get out and never show his face before him again. Rolo leaves, and almost immediately Karen comes in instead. Toudou and the others are waiting for him, and she promises to stay by his side until he return to Zero-hood. But what can he do with Nanaly and even C.C. gone?

Since Zero is keeping himself incommunicado, the other Zexis commanders have no choice but to go through with this conference with Schneizer without him. Schneizer has requested a chance to address as many Zexis folks as possible... Cornelia meanwhile has been filling Schneizer in on everything she's learned about the Geass Order, giving Schneizer all the ammunitions he needs for the conference.

Schneizer is certainly very well informed about who Zexis' pilots are, though Roger has done this enough to be instinctively distrustful of Schneizer's bon homme. Schneizer isn't surprised that Zero is absent, noting that he's always been the type to shun others' counsel and keep them at arms' length. Quite familiar with Zero, eh, asks Sumeragi. Sure, given that he's Schneizer and Cornelia's brother. Indeed: Zero is none other than Britannia's eleventh

prince, Lelouch vi Britannia, the man "most loved, and most feared" by Schneizer.

This provokes bewilderment among many of the pilots, though nobody on hand can deny the claim either. Diethart isn't swayed by the accusation, noting that "Zero" has always been judgable by his miraculous results and not by his identity. But what, asks Schneizer, if those miracles were all false? Zero, he says, can issue hypnotic commands via an ability called "Geass". Where's the proof? With Viletta, from whom Ougi has heard everything. Ougi asserts that Zero's been deceiving them all this time... using them as pawns!

...None of which changes, Diethart asserts, the results that Zero has achieved. If this so-called "Geass" actually exists, it sounds like an extremely useful weapon. Maybe if it was only pointed at the bad guys, but there's the possibility it's been used on Zexis too. At least, Cornelia is quite convinced that Zero used it on Euphemia to cause the slaughter of the Japanese... and Schneizer has the audio recording of Lelouch's conversation with Suzaku as Lelouch's admission of guilt.

It starts to become clear why many of the people near Zero have acted as they did, and Roger can sense the chain of doubt leading all the pilots toward the conclusion Schneizer desires. Sumeragi too knows what's going on here: Schneizer wanted as many Zexis pilots as possible to deepen the overall sense of hysteria. Hiiro and Kiriko remain silent as Schneizer asks to have Zero handed over to him.

Karen then walks in with Zero, and Zero realizes almost immediately that Schneizer is trying to sever his ties with Zexis. NOW Roger intervenes before Tamashiro and the others do something rash. What proof, he asks, is there that Zero has actually misled Zexis? Sure he's kept secrets, but it's hardly fair to turn against a teammate without hearing their side of the story. That, adds Sumeragi, has always been Zexis' policy. Perhaps Zero's very identity constitutes a betrayal to the Black Knights, but she for one would like to know what reason drove him to kill his own brother in the interest of battling his own homeland. Hiiro observes that Zero is neither just, nor evil... and everyone knows that Hiiro's seen lots through the Zero System. Nor does anyone doubt that Hiiro will kill Zero if he ever believes he's truly turned to the dark side. Besides, notes Kiriko: everyone in Zexis is at least partially in Zero's debt.

Crow, a self-confessed liar, is prepared to hear Zero out. And Simon recalls Kamina's words, that Zero is truly prepared to risk his life in battle. The question is, for what? The rest of the team will leave the choice up to Ougi, de facto second-in-command of the Black Knights, whether to believe in Zero or not.

[This whole business of having a choice comes about only if you've garnered enough Zero Points. If you decide to NOT believe in Zero, the following happens.]

Ougi tells Zero that he can't forgive him, and Toudou orders the Black Knights to surround him. Diethart pulls out a camcorder, saying that they will tell stories about Zero for generations, despite the fact that he will have died with his revolution half done. Mind you, Diethart had wanted to stick with him to the end, but at least he can post the execution footage to FaceTube. Karen doesn't want to leave Zero's side even as the Black Knights prepare to fire, pleading with Lelouch to tell her what she was to him.

Lelouch is now in "check" thanks to Schneizer, who he knows won't have left him any escape routes. That leaves only one option: self-sacrifice! He

grandly removes his mask, sniggering at the team for taking this long to figure it out. With almost too much stereotypicality he claims that they all were his pawns... especially Karen, who was of great use in this game. She sadly nods and bids him farewell, but as she turns to walk off, he murmurs gravely at her to keep herself alive.

But just then the Shinkirou breaks in, with Rolo at the controls. He gives Zero a chance to escape with his Geass, appearing to simply vanish before the eyes of the Zexis pilots. As the others try to rush off in pursuit, Karen can only gape and ponder what Lelouch told her.

Eluding a bunch of people with machine guns is one thing. Eluding an array of mecha spread far and wide is quite another, even with the Shinkirou's Absolute Defensive Zone... which, as Rolo finds out, is really hard to operate. Lelouch is like totally a genius and stuff! Lelouch protests that he's got no reason left to live, but Rolo goes on using his Geass on a grand scale to keep them on the path to freedom... even as the strain on his heart mounts. Rolo explains his actions by saying that he'd been someone's tool for so long that it felt wonderful to have an actual family... even if it was fake. The memories of their time together are what finally made him human! What he's doing now isn't for anyone else's sake but his own!

As Rolo's heart gives out, he tells Lelouch that he saved him because he knows he's a liar. All that stuff about hating him had to be a lie, right! Seeing that Rolo is beyond aid, Lelouch agrees, having to hand it to his brother for figuring him out. Rolo smiles and says that he's always known what his brother is thinking. As he slumps lifeless to the ground, Lelouch agrees with one thing: Rolo's "brother" is indeed a liar. That doesn't make any of this easier to take, of course: Lelouch has lost Nanaly, C.C., the Black Knights, and now Zexis. Maybe this was the only logical outcome. Maybe he had this coming. But if so, that's all the more reason to go on, to use the life that Rolo saved to do what must be done. And that is to take his father Charles Ji Britannia to hell with him!!

[If however you try believing in Zero, the following happens.]

Ougi is clearly conflicted, but he reminds the team that he's wanted to believe in Zero ever since he asked him to be the Black Knights' leader. And despite the mess at the end of the Battle of Tokyo, Ougi doesn't want to believe that all the successes they have enjoyed together are lies. He means to talk this all over with Zero until he's satisfied, and if that doesn't work, he promises he'll defeat Zero himself! It's the least he can do as the first person to ever give Zero his trust. F.S. asks Schneider to leave, and Schneider warns that Zexis will surely regret this decision. Roger observes that Schneider seems to have not expected this... but there's a lot Schneider doesn't expect that makes Zexis strong.

Viletta tells Cornelia that she'll stay here, with her man -- obeying an emotion with which Cornelia herself isn't yet familiar. Viletta admits to being pretty new at it herself, and all Cornelia can tell her (ironically) is that there's more to life than king and court. Schneider strides out, telling Zexis that their true battle has just officially begun.

Expression grim, Lelouch removes his mask in view of the team, tossing it away as unnecessary now. Wufei wants to hear the whole truth, and Hiroyuki tells Zero that it's his obligation to come clean. Zero warns that it's a very long story, and Crow all but brings the popcorn in anticipation. Lelouch ponders the loss of his beloved Nanaly, and C.C., AND Suzaku, and even the mask that protected him. What else has he to lose now? Go to Chapter 50B.



## CHAPTER 50A. The Emperor Deposed

C.C. comes to near the F.L.E.I.J.A. crater, finding Anya watching over her. It's not Anya at the controls though, but someone else inside her mind -- and that someone wants to know why C.C. sealed her own Code rather than let Charles grant her wish to die. C.C. recognizes the speaker, telling her that she's uncertain and even a bit shocked herself why she did it. Anya's passenger explains that she saved C.C. from total evaporation (which even C.C. might find a tad inconvenient) and announces that they're going back to Charles to settle things once and for all. C.C. sniffs that this woman is the only one who's ever been this pushy with her, and the woman smirks that it's her way of saying thanks for granting her her Geass. C.C. points out that the woman never kept up her side of the bargain, but isn't that all the more reason to go along with her now? C.C. notes that the woman, none other than Marianne "The Flash", must be really worried about Lelouch to go to this extent, though both of them have to admit that Marianne doesn't exactly seem like the world's most ideal mother...

At Diethart's recommendation, the word has been put out to all the Black Knights' allies that Zero has been killed in battle -- making it easier to brand Zero an imposter and dispose of him if/when he resurfaces. It seems Diethart's obsession has shifted to Schneizer, and he accompanied him when he left Zexis. Viletta however is staying with her man, no longer aligned with any specific force...much like Margret. Love knows no borders, is Crow's view, and as long as Ougi calls Viletta by her name and knocks off the "Chigusa" business, all will be well.

Of course, "all" excludes the fact that Zero himself is missing. Ougi will have a very hard choice to make once Zero is found, but Hiroyuki proclaims that he'll go kill Zero himself when the time comes. He admits to the team that he's known Zero's identity for some time now, but judged that that identity -- and the existence of the Geass -- were not in and of themselves any sort of betrayal. If anything, the problem is how the rest of the team did what Schneizer wanted them to do. The other Black Knights still reserve the right to be butthurt over the whole thing, but Karen is in a much more complex position as the closest thing Zero had to a real friend among them. Crow tells her that his gut says Zero will appear before them again -- though whether for revenge or some other purpose even he can't say.

One thing Hiroyuki will not do is divulge what the Zero System revealed of Zero's future. That's okay with Karen, who doesn't believe that a machine could know the future anyway and who still thinks there's a chance to talk things through with Zero. If that talking fails is where Hiroyuki plans to come in, though it looks like he might have to fight Wufei for the chance.

Now until Zero resurfaces, the most pressing problem is the autocratic crap Charles is pulling. He's been quite successful in stamping out most of the remaining anti-Federation resistance groups who had come to the peace table Rilina had set -- picking up where Britannia left off when Insalaum attacked. Interestingly, there have been odd twists in the Britannian strategy, such that world balance has been perilously maintained. For example, why invade only one of the Japans and then stop? Even this most recent purge has been more a show of force than of high-probability military theory. It's not even comprehensible as set-up for a sounder future government.

In any event, Charles' evil must be struck down, and if it's true that he's in direct command of the military, that gives Zexis an official excuse to murderize his ass... after going through the motions of asking what he's really up to, of course. Bump him off, put Rilina back on the throne, and world

peace should return so long as those pesky Innovators stay out of it. But when to strike at Charles? Tamashiro thinks the team should just ask Schneider for help, since he seemed so cooperative just now. He probably just wants to supplant his father on the throne or some shit, right?

Tamashiro has always been an idiot, and this latest bad idea earns him Death Glares from all the pilots with functioning gray matter in the room. Schneider is probably a far bigger threat than Zero, in point of fact. Just then info comes in that Charles is headed to Kamine-jima alone, which sounds like the perfect time to strike. Ahh, but where did the info come from -- Schneider himself? Apparently not, though precisely who did send it is impossible to pin down. Karen figures that that must mean it came from Lelouch...

Back at the Britannian embassy, Cornelia hears of the Tokyo Settlement's destruction. Schneider says that it's not bad news: at least now the world knows the might of the Federation Army. Thanks to Guilford for firing the thing, eh? Cornelia sure knows how to pick her knights! Cornelia is shocked to hear that Guilford would do that, and with good reason -- Suzaku is standing right there, and points out that he is the one who fired it and he is entitled to the honor that entails. After all, he's out for the Knight of One job. He presumes that Schneider is just trying to avoid disgracing Guilford, who's gone missing ever since succumbing to Zero's Geass. Schneider tells him to leave off, but Suzaku continues that his previous insistence on means rather than ends was mere sophistry. Or will Schneider himself confer the Knight of One title on him?

Cornelia tells him that that's going to far, and Lloyd adds that the only one able to grant said title is the emperor. In short, a coup is needed: and Schneider "reluctantly" agrees to be at its head. The emperor, you see, has characterized everything from the battle with Zexis to the chaos gripping the world as "trivia". Cornelia must know how Charles is prone to vacating the throne in favor of his research, treating war and governance as mere games. No man with such detachment from the world is fit to be emperor, are they?

Suzaku pledges his loyalty as Knight to Schneider, and asks to be given the order to assassinate Charles. Gino tries to protest, but Suzaku says that if the only thing he's good at is killing, he'd rather just own up to it and do things right. What they all need now is an End!

Charles takes most of the remaining Geass Order priests with him to Kamine-jima, which they've pinpointed as the most suitable spot for what will come next. Their fellows are scattered across the world to the other ruins, all of which will be brought online at once as part of the Sword of Akasha. Apparently Kamine-jima's ruins are old and busted compared to Pendragon's new hotness model, but a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

Zexis show up at this point, with Roger stepping to the mic to ask Charles why he gotta be all dictatorial. Charles snorts that he can't leave governance of the world up to the common mobs, and refuses Roger's offer to justify his own actions that are plunging the world into war. He orders his forces to open fire instead, dispatching a bunch of Mobile Dolls because that's just the way he rolls. He then tells Zexis that he's held them in high regard, that if the world was wholly populated with strong folk like them, it might actually be going places. Unfortunately the world is actually filled with weaksauce mo-fos, and while weakness is not a crime per se, Charles will not stand for that weakness twisting the path of mankind.

The ultimate expression of that weakness is the lies people tell one another. He says that Zexis' desire to avoid battle, despite their strength, is the sort of arrogance only the strong can afford. But in the world he means to

create, there will be no more notion of "strong" or "weak" -- and that's what this battle is really about. Esther doesn't follow that all, so Charles uses small words so she'll understand: battle is a means to make people realize how stupid they are! That's why the world can now be changed, as the battle Ragnarok will end the reign of the old gods!

Something similar to Quakes begin to manifest here and at several other sites around the world. Lakshata has no clue what this portends, but if the emperor has come with power, Zexis' only real answer will be in kind. Charles isn't thrilled that Zexis would keep opposing him, claiming to have planned to leave the new world in their care. Of course, the entire meaning structure of the new world will be a tad different...

Charles heads for the same cave where Schneizer was screwing around before, and where Lelouch and Suzaku had their fateful duel. What the hell, Karen wonders, is so special about that place? To find out, Charles will have to be defeated -- and that means taking out Bismark and the goon squad.

Bismark may have the power to see the future, but seems to lack the ability to avoid it when it comes to trounce him between the eyes. when his mech is disabled, Charles gives him a reward for his years of service -- he allows him to retreat instead of laying down his life here, so that he may witness the new world arrive.

Lelouch turns up on turn 2, announcing himself as the discarded son of Queen Marianne, and Zero, the Man Who's Lost Everything(tm). Charles points out that shooting him down here won't solve anything, but Lelouch is determined to try anyway. Lelouch makes no answer to Zexis' hailing, but privately appreciates it when Hihiro tells his teammates to concentrate on Charles first. Lelouch is hoping that Zexis can take out all Charles' companions, which will give him the chance he needs.

Charles fails to comprehend why his son would fight him, both of them knowing that Charles is undefeatable. It's as though Lelouch has progressed not one step since his childish temper tantrum in the throne room all those years ago. Lelouch counters that his only motivation back then was vengeance for his mother. But he's got a wider perspective now, and far more people whose lives depend on his actions. Charles calls that an outright lie, and snorts that he can expect nothing from a liar. Perhaps Charles is right about him, but that doesn't change Lelouch's obligation to strike him down.

Charles manages to eject from his flagship before it explodes, hastening his way to the cave. He commends Zexis on how kick-ass they are, reckoning that they might have actually been able to defeat him once. But it's too late for that now, and Zexis and Lelouch are about to witness the Ragnarok Connection in action!

More Britannian reinforcements arrive, and there's no way for Zexis to keep Charles from entering the cave. On the other hand, nobody is left to directly protect the guy either, and that's all Lelouch needs...

Waiting for Charles inside the cave is Suzaku, who once captured Lelouch on this very spot. He means to slay Charles now, not for Schneizer's sake, but for his own. He thanks Charles for the honors he's granted him, but says that Charles has committed two unpardonable sins -- the first of which being his abandonment of a king's rightful obligation to govern. The second is Charles soiling his hands with Geasses, though Charles differs on whether that's actually a sin. Suzaku figures that Geasses bring out the worst in people, using Euphy's death as an example: Charles had enough information to prevent it if he chose. Suzaku draws his sword, saying that within it are Lelouch

and Nanaly's despair, but unfortunately for him time is, as they say, "up". Either a Code or a Geass is needed to pass through the door next to Charles, and Suzaku has neither.

No sooner does Charles vanish than Lelouch walks up, telling Suzaku to stand aside. He means to follow Charles and to never return, claiming that Charles' score is his alone to settle. See, Charles thought his duel was with God, but Lelouch sets the record straight when he follows Charles inside. Zexis gave him shot at Charles solo, and he means to make the most of it. But how, when neither bullet nor blade nor Geass can affect Charles? Well for starters, Lelouch has to thank Charles for showing him the inside of this place, which gave him the hint of how to win.

His plan is simple enough: destroy the entrance with time-bombs, sealing both Charles and himself, and all Geasses, inside for all time. No longer will Charles be able to affect the outside world! He tells Charles it's time to start suffering in this eternal prison, but a strange surprise then appears: Zexis! Apparently their Stigma allows them to enter, which is good because Eim can also enter at Charles' bidding. Zexis apparently didn't come of their own volition, but got dragged in by the Ragnarok Connection starting. Note that not just the ZEUTH folks came: Eim tells them that all of the Zexis members seem to have been Stigmatized by now... probably part of the reason why Crow Brust has Awakened.

He intends to see that Charles has the time to finish the Ceremony, and Charles doesn't exactly sound grateful when he says that Eim's usefulness is over. Nor does he understand why Eim would bid him "good luck", given that Eim is about the most opposite being from what Charles has planned possible. Actually that difference is precisely what's got Eim interested -- that and the fact that the fate of a single world is of trivial account to him.

Lelouch demands to know why Charles is in league with Eim, and Charles says it's all thanks to his Code, and the Black Knowledge it's imparted to him. Eim seems to be in a talkative mood, since he actually gives Crow a sort of straight answer to the question of precisely what the Black Knowledge is. It's a record of all phenomena in the galaxy, both past and future -- a fragment, as it were, of a Higher Power. Just like the Spheres are. Unfortunately, he who acquires such power also acquires despair and suffering, though why that should be he won't say.

He won't stay to battle Zexis here in person, saying that if they can break free he'll take them on later... at a time when his powers will be at their peak! As he vanishes, Crow tells Margret to not worry about pursuing: all that bit about the Black Knowledge was just a ploy to aggravate Zexis. Better data can be had from Charles, and that means taking out all his protection. Hiroyuki tells Zero to hang on until they can reach him, but Zero has more pressing questions for Charles: Who was it really who killed his mother, and why did Charles not protect her?

As Zexis slugs it out with Charles' hired goon squad, Zero repeats his question. Charles finds it ironic that such a pathological liar would seek the truth, and tells Lelouch that he's no different from that Eim dude. Lelouch admits to lying, not only about his name and his past, but about the true contents of his heart. Of course he did: how else would one converse with others, found a community -- a country, a people -- with them? All men measure out lies: to their family, their friends, their society in turn.

How can this be a crime, when the definition of the truth is itself in doubt? And has Charles himself not hid behind the false mask of "emperor"? Who can take a single step without that a Persona is involved? Charles disputes

this, saying that Personas shall be cast aside the moment people realize that lies are futile in Eternity. Mutual understanding will quiet war, Charles declares; Lelouch isn't impressed by this typical metaphysical platitude. Then again, there are plenty of people who act as though the ideal really exists, including one Ioria Schoenberg. Oh, and by the way, the Ragnarok Connection is going to actually make it happen, but ripping away everyone's masks to reveal the truth. But before that happens, there's someone Charles wants Lelouch to meet.

That would be Marianne, no mere illusion, who is able to manifest inside the special space inside the Sword of Akasha. Charles proceeds to answer Lelouch's question, hearkening back half a century to a time when the royal family was in an all-out war for succession to the throne. Assassination and betrayal were daily occurrences: a toxic stew of lies that claimed his own mother. He and his brother V.V. hated the world, and grieved for it, and swore that they would create a world without lies -- a dream undimmed by the Breaking.

Marianne and C.C. concurred with that pledge, but V.V. himself abandoned it. Indeed, it is he who killed Marianne, enraged at the extent of the understanding she and Charles shared... and terrified of being left alone in the unaging, undying body he received his Code in. Though V.V. managed to kill Marianne's body, her spirit lived on thanks to her Geass -- a very special one that lets her cohabit the heart of another. It first manifest as she lay dying, letting her conceal herself within the nearby Anya and thereby elude V.V.'s grasp. It was also this elevation of her soul that let her converse with C.C., though it also led to the gaps in Anya's own memory that torment her so.

When she learned the truth, C.C. turned the Geass Order over to V.V. and vanished. V.V. in turn lied to Charles about what happened, and the rest is history. Lelouch, however, isn't going to let Charles blame everything on his deceased brother: why the hell did Charles send him and Nanaly to Area Eleven? It's obvious: one must distance themselves from that most precious: C.C.'s words that Marianne now repeats. Not only was it to keep the two children safe, but also to keep Marianne's own corpse from V.V.'s hands -- so long as it remains intact, there's even the possibility for her spirit to return to it.

As part of this grand protection, Charles was forced to overwrite Anya and Nanaly's memories: the fact is that she was nowhere near. Her false memories and associated false blindness were supposed to keep her from approaching the truth. But Marianne found out something through her research: even though any Code should have done, it turns out that only C.C. could give a 100% guarantee for what they had planned. And when C.C. disagreed, Charles saw no option but to use Lelouch.

So what the hell has Lelouch been fighting for all this time, heaping so many heinous crimes on his own name? Charles tells him that the Ragnarok Connection will make such tragedies moot, and that everyone will accept and be accepted just as they are. The Sword of Akasha was built long ago by one who touched the Black Knowledge, as a tool to withstand the Judgement they knew would come.

What Lelouch takes from all of this is that even the whole battle between Britannia and the Black Knights was just another gambit to lure C.C. in... and his role nothing more than noise in the system. What, he asks, do C.C. and Suzaku make of that? He expected at least her to show up, given how pivotal she apparently is to the plan, but isn't sure why she brought Suzaku along. C.C. says that he's very much like her in that he's denied the

very death he longs for so much.

C.C. says that she's used Lelouch all along, prioritizing keeping him alive above all else so that she could eventually taste the fruit of her own death. Suzaku asks if she regrets this, and she sniffs that any unaging, undying witch would have cast such human concerns off long ago. That makes them different in Suzaku's book, in the sense that he finds himself unable to do anything but keep bowling forward, even if everyone calls him an idiot for it. Suzaku knows he can't do much against the similarly invincible Charles, but he wants to know if the world Charles is trying to make is the same ideal that Euphy and Rilina share. It is, or at least so Charles claims. He declares that the plan can now begin, and promises to grant C.C.'s wish once it's over.

The ceremony starts, and Lelouch beholds a writhing mass of human hearts and memories: a joint consciousness that looks suspiciously like Jupiter. C.C. need but join with their sigils to make the god-killing process complete. Suzaku asks why Lelouch tried to make the world his, not letting him get by with the excuse that it was "for Nanaly's sake". Lelouch sees his point, and says that he was doing it to protect everything he holds dear. Results require actions, and for every action there is a myriad of other actions not taken. And that can mean one thing only.

Lelouch yells that he rejects Charles' world view, that lies exist only for fighting. Lies, Lelouch declares, exist because people seek something! A world where status quo is just fine is no world worth living in, if "living" is even the right world anymore: a frozen, circumscribed world of memories. Marianne asks if Lelouch means to reject her, and she tells him that this plan will bring everyone back together at last. Even the dead, even Euphemia can be with him again! Lelouch laments momentarily that she would think of that as a good thing, calling it a spurious Good that can't be distinguished from Not-Good morally.

This much he knows: no matter how much they claim to have his and Nanaly's best interests at heart, Charles and Marianne still cast them away. Else, why didn't they stop the war between Japan and Britannia? Oh, snap -- that apparently never occurred to them. They, so self-satisfied with their excuses, abandoned their children for the sake of their little project. They saw only the past, with no care for the future. And this "kind" world they sought to create is only "kind" from their standpoint -- what Nanaly wants is a world kind to all! Suzaku is starting to see the sense in that, suddenly recalling how neither Shirley nor Euphy divulged Lelouch's secret identity before dying. They understood what Lelouch is trying to do...

So what the hell does Lelouch intend to do about it, thunders Charles. His Geass won't work on anyone here! Oh yes it will, counters Miracle-Man Lelouch. He hasn't yet Geassed the joint consciousness lurking here in C-Space... and for the record, people are NOT created equal, just as Charles himself once stated. Charles cries out that Lelouch is a fool if he thinks his power can beat God, but Lelouch says it's not a question of "beating" God, it's a matter of wishing to God. He's finally realized his own nature, and cries out to the assembled souls, to NOT stop the steps of time.

Marianne can't believe Lelouch would do something like this, or that Suzaku would let him given that he stood to see Euphy again. Suzaku won't let her force him to see Euphy, and Lelouch says that he obviously can pull off this feat because, unlike Charles, he is seeking the future. And you know what, he's right! The Logic Elevator begins to crumble, and with it Charles', Marianne's and V.V.'s dreams. C.C. tells Charles that it's time to stop this foolishness, and Lelouch gives them a bit of Truth for a chance: their ass

is grass. Charles and Marianne are being sucked away into C-Space for all time, but C.C. isn't -- she's finally realized that the only people they really ever loved was themselves. Why the hell can't they see the real meaning behind Nanaly's smile: a small token of gratitude for all the help she's received, after being forced to realize that there are things in this world one can't do alone.

Charles screeches that Lelouch has no right to do this, to plunge the world into the despair spoken of in the Black Knowledge. And before that, all the lies, the goodwill and malice inextricably woven together!! May be, but Lelouch wants the world Charles envisions even less. He finally gets his parents to STFU and GTFO, and with C.C.'s help sends Zexis back to realspace. The question is, what happens now? Time still marches on, and there's plenty still wrong with the world. And there's still Euphy's death, which hangs over Suzaku and Lelouch like a pall. But Lelouch has an idea about that too...

Zexis' pilots find themselves back on Kamine-jima, but two weeks into the future! And as fate(??) would have it, a new Federation president is about to be announced. Will it be Rilina? No, amazingly enough it will be Lelouch himself, introduced by the new supreme army commander Treize!!! Lelouch announces himself as the 99th Britannian emperor, saying that he is the one who killed his predecessor Charles. He easily Geasses everyone in attendance (including his eldest brother, but with the possible exception of Treize, who might have had his eyes closed) into accepting him as the new emperor, and then makes a further announcement: his personal knight Suzaku. Insofar as Suzaku surpasses all the Knights of the Round, Lelouch dubs him the Knight of Zero.

As he calls upon the whole world to answer his call, Lelouch knows that Zexis is listening. Let the final battle between them (who already tried to kill him once), and the world that worships his very footsteps, begin!

Schneizer and the Knights of the Round watch this from a safe distance. Farce? Maybe, but Schneizer tells the others that it's part of human nature to be ruled by something... and that something is currently the Federation. Cornelia asks if Schneizer is saying Lelouch is incapable of sitting at the head of such an institution, and while he doesn't answer that directly he does say that that seat isn't well suited to an usurper. The last thing the world needs is another falsehood in the form of a Geass.

However, even the mighty fortress Damocles, with the Knights aboard, isn't equal to the might of the Federation army. That's why he's enlisted a bit of aid (or is that AIDS) from his good butt-buddy Milliard. White Fang brings a lot of firepower to the Round Table...

#### CHAPTER 50B. The Inaugural Battle of the Super-United States

C.C. and Marianne have the same conversation as on the other side, but this time C.C. isn't willing to go along with the ghostly imperial consort. She's got promises to keep... and many miles to go before she sleeps. Marianne smirks at this, finding it quite out of character, and with something between a frown and a half-smile C.C. muses that she doesn't mind the character she's become now. Telling Lelouch the whole truth won't solve anything with the Sword of Akasha about to activate, at least in Marianne's opinion...

Back aboard the Ikaruga, Lelouch is winding down the tale of his past and his Geass, a power so fantastic that it beggars even Banjou and Char's belief. Lelouch grimly, and unhesitatingly, admits that his power is responsible for the Princess Slaughter incident, believing (correctly) that the saner heads

on the team will understand: to have fessed up then would have caused the Black Knights to implode on the spot, whether or not one of them had executed him for the Japanese citizens' accidental deaths. Accident or not though, it's an unpardonable turn of events in Wufei's book. He reckons Zero sent the Black Knights to Zexis in part as a form of penance, and wants to know how he means to pay the rest of it now that he's confessed.

Lelouch states flatly that he's prepared to pay the ultimate price, despairing of a world without Nanaly in it, but suddenly Karen steps up and hands him his discarded mask. Suddenly confused, he heeds her instruction to put it on... and a good thing to, as Karen punches him in the head with all her strength moments later. The impact actually dents the high-tech mask, and almost surely Karen's hand too as Esther notices. Karen yells at him to get up, reminding him of how he once said that those who "shoot" must be prepared to be shot in turn. She agrees, on the basis that those who shoot do so with their heart. Well this was a bullet from her heart to him, and to herself for following him... following him without being able to help him.

He tells her he's the one who should apologize, for all the terrible, irrevocable things he's done in the service of his ultimate goal. There are so many people who he owes an apology to that he's not sure he can do it. And if Karen's urging to live on and try anyway isn't enough, there's Rolo too. While Rolo now knows he can't take Nanaly's place, he can serve as Lelouch's brother... and like a brother he forgives Lelouch for the little spat they had earlier. Rolo knows better than most what it's like to have to live with the consequences of having done wrong. Jeremiah also has Lelouch's back, faithful as always to his lord both as rightful heir and as someone to whom his soul seems drawn. He wants to share whatever fate awaits Lelouch.

The other commanders tell Lelouch that he's got a chance to decide where to go from here. Obviously all the doubts (and even resentments) won't vanish over night... but everyone has the ability to create trust anew. He digests this a moment, and tells Jeremiah that there is no more Lelouch Lamperouge, or Lelouch vi Britannia. Only Zero, the man who will liberate the world. This is all he can do now, and that he had even that much freedom to decide is thanks to Ougi for deciding to hear him out.

It's not easy for some on the team to watch a man turn his own identity to "zero", especially after all the good he's done. Zero invites Tamashiro or any of the others to strike him down if they feel he betrays their trust any further... the same role that Hihiro's borne up till now. They all know that Zero will be going forward wearing a mask of punishment after Karen's mighty blow... though said mask won't be exactly all that photogenic. Enter C.C. with a spare mask... not all that surprising, given how she's an immortal, wisecracking witch and all.

The new mask seems to do wonders for him, and without delay a war council is on for what to do about Charles' power grab over the Federation. Zero, as it happens, has planned for this day for a long time. He asks Zexis to head for the China Federation, where he means to consolidate power around the Empress and the former Japanese government. He means to raise an empire that can confront, and beat, the Federation itself: the Super-United States! He admits that the idea started as a scheme to take Charles down, but whatever the genesis, it's undeniable that the world needs a dose of freedom now.

Lelouch may have lost everything, especially Nanaly, but he's still got the power to cause miracles. The world Nanaly and Euphy wanted will be his to create!

Flash forward to the official announcement, made by none other than Tianzi.



She introduces Kagura as the head of the Supreme Council, who in turn announces that this new union already has several dozen current or pending member states. This Super-United States offers an elegant alternative to the tyranny of Arrows and the suspiciously abrupt dismissal of Rilina. All nations that participate will be able to claim "liberation" as their noble cause, and the fact that so many have signed up already despite the obvious problems of fielding a patchwork military is testament to just how untrustworthy the Federation has become.

A decisive defeat on either side of this new rift could prove fatal, and it'll be Zexis' mission to protect the nascent Union. The problem of course isn't the Federation per se, but those leading it -- and the ultimate goal of all this pantomime is returning the Federation to its rightful state. And Zero has that all under control. Good thing he's on Zexis' side, right? \*WINKWINK\* \*NUDGENUDGE\* Anyway, Kagura concludes by announcing that Zexis will be handling diplomatic "relations" with the Federation, including monitoring Charles' monopolizing the Federation army. Supporting Zexis' mission is the Union's first official Resolution.

Watching all of this from the bleachers, Watta wonders aloud why the team had to go through all this boring stuff if Schneizer is planning to depose Charles anyway. Well, Schneizer might have been willing to take on Zero as an agent of chaos, but his (apparent) plans for world peace weren't likely to work on the man in command of the greatest army on Earth. Schneizer is the sort who only jumps when he believes victory assured, a useful sort of fear that drives many high-positioned folks to do whatever it takes to guarantee that victory. Instead, Charles' deposition will have to come about via a four-sided war: the Federation, the Union, the White Fang, and probably Insalaum.

The suffering will be minimized if the Union can topple the Federation fast, and it might be useful to have a rallying point for the cause... someone like Rilina perhaps. But Hiiro is confident that Rilina would never take sides in a way that further divides the world. The point is moot though given the latest intelligence reports: Charles is massing forces to him in Area Eleven. If that's not a challenge to Zero, what is?

Charles and the Geass Order folks are busy with basically the same stuff as on the other path. As on the other path, Charles refuses to repent for his assbattering, taking specific care to tell Lelouch that he'll always be the lesser man. While it's true Charles may have the numerical advantage in high class bed-bunnies, Lelouch clearly has the edge with his phenomenal White and Red Queens. He's also better at ignoring Charles' smack-talking, and marshals the troops to kick Charles' ass once and for all. They'd better hurry though, before the Sword of Akasha comes online.

Perhaps to buy time, Charles delivers the same speech about lies distorting the world as he did on the other branch. But there's more than one way to change the world besides the End of Evangelion -- just bumping Charles off will be enough to get positive change started.

Charles' flagship takes a pounding before Suzaku and friends show up. He's content to withdraw and leave the "lesser matter" of taking it up the ass to them, so he can concentrate on polishing his Sword. Suzaku sounds nonplussed to hear his proctology alluded to as "lesser", and baws at Zexis for following Lelouch despite his crimes. Not following, fighting alongside! Major difference, that. And what about calling the kettle black, which is what Suzaku is doing via his allegiance to the man who simultaneously seized the Federation's throne and got busy jacking off instead of actually governing from it.

Everyone on Zexis knows that Lelouch wants to dash off in pursuit of Charles, trusting that he's already worked out how to kill the unkillable emperor. They trust him to do the right thing and to return in one piece, and Karen in particular is determined that Suzaku not get in the way. As Zero rushes off (and Crow muses that Zero might in fact not be coming back from this one after all), Suzaku orders the troops into battle. Even Gino thinks this is lunacy, what with Anya missing and their emperor having apparently fled in the face of the enemy.

But Suzaku has decided that he's been a chimpion all this time, hung up on means instead of ends and bringing many to death because of it. And if killing people is all he's good for, might as well accept it and get pwning over with. And his new Lancelot Albion, fortified with data taken from the Guren, might just be equal to the task.

Unfortunately, Suzaku himself is not, and Toudou tells him he ought to know it. If Suzaku really wants results so badly, he needs to stop being so hung up on the here-and-now. That seems to get through to him, as he momentarily leaves the field just in time for Schneizer to bring out his trump card: White Fang! He's engineered Treize's release on the theory that Zexis is too powerful to control now -- and uncontrollable power is just "violence".

Yeah whatever. Suzaku comes back to pick up C.C., both of them interested in seeing how Lelouch's duel with Charles will end. Suzaku figures that C.C. must have some role to play in the drama, and Karen reluctantly gives C.C. her blessing to go help her "partner in crime". Toudou instructs his former student Suzaku not to do anything he'll regret later. Just as he's given Zero a chance to prove himself worthy of trust, he'd like to believe that Suzaku deserves the same shot at redemption. The question is, just what the heck are Lelouch and Suzaku about to go do?

Suzaku isn't entirely surprised when C.C. leads him to the fateful cave on Kamine-jima -- the very spot where he captured Lelouch the last time. Waiting for them is Anya... well not really Anya, but rather Marianne vi Britannia's spirit, possessing Anya's body. She's (sarcastically?) appreciative of all the good care Suzaku has taken of her son...

Inside the Sword of Akasha, Charles is ready for throwdown with God. Too bad for him that Lelouch is on hand instead, determined to kick his ass on behalf of his trusting battalion of friends. Charles finds it laughable that a master of betrayal like Lelouch would rest on others' endorsement, musing aloud that the Zexis clowns must be even denser than he thought. And just how does Lelouch intend to beat Charles, given how Charles is all invulnerable and shit. A series of distant explosions are his answer: Lelouch has set some time bombs to destroy the entrance and trap both he and Charles inside for all time. Time for Charles to FACE THE FACT that he's as good as dead.

Charles is impressively unimpressed, calling the whole business stupid. Eim shows up out of nowhere and agrees, commenting that Lelouch's face is quite shota^Wboyish without his mask on. Supposedly he's hear to congratulate Charles on the impending Ragnarok Connection, but since he's about as diametrically opposite as possible to what Charles has in mind, the emperor makes a grand show of ignoring him. Lelouch wants to know why Charles is in bed with Eim [winknudge], and Charles ascribes it all to the info his Code has granted... info akin to the Black Knowledge.

Eim explains what the Black Knowledge is as on the other path, and then withdraws to let Charles and Lelouch scowl at each other. Lelouch orders Charles to tell him the truth about his mother's death and Charles' failure to protect her -- admittedly a bit shaky given all the lies Lelouch himself has

told to get this far. Charles and Lelouch then have their argument about the value of lies from the other path, and things proceed through Marianne's appearance and C.C. and Suzaku's coming to Lelouch's side.

Things come to a head as the Sword of Akasha powers up, and Lelouch confirms that it is NOT a good idea to melt everyone in the world together into LCL as Charles and Marianne want. That's certainly not what Nanaly or Euphy wanted. With Charles and Marianne vaporized, the question becomes what Suzaku will do next. He's having a very hard time forgiving Lelouch for Euphy death, but Zero declares that "Lelouch" is effectively dead, leaving only Zero behind. If Suzaku still wants to strike him down, he's welcome to: Zero's role is now effectively done now that Charles is toast. Kagura can certainly care for the Super-United States herself, and once Zexis strikes down the Innovators even the Federation will be repaired in time.

That is the sort of peace Euphy and Nanaly wished for, and helping assure it was the only way Zero has of making amends for what he's done (oh, that and trying to sacrifice himself in that bid to trap Charles in here). Or does Suzaku have any other bright ideas? Maybe he'd like to go back to Schneider and try to become the Knight of One? Would owning Area Eleven satisfy him?! Is he still seeking to be punished?! This turns into shouting match so huge that even the game's own writers Tl;dr'ed it.

Eventually Zero and company reemerge from the cave, where Karen has been faithfully waiting. Zero explains that Charles has been annihilated, and that despite arguing with Suzaku all night they've not been able to work out their differences. It turns out however that a full week has passed in the outside world, testament to how differently time works in C Space. And during that week, the Federation has been turned upside down...

After Charles vanished, Schneider pushed to have him treated as war dead and seized power in his stead, once again restoring ass-comrade Treize to his former glory in the process. Treize is now head of the army, but Schneider himself is not the head of the Federation. Schneider claimed that that role should follow royal succession, and that anyway he's unfit for the job. Lelouch isn't surprised: Schneider has always been one to choose the surest path to victory with the most "insulation" from other people, something Suzaku isn't thrilled to hear from Lelouch's lips.

This isn't the time for Suzaku's grudges however. The Super-United States are in dire straits thanks to Schneider signing a peace accord with White Fang. What the hell is that all about? What it's about is ending the war between the Earth and the Colonies, and the new head of the Federation is none other than King Milliard Peacecraft! Milliard is happy to have extended "peace" beyond what his predecessors managed, and vows suitable retribution upon those who would threaten it. Kinda ironic, dontchathink, that some dude named Peacecraft is all threatening the violences against those he doesn't like?

Rilina herself, huddled in some distant refugee camp with Marina and Sheryl, sure isn't thrilled. She tries to tell herself at first that her brother must have some deeper stratagem going, but that quickly rings hollow. As if on cue, Gaiou shows up and tells her to come correct. He declares that Milliard shall be the King of War-Strife...

#### CHAPTER 51A. Schneider's Mask

News of Lelouch's ascent to the Federation's causes no small stir among the Insalaum. If there's a silver lining to the brilliant strategist's promotion, it's the number of Earthlings opposed to it. Yuusar predicts that Lelouch's

coronation will split the Federation in two, which would seem to Unblown and Marilyn to create the perfect conditions for an Insalaum takeover... especially with Yuusar's newfound mastery of his Sphere. Yuusar sounds rather dubious about the "takeover" part, and he announces that he's going to go rest in his quarters. As he saunters out, he tells Marilyn to come see him in said quarters in half an hour, which has the normally stoic lolita genuinely blushing like a schoolgirl. Unblown (stifling a grin) tells Marilyn that Yuusar must be lonely after losing both Margret and Wayne, and implores her to "comfort" the emperor. Marilyn assures her that her "small breasts" are heaving with anticipation. I meanwhile I am heaving with nausea like a mo-fo as things mercifully cut to the Britannian throne room.

There we find Lelouch conferring with Treize. Schneizer has become a rallying point for all those who wish Lelouch the Usurper deposed, who total around 30% of the Federation's strength. Lelouch has expected as much, and made certain preparations that Treize is happy to assist. Lelouch knows he'd never have gotten to this point without Treize's help, and yet can't help but feel odd that Treize of all people would turn out to be one of his closest comrades. Perhaps thanks are due to Wufei, whose hatred(?) for the both of them actually drove them to overcome their differences?

At any rate, Lelouch has more than just Treize to turn to now: Lloyd and Cecil have joined Jeremiah and Suzaku(!!) in aiding his cause. Cecil probably has the most qualms of any of them, but has firmly suppressed them once she heard what Lelouch and Suzaku have planned. Lloyd smirks and supposes aloud that none of them have any real choice, as Lelouch would have just Geassed them into submission anyway had they refused. Wouldn't it be fun to try and study how the Geass works? Jeremiah asks if Lloyd has some kind of death wish, and Lloyd is oh so sorry to disappoint him when he says that he's not yet despaired of this world.

Maybe so, but Lelouch himself isn't holding out that much hope -- the Federation's splintering was waaay too predictable. Maybe the common people have gotten too feebish after letting Zexis fight all their battles for them? C.C. observes that the Schneizer faction of the Federation are exactly the kind of power-grubbing scum that Lelouch expected... precisely the sort of people who need to be taught a very hard, historical-grade lesson. Let them curse Lelouch's name, but remember the Truth. And for that to happen, he's got to stain the pages of misery with enough blood to wash away the tainted memory of Euphemia... in short, Lelouch needs World Domination(tm), and to his credit the ring of those words gives even him pause. All the same, someone's got to stop the serious business that Schneizer has going on, and nobody but Lelouch and cohorts are in a position to stop it...

Even among Zexis, Lelouch's ascent to the throne at age 18 can't but inspire a certain amount of admiration. He's perfectly captured the zeitgeist of a populace weary of the shadowy domination of the Innovators, and in the first two weeks of his rule has cracked down hard on government figures who allied themselves with the criminal underworld. This seeming show of Justice is, in Setsuna's view at least, really a show of terror... and at least 30% of the Federation don't much like being terrorized.

Then again, Schneizer isn't precisely the answer to everyone's prayers either. All that seeming goodwill is nothing but a mask for something much more terrifying: let's not forget that Schneizer is probably the one who bumped Treize off after he got a little too warlike for Schneizer's tastes. Schneizer seems to be a very detached individual, like many born into privilege, and is very unlikely to take on Lelouch without some kind of ace-in-the-hole.

The question is, with whom should Zexis side? Lelouch clearly wants Zexis in

his camp, since he's gone through Treize to set up a little meeting with them at Ashford Academy. Lelouch had the courtesy to notify the Student Council that he and the fabled independent battalion are coming, so rumors are swirling over what kind of meeting it will be. President-emeritus Milly has returned from her reporter training to help run the event, and to play hostess to fugitive, penitent genius Nina. F.L.E.I.J.A. was successful beyond her wildest nightmares, and she's got a lot to ponder as she surveys the ruins of her city.

Even Saji turns up (!! ) in hopes of glimpsing the emperor, and maybe other illustrious former members of the Student Council. Besides Lelouch, there's renowned knights Suzaku and Karen, and former Federation head Rilina. Even Nina has become famous in her way. Shirley on the other hand (assuming she's still alive) is in no mood to look upon her old friend, and Louise isn't anywhere in sight... but Saji vows to bring her back here one day, returning her to the way she once was because of course everything just works out that simply in life.

NOT. Before Lelouch makes his appearance, he sends Lloyd and Cecil to pick Nina up (yeah, not very hidden, no surprise there). Greeting Lelouch and Treize officially are Karen, Hiirou and Wufei. Karen struggles to keep up an "official" front before her old commander, but Wufei makes no such pretense before Treize. He only volunteered for this detail so he could better memorize Treize's face: the better to kill him later. Hiirou wants to get a good look at both Treize and Lelouch, and all the attention seemingly makes the emperor "bashful"... really just an excuse for a private walk through the Ashford grounds with Karen.

Lelouch is glad to see his old school intact, \_juuust\_ barely spared by the F.L.E.I.J.A. Karen offers him thanks for saving her and all the Black Knights, who without him would have died ignominiously in the Shinjuku Ghetto. But more than that, she was incredibly happy that "Zero" would value her so highly. The revelation of Zero's true identity has left her confused, and Lelouch's power play with Suzaku and Treize has confused her more? What is it he really wants, and what is she \_really\_ to him?! Why'd he tell her so intimately to keep herself alive on the brink of his near-execution aboard the Ikaruga? Lelouch makes no reply over several long moments, and Karen finally apologizes for taking time away from the formal conference. Once she's headed out of earshot though, Lelouch bids her a fond -- and final -- farewell.

Once closeted together with the Zexis commanders, Lelouch coyly suggests that they needn't stand on ceremony with him: he is, after all, their \_former\_ comrade-in-arms. Treize tells Zexis that the Innovators seem to have "despaired" of humanity, which surprises Amuro not a bit based on his time with Ribbons. It's plain that Lelouch and Treize don't intend to leave the governance of the world up to Schneizer now that Ribbons is out of the picture; yet Lelouch doesn't intend to \_force\_ Zexis to do his bidding... especially since he knows they've prepared for his Geass.

He's prepared for their preparation, of course, but still does them the courtesy of telling them to follow his orders rather than \_making\_ them. Sumeragi isn't having any of it, which seems to be just what Zero hoped for. Of course this defiance makes them outlaws of the Federation, though Lelouch claims he won't hold it against their friends or family. He wants, it seems, a "fair" fight, as does Treize. Treize's contribution is to tell Zexis the whereabouts of Elgan: hostage to the Innovators and pawn in Ribbons' twisted schemes, though even Treize hasn't figured out what role Elgan plays.

The conference is interrupted by some ghastly news: the Britannian capital city has just been obliterated by a F.L.E.I.J.A.: it seems Schneizer has

stolen a march on Lelouch and co. He radios in to gloat, in fact, and to announce that he's got all the remaining F.L.E.I.J.A.'s with him... as well as his own preference for emperor. Or shall we say, "empress"? It's none other than Nanaly, not quite as dead as presumed! She's been coached by Schneizer to try to shake Lelouch and Suzaku's resolve, questioning whether their use of Geasses is somehow better than nuking a whole metropolis, but this time Lelouch is having none of it.

He calls her an entitled little emokid, calling her out for depending on others to execute her ideals. He vows to crush any who oppose him as emperor, her included if she insists on siding with Schneizer, and Schneizer calls upon Zexis to join his little crusade. Amuro is the first to turn him down, with Sumeragi close behind. Lelouch may be trying to rule the people with fear, but Schneizer and his no-warning mass slaughter is surely no better. Treize has no love for Schneizer either, and announces that they are to fight their final battle in three days time at Mt. Fuji. Schneizer promises to be there, with Nanaly in tow.

Lelouch clearly isn't happy with all of this, and makes a hasty end to the conference. On the way out, he asks Sumeragi what she thinks it takes to rule the world. She claims to be unqualified to answer, which he sort of expected from a Celestial Being. In his view, to rule the world one must be prepared to destroy not just it, but oneself too if need be! He bids Zexis farewell, and Sumeragi tells the other commanders that one thing the CBs will not do is simply watch the battle for the Federation from the sidelines.

Once in private, Lelouch demands to know why C.C. didn't tell him Nanaly is still alive. C.C. sniffs that she has no way of knowing what's going on with random people she's not connected to via Geass, and recommends he ask Sayoko what happened. Sayoko hasn't been able to act or radio in all this time, but when she finally escaped she seems to have elected to serve Lelouch over her nominal boss Diethart. What Lelouch thought was Nanaly caught in the blast was actually a decoy arranged by Schneizer, and despite his best efforts to stay calm Lelouch can't help but be shaken by the ruse. It takes Suzaku to have him go pull himself together. Even C.C. wonders at how stern Suzaku is being, but he tells her that' he's become Lelouch's sword -- to drive out all Lelouch's weakness. He wants her to be Lelouch's shield and protect him -- who better for the role than she, Lelouch's partner in crime?

When Schneizer and friends arrive, their advance forces are already in combat with Lelouch's troops. Schneizer's fortress seems lightly defended, but he's got F.L.E.I.J.A.s to keep him safe, and "reinforcements" on the way. It only takes Schneizer one more lie -- that he "evacuated" the residents of Pendragon before firing -- to get Nanaly to help him out of her own "free" will. She actually asks for the firing controls for the nukes, wanting for herself a share of the blame since she can't pitch in in any other fashion. Cornelia isn't at all happy with Schneizer lying like this, and is even less happy when it turns out that he lied to her too about the true purpose of this mission. He is not out to merely punish Lelouch: he wants to put the 3km-long Damocles into orbit, from where it can bombard anyone who doesn't agree with him with nuclear goodness. Schneizer, it seems, never really believed in peace on earth at all -- save for that brought about by people living in fear.

And if that's the province of God to describe, that's what he'll be. He has Cornelia escorted forcibly off his bridge just in time for Lelouch to arrive. The Knights of the Round start arguing almost at once, and a one-on-one duel between the Knight of One and the "Knight of Zero" kicks off. It rapidly becomes clear that Suzaku's got his work cut out for him: Bismarck has a Geass of his own that allows him to predict the future. But Suzaku can't afford to

fall here, and with Lelouch ordering him (again) to "Live", Suzaku comes up with a very novel trick -- overcoming the "flight" reflex by sheer force of will and thereby converting the Geass he's under into pure "fight" goodness.

Who cares if Bismarck can see Suzaku coming, if there's nothing he can do to block or dodge? Even Lelouch is impressed momentarily, until Zexis show up. He's not surprised when Sumeragi orders the troops to attack both sides (she is, after all, a CB). Schneider sounds miffed, but Lelouch focuses on the task at hand and orders Suzaku to focus on guarding the Avalon. His grand speech to the troops is all inspirational and whatnot, but it won't stop Karen and Zexis from doing what they must. Upon the battle rests the fate of the world!

Schneider isn't going to leave the fate of the world to chance. He rebuffs Lelouch's first sneak attack with a F.L.E.I.J.A. strike, emboldened by a shipment of mobile dolls from his new butt-buddy Zechs. He figures that Lelouch is no good at utilizing his "masks". He figures wrong. Lelouch counters by firing at Mt. Fuji, detonating some of the Sakuradite within and turning those reinforcements to ash. Zexis is starting to get a bit scared facing the full fury of these two consummate strategists, but no one on the battlefield can turn back now...

Karen is greatly confused about why Suzaku, who formerly hated Lelouch's guts, would proclaim himself Lelouch's "sword". She's also confused by why he seemingly pulls out of battle prematurely, but he in fact knows exactly what he's doing. Jeremiah too vows loyalty to Lelouch, despite all that's come out about his tactics. As for Lelouch, he knows when to make a strategic advance to the rear -- it's time for the second phase of his plan. As the Avalon heads out, he heads from the bridge toward the hangar, meeting Nina along the way. He promises her that her research won't all be in vain, and she admits that she'll probably hate him for the rest of her life. But even more, she feels she's got to find an answer to all of this -- and Lelouch plans to give her that chance.

Anya and Gino make relatively meek exits, probably because they're far from clear whether they're on the right side. Schneider has no such issue, secure in the beliefs that he's in the right and that his fortress is invincible. It is possible to cripple the damn thing though, and all Lelouch needs is a momentary pause in its motion. He and Suzaku race towards Damocles, only to have Schneider fire a F.L.E.I.J.A. in their direction.

Nina radios in that the weapon's score is about to change composition: if they can hit it with a countervailing reaction, it'll be unable to reach critical mass! That's the idea behind her F.L.E.I.J.A. Eliminator, but the final data needed can only be had on the spot, in the 19-second window between munition deployment and detonation. Daunting, but there's never been anything Lelouch and Suzaku can't do if they join forces. Lelouch completes the program in the theoretical minimum 15 seconds, and Suzaku puts the final 4 seconds to very good use.

As the F.L.E.I.J.A. falls useless to the ground, Lelouch and Suzaku force their way through the hole in Damocles' shield where it was fired from. They start rapidly wrecking it from the inside, and Schneider half-smirks, half-sniffs over having to actually play his final card: deliberately detonating the remaining F.L.E.I.J.A.s to blow Damocles -- and Lelouch -- away. He's confident Lelouch will love this splendid coffin, and tells Diethart not to sweat Zexis: what could one lone battalion with the "whole world" against it possibly do? I'd call these famous last words, but Schneider's impending infamy makes that a lie.

Kanon prepares to go retrieve Nanaly, but Diethart tells her there's no need: the whole reason Lelouch has broken in here in the first place is to get to her. Schneider adds that it's not even worth trying to value her one life against his plans for world peace. Lelouch gets on the intercom at this point, telling him (nicely) that he's fucked up the pooper this time. How has Lelouch read his brother's intentions this thoroughly? It all goes back to something Treize said once: Schneider never intended to "win" this fight at all. Every game he's played, even the chess match back in the Chinese capital, were ones Schneider had no way to lose. Well he gets to lose this time.

Schneider asks if Lelouch will kill him, and Lelouch counters with a question of his own: was Damocles intended for ruling the world? Not at all: it was made for bringing about "peace", in accordance with the wishes of the people. A nice platitude, given how good Schneider has proven at ignoring those wishes. What Lelouch won't tolerate is Schneider's desire to petrify the world, to make its people go from "living" life to merely "experiencing" it. Charles in his blind arrogance desired the past. Schneider, it seems, craves the present out of an abundance of intellect. Only Lelouch among them cares for the future, and regards it with hope based on all he's seen firsthand. Schneider's pessimism is typical of insular royalty, and rather than rethink his approach he'd rather have Zero just kill him, and die in turn in a nuclear holocaust.

Lelouch of course has had other ideas all along. His plan was to get Schneider off guard and enslave him with his Geass, forbidding him from laying down his life and ordering him to serve "Zero" forever. Diethart is frantic at the thought that Lelouch would depose his newly chosen master, but Suzaku bitchslaps him when he tries to resist. Lelouch tells the journalist that he's still useful: after all, even the Spiral Lord left Viral to act as mouthpiece after his death....

Schneider gets on the mic and orders his soldiers to stand down as Damocles enters Lelouch's service. Treize shows up with more Federation troops at this point, ready to get "phase 2" underway. Meanwhile, Rilina is ill at ease over in the refugee camp -- she feels like she should be doing something to help the Federation from going down the crapper. It's a problem of power: had Rilina refused Treize's "offer" to get out of Dodge, she'd probably have just been kidnapped and used in someone else's nefarious scheme. Besides, Rilina is pretty sure Treize has saved her for some other plan for the world's future. So why not go find out? Kagura turns up and invites the deposed leader over to Area Eleven to see what Lelouch (her "husband", as she claims) will do next. Seeing that Kagura knows both Treize and Lelouch's plans, Rilina is glad to come along.

Will boredom strike Sheryl and Marina dead on the spot?!? Surely not: if there's one thing Sheryl knows, it's how to show a girl a good time(!?!). Her sales pitch is this: Marina really ought to see the Earth from the outside, ought to give herself a new appreciation of how hard all its people work at just staying alive. Sheryl sees something of her younger, less resolute self in Marina, and Marina has the good sense to agree to the journey.

#### CHAPTER 51B. Peacecraft, King of Warfare

Insalaum regards Treize with a bit less respect than they afford Lelouch on the other path, but he's certainly proven himself a force to be reckoned with after vowing to slay his enemies during his inaugural address. And like the other path, Yuusar seems in no hurry to hit the battlefield himself to exploit the Federation's impending rift. Marilyn gets enlisted to comfort Prince Emo, with Unblown's blessing, given how all his other confidants are gone.



The Super-United States is turning into the who's-who of small nations, plus China (former centerpiece of the HPL). Not only is it shaping up as an anti-Three Great Nations club, it's also garnering support from Colonials who don't like how Milliard and White Fang are representing them. One thing's for sure: the week of peace since the inauguration won't last much longer. Crow isn't exactly thrilled at the prospect, but if there's going to be war he can take at least some comfort in the thought of it earning him a bit of dough.

Quatro on the other hand has bigger worries on his mind. He can't figure out why Treize and Milliard, who he's known for a while now, would join forces with Schneizer. They're up to something, but what? Saji meanwhile is fretting over Suzaku and Lelouch, whose personas outside of school have turned out so differently from those he thought he knew as friends. The same could be said of Karen, who gets annoyed when Saji mentions her double life.

Her ire gets cut quite short though when Margret intervenes, telling her and Esther to listen closely. Sure they're all warriors, but they're also women: and it takes a lot of manners, refinement and knowledge to produce a feminine aura! This devolves into a full diatribe, the upshot of which is that ladies should learn to embrace even their unpleasant aspects in pursuit of a fuller life. Watching the womenfolk smiling and nodding, Saji just wishes Louise was among them.

Setsuna tells him that Louise's story isn't over yet, any more than Suzaku and Lelouch's are. Suzaku for instance has currently lost sight of what to fight for, even as Lelouch found something new to fight for. As long as Saji has something worth fighting for in his life, all will be well. As well as anything else in the world anyway...

Schneizer has a very optimistic view of the Super-United States: Zero's brainchild has gathered all the Federation's enemies into one place. AND made it easy to blame Zexis for the Federation's splintering. Take Zexis out, Schneizer claims, and the rest of the Super-Union will scatter like a flock of geese.

Dorothy walks in at this point, having brought Liumei as instructed. She's happy to serve Milliard and eager to try out a certain system the next time combat occurs, yet another warrior for peace in Schneizer's delusional brain. The Britannian prince is cagey about whether he'll actually show himself on the front lines, and takes his leave to go prepare a certain gadget Tomoro has been working on. Quite sure of victory then? Milliard himself isn't, nor Treize, which is why they never considered themselves truly colleagues of Schneizer. By rights, the two of them should be at each others' throats too, but Zexis has provided them a common enemy compelling enough to make it worth Treize's time to play at allying with Milliard. That's partly why he had to get Rilina out of the way, though Treize was also worried that Charles thought Rilina's presence was bad for humanity in its immature state.

Liumei figures in thanks to her Innovator connections, which have shat out a list of "dead men" more interested in their own lust than in helping govern the Earth. She hopes it will be of some use in Milliard's planned purge, claiming she's doing it all for Teh Revolution. Dorothy assumes this means Liumei wants war as much as she does, and that that's why she hooked up with the Innovators. She promises Liumei the best seat in the house for Zexis' destruction, preparing to do something Treize probably won't like. Treize tells her he's in little position to quibble about methods now, and wishes her good luck.

The two men realize that the Innovators are going to come after Liumei for her duplicity, and that will afford them a chance to get the last pieces of info

they need to pinpoint the Innovator hideout (and within it, Veda). Milliard has to smile in spite of himself at how similar the two of them turned out to be... similarly stupid in fact, given that neither has any better ideas of how to proceed. Wherever Rilina is, she's probably laughing in scorn.

The Federation forces are moving to intercept Zexis while they're still in China, testament to their military might and to the charisma Milliard has brought to the Federation's top job. As Zexis takes the field, Suzaku's been put into "protective custody" aboard the Ptolemy-2 -- he needs to be kept away from any vengeful types among the Black Knights who might wish him ill. Saji asks if there's anything Zero can do for his friend, but there's little time for psychology with the wolf at the door.

The enemy is a mixture of Federation and Colony forces -- an ironic realization of the dream of unity throughout the Earth Sphere if ever there was one. The White Fang forces have even hauled out the red and blue mecha Trois and Hihiro were made to pilot. But something is different about the Mobile Dolls this time: their collective movements exhibit some sort of human touch. That is what Dorothy's been up to, utilizing the Epyon's control system. Liumei herself doesn't much care which side wins... so long as the result is a new world.

Dorothy isn't too happy when Zexis wrecks her red-and-blue toys, but Liumei seems pleased on the sidelines. As a little reward to Zexis for being so bad-ass, she decides to leak them a little info. The Ptolemy-2 picks up a short-range encrypted transmission from her, in which she claims to have info so sensitive she fears Veda intercepting it. The realtime decryption reveals that the Innovators have a crucial collaborator aboard the Frontier fleet, whose name is--

Oops, more enemies, including Neina in her Gundam Throne. She is not here for Zexis as one might expect, but rather for Liumei, who protests that Neina was supposed to be keeping the Innovators under surveillance. Neina doesn't intend to take orders from a triple agent, especially one with so sordid a past as Liumei. To wit: the dude she's hanging out with is in fact her brother, booted from leading their moneybags family for being impotent and hence incapable of siring an heir. Liumei got the assignment instead and hated every minute of it, vowing to change the entire world on account of the trouble her brother's erectile dysfunction caused her. No word on where the Viagra deficit came from.

Anyways, it's all BAWW and "Revolutionize the World" ass-haberdashery. The only reason Neina put up with it this long was to avoid an early grave. Liumei was soooo eager to trust Neina when she showed her the slightest inkling of lesbianical receptiveness, making it all the more satisfying to blow Liumei into smithereens. From now on, Neina is going to live as she sees fit and make herself happy for a change... and that includes avenging herself on the Innovator lackey who killed her brother when the time comes. She'll like, rip out his throat and shit with her bare teeth!

Maybe. Then again, maybe someone is coming to give her a proper bitch-smacking for turning against the Innovators. So sayeth her blue Haro, which turns out to be a mouthpiece for Ribbons. Ali appears, but with him is Louise... who goes berserk at the sight of the Gundam that murdered her parents. Neina growls that Louise isn't the only one with family to avenge, and is damn sure not going to die here after all the hell her creators put her through. The question is, can Setsuna and Saji do anything to prevent the two butthurt girls from butchering each other?

Not really. Louise by this point has gone batshit insane, impelled by the thought that her parents didn't even have time to say "I don't wanna die"

before, umm, dying. All the Newtypes know Setsuna needs to hurry if there's any hope of saving what remains of her mind. Before he can charge in however, Mr. Bushido -- really Graham with that \$2 mask on -- shows up and challenges Setsuna to one final duel. It's FATE, I tell you, F-E-I-T-O that has brought them to this moment, surpassing love and hate and every other platitude the writers can list.

In a way, Graham is yet another victim of the C.B.'s meddling in world affairs. But how to fend him off and save Louise at the same time? Sumeragi solves that by uncaging Suzaku, who promises to hold Graham off while Saji and Suzaku go to Louise. Suzaku calls this an apology for his past misdeeds, but the real explanation is simpler: straight up friendship. Graham recognizes him as the Knight of Seven, but Suzaku declares that he has no lord to serve any longer: his allegiance is blank. What to call him, then? Hmm. Hummmm. What about... the "Knight of Zero"! That fits, somehow, especially when Suzaku is able to overcome his "flight" reflex and parlay the "Live!" Geass into unrivaled fighting ability. Suzaku yells at Zero to watch as he carries out his own version of Justice.

The longer Louise fights, the more unhinged she becomes. Amuro urges Setsuna to stop her pronto: whatever's wrong with her, Ribbons is behind it! This is easier said than done however, on account of how powerful the mech he "gifted" her for her revenge is. Saji blames himself for not stopping her rampage, and vows to do better next time... if there is a next time! See, Eim's put in an appearance, and Crow knows that Eim's power is faaar stronger than usual.

Why's that? Eim claims it's because the world is full of lies, which Zero and Suzaku are experts in. But Treize, Milliard, even Prince Yuusar are also hiding behind a liar's mask. It all adds up to Eim spooing his pants and Body Dividing in an orgy of Dimension Power. His lies will fill this world of chaos, and then They will come with the Spiral Nemesis to take him home. As before, his speech quickly becomes incoherent, and further parlay is useless.

But the words he did use stung Zero and Suzaku pretty bad. Pep talks at a time like this are Zexis' stock-in-trade, and Lelouch pulls his shit together first. Preventing a world like Eim describes is the whole reason he's here, and when Suzaku stops to think about it, the same goes for him. Eim finds this totally farcical, but Crow points out that the only reason Eim seems to deride people growing (proverbial) balls is that he's got none of his own. Maybe the world is full of lies, but as recent events have shown, those can be as much a hindrance as a help.

Oh, and don't forget about that Bushido guy. When he gets taken down, his consciousness merges with Setsuna's. HE thinks he's dead, but Setsuna's finally figured out what Amuro and Camille were trying to tell him: this state is brought about by the GN Drive -- a meeting of the minds that lies at the heart of Ioria's true plan. The armed intervention stuff he had the CBs doing was merely instrumental to help force human evolution along. Evolution by revolution, in fact.

Now Graham's got a dilemma. He thought he could only find enlightenment through perfecting combat, believing that war is all he and Setsuna were good for. Now that he's lost in battle, he wants Setsuna to finish him off entirely. But Setsuna doesn't roll like that: he battles to seize tomorrow, not to kill dudes like him. He orders Graham to try simply fighting to stay alive, and Graham flees in a burst of emohood. Will he ever find his way back to the light?

Back to Eim though. Despite all his talk about being SO MUCH MORE WINZOR than Crow, his ass goes down without much delay. He gets so incoherent at this point that even the Japanese character set can't adequately express it. His renewed energy is of course just what Asakim has been waiting for. Whoa, wait, how'd he get out of the ZONE?! No word on that yet, since even Asakim is impressed at how high Eim's Sphere factor has become. Eim declares that Asakim is about to be eradicated, unless of course he wants to offer his soul to Them again.

Oops, that was bad. That was a mistake. Eim just pissed Asakim off, and I'm fairly sure that's a recipe for disaster. Here's a little info for Eim: Asakim left the ZONE of his own free will, having figured out there how to actually use the Ultimate Power he's received. The Sphere power Eim fears most is already in Asakim's hands! Witness the wrath of the INQUISITIVE SEA-GOAT!!!

Yeah, that's Greatest Of All Time. Or Genius Of Ass Termination, if you're keeping score at home. That's right, Eim's about to get capped in the ass by Capricorn, and there's nothing he can do about it but flash back to a happier time, when he was a lowly research assistant named Harmal. Sure, even then he was a pathologically-lying fuckup, on the verge of getting fired for mixing himself up in occult research beyond his comprehension (and then trying to play it all off like he was the next Laura Croft). The Sphere he was studying apparently reacted then to his desperation when b& approached, and his final plea was to his supervisor to see him as a whole human being.

This flashback is visible to the whole frigging battlefield, thanks to the power of Asakim's Inquisitive Sea-Goat Sphere. It is keyed off of, you guessed it, Curiosity, and is capable of delving to find the Truth(tm) even in the face of the False Black Sheep's lies. This Sphere's former owner's curiosity, unfortunately for her, led her too deep into Asakim's darkness, where she was eventually swallowed whole. The interesting question is, what is the other Sphere Asakim bears?

Ah well, we'll find out eventually. For now, Harmal Algor has basically lost the ability to access his Sphere power at all. Asakim explains to Crow that certain of the twelve Spheres have special interactions with each other: the Goat and Sheep, for instance, and Crow's own Scales with the Water-Bearer. That's why Crow and Yuusar were able, if only for a moment, to tap directly into the Origin Rho to save Esther.

Before Asakim strikes the final blow, Yuusar appears out of nowhere and vows to punish Eim for what he did to Insalaum. He strikes the final blow, gaining the power of Eim's sphere in the process. Maybe the souls of Insalaum's people will rest in peace, but Yuusar himself surely can't yet. Asakim tells him why Eim brought Insalaum to the brink of ruin: only with Yuusar's love for his country pushed to the absolute limit could the Water-Bearer's Sphere engage. Mind you, had Eim not gone to all that trouble, Asakim would have had to do it himself...

That makes the Accursed Wanderer Yuusar's enemy, just like the person who set Asakim free: Gaiou! They've become colleagues of sorts, and Asakim says that their duel will be settled later -- for now, Yuusar hangs onto Eim's Sphere. He jets off, and the question now is, is there going to be more throwdown with Yuusar? Not unless Zexis really wants to: see, Insalaum has just signed a peace accord with the Federation. That puts the Super-United States in a really bad position. One thing's for sure: Eim was right about the pervasiveness of the lies filling the world just now...

Elsewhere in a refugee camp, Rilina, Marina and Sheryl are fretting about

the state of world events, and wondering at the words of a hulking, war-torn man they all separately met. Fearsome, yes, but also beset by an indescribable loneliness. Fighting to protect that most precious to you seems like common sense, but can it really bring about peace? Milliard seems to think so, but Rilina isn't convinced: time for a journey to find out where her brother's head is really at. She'll avail herself of allies in Cinq Kingdom, and hopes that when she sees the other ladies the world will finally be at true peace. As on the other path, Marina then accepts Sheryl's invitation to see the world from space.

Back aboard the Ikaruga, Suzaku has decided to immerse himself in this whole Knight of Zero persona, forsaking all countries and causes other than world peace. He and Zero are not repeat NOT going to forgive each other for anything that's happened. Saji's pretty worried, but Karen says that this is the best they can hope for right now. Hopefully the day will come when everyone can return to Ashford Academy together... Louise included! Soma is watching this attempt to overcome hatred and work together from the sidelines, and Crow in turn is watching her reaction. She accuses him at first of reading her mental activity, but it's really much simpler than that: he's merely trying to "understand" her. A lot could get done in this world if more people tried to do that and fewer behaved like Eim. Even "Mary" inside her would love that, right? Soma tells him to mind his own business and stalks off, but in fact that's precisely what she needed to hear.

Back across the room, Suzaku recalls the quote that there is no such thing as an "unforgivable" act. There are simply acts that people don't forgive -- that they don't want to forgive. Zero recognizes the gravity of that statement, and observes that both he and Suzaku have decided to reject Eim's world-of-lies view. In some some sense, they're fortunate to be able to start from scratch, fighting only for the desire for peace that Nanaly and Euphy bequeathed them. Suzaku agrees to stick with Zero till that day, and Zero can rest a little easier knowing that there will always be an element within Suzaku he can trust.

## CHAPTER 52. Battlefield of Confusion

Lelouch makes his way to Nanaly's chambers, where she sits clutching the scepter that launches the F.L.E.I.J.A.s. She's expected him, and to his vast surprise opens her eyes and regards him for the first time in eight years. Kind of sad to exert all the energy to break Charles' Geass only to find that your brother has been out killing people. Then again, she's got blood on her hands too, and it was worth it to try to stop Lelouch from running riot. So he shouldn't expect her to hand over the Key of Damocles, even if he Geasses her into it!

Come to think of it, Nanaly's one of the only people he hasn't Geassed yet, on account of her being blind and whatnot. Now's his chance!...and stuff, except that he'd really rather not twist her will on top of everyone else whose lives he's already altered by force. Fortunately, he doesn't have to debate himself for long: Nanaly helpfully breaks the deadlock by telling him that he's unfit to rule the world after all his lies.

He who makes the first move, dies. Isn't that the cliché? Well Lelouch has an opening now, asking Nanaly if she'd have rather left the two of them cowering in fear for all eternity -- he did this for her sake too. ORLY? Did she ask him to? Maybe she didn't have to: so many powers tussle over the world that one has to fight just to stand one's ground, much less advance. Quite so, but it's precisely the vividness of this universal struggle that makes Lelouch's Geass so unfair: it disrespects people's autonomy.

If so, is a monstrosity like Damocles, ruling by fear, any better? Yes, Nanaly says, insofar as it is meant to become a symbol -- a focus of hatred! It dawns on Lelouch suddenly what Nanaly is trying to: take all the blame on herself. That makes his course clear, and he unleashes his Geass to force her to hand over the Key. She really doesn't want him to heap any further sin upon himself, but after a long moment even she succumbs. He tells her that her belief in her own ideals is what lets him be true to his, and accepts the key from her hand.

She realizes only too late what he's done, and Lelouch summons Suzaku to take Nanaly into custody. Still wheelchair-bound, she's unable to do so much as follow him towards the door, crying out that he's a demon, unfair, etc. etc. All he can do is LOL the laughter of someone who is already doomed.

Just to get the media's attention, he fires a F.L.E.I.J.A. and blows up some random scenery. He then broadcasts that Damocles and the remaining WMDs are his, and offers amnesty to all rebel troops who swear loyalty to him now. Those that refuse should be prepared for rump-shaking action -- for THIS, this very moment is when the world becomes his.

That sounds villainous. Like, too villainous. He withdraws to a safe distance with Treize, leaving Treize's troops to attempt to take Zexis down. It would appear that the whole of the Federation are now Zexis' enemy, and just for good measure the White Fang show up to help seal Zexis' fate. Once upon a time, the CBs would have loved this shit; now, it's just one more clusterfuck en route to a better tomorrow. From somewhere nearby, Liumei and her brother are watching nervously. It's patently unsafe to be on foot near this quantity of military mecha, but there's no other safe way to contact Zexis. If the CBs can win here, she promises to tell them the way to change the world.

One thing nobody seems to have realized is just HOW dangerous Zexis really is. Or as they say in the Shinjuku Ghetto, "Bitches don't know 'bout my Continuous Action!" Someone deep within the Force Which Is Called Bandai(tm) thinks you're cool if you can beat up 30 sacrificial lambs within 2 turns. \*I\* say it should take less than one PHASE on your first playthrough, without excessive SP burn. Apocalypse Now this isn't.

What it is is a repeat of Neina's assassination of Liumei, and Louise's assassination of Neina, as depicted on the other route. Seriously, that bitch CRAY, and I ain't praising her floating point prowess. More like how high maintenance she's turned out to be, and before Saji and Setsuna can go make any adjustments a challenger appears -- Graham.

Setsuna and Graham have the same meeting of the minds as on the other path when Graham's ass is neutralized in battle. He's still uber-emo at not getting killed by Setsuna after he asked all nicely like. Louise too isn't gonna become sane just by getting Setsuna's beam saber up the exhaust manifold, and makes good her escape thanks to new enemy troops showing up.

Both Treize and Milliard have brought henchpeople, which Treize finds terribly convenient. He'd like to settle the fight between Earth and Space once and for all, content to spread the bloodshed at Zero's side. He lectures Zexis on the fact that the Federation has emphatically failed in its original mission to bring peace to the populace, menaced by hooligans like Zechs on all sides. Call Treize hypocritical if you must (and I must), but this is what he believes the Earthlings need right now.

Milliard begs to differ, spitting that "peace" is the furthest thing from the Federation's deeds. The Earthlings spout nothing but malice, and the

Federation government is the wellspring from which that flows. The Federation must be destroyed, and Treize as the Federation military head bears the biggest target on his forehead. Now at this point, prudent folk might quietly tiptoe out of the way and let them beat each other's brains in... but no one ever accused Wufei of sanity. He plans to PREVENT the two leaders from settling their score with each other, preferring instead to settle HIS score with them both in parallel.

Hiroyuki actually agrees, declaring that Zechs' mission is to take out aggressors even-handedly. It will fall to others to actually fill the ensuing void with peace (others like Rilina) but for now, it's game on.

Milliard can't seem to agree with his sister Rilina's way of doing things, determined to demolish the Federation for its role in sparking all this bloodshed. He's not going to be able to go through Zechs to have that revenge though, and is forced to temporarily withdraw when even the Epyon doesn't cut it.

Treize may be many things: poet, fencer, career bureaucrat, but one thing he ain't is titanium. When shot down, he falls, and when he falls, he busts out the history lesson action. These here Mobile Dolls are the realization of an ages-old dream -- nightmare, really -- that wars could be ended with the push of a button. Both war and defeat are atrocities in a war without the human element, and no God would bless either side once all the dust has settled.

Wufei is sick of being lectured about war by some REMF no better than Zero. He rhetorically asks if Treize knows how many people have died on his account, and Treize promptly gives him the precise count as of yesterday: 999,822. That shuts Wufei up real fast, and while Treize says he can do no more for the dead than memorialize them, he promises everyone listening that these dead have not died in vain. He tells Wufei and Zechs in general that they're his BFFs, calling it an honor to have fought them. He concludes by telling Quatro that he believes Quatro has the power to choose a better way forward than he's chosen. He then allows himself to be claimed when his mech explodes.

Only now does Wufei understand what Treize, what Zero himself are trying to do... and it's driving him nuts. But Hiroyuki tells him to keep it to himself: after all, it was their choice, made of their own free will. Milliard inwardly promises his fallen comrade that he'll keep up the farce, and just then Lady Une shows up. She announces that Zero has just signed a peace accord with White Fang, and that he's forbidden any further warfare. Zechs' role in today's battle will not be subject to inquiry if they quit now.

Lelouch seems to have the clout to finish the process of demolishing all the old vestiges of elitism that divided Earth and the Colonies, and with Treize dead the decks are clear for a full-blown renaissance. The problem is that such a peace will be underwritten by fear... and Hiroyuki has to wonder if Zero really is destined for the future the Zero System showed.

Then again, Zechs may not live long enough to see that future come to pass. Nia is on hand, musing on how the human's foolish, warlike nature does have the useful property of turning the spiral and forcing things forward. It is apparently time for Phase 2 of the Anti-Spirals' plan, and she's come to make the official announcement.

Let there be despair throughout the world (to whose ears Nia's voice is being carried courtesy of hax0red internet service). In one week's time, the Shadow Moon will leave its current orbit and crash into the Earth. Bumerooski! Nia

leaves without further confab with Simon, and confirmation comes in almost at once that the world is already beginning to panic. THIS is precisely the sort of thing that Veda ought to be used to blunt, but of course the Innovators are off "surfing" the internet or something. What to do? Duh, save the day!

"The" day is apparently not to day, since the pilots have some time to themselves after returning to their motherships. Karen in particular is in mental agony, trying fruitlessly to figure out what Lelouch could possibly be thinking. She believed that becoming emperor was part of a deeper scheme to topple Schneizer, but she can't think of any good reason why he'd ally himself with the White Fang. Why would he do all of this? Fiana, like Wufei, seems to have a guess. And Kiriko, like Hiiro, tells her to keep it under her hat: apparently Karen can't handle the truth.

Maybe Rilina can, or Kagura? They've rendezvoused with Zexis, and want the assignment to go hear from Lelouch's own mouth what he's really after. Rilina has the leverage to pull this off, as former Federation head and brother of the White Fang commander, and Hiiro as much as gives her his blessing. He promises her to defend the world she's busting her buns so hard for. He and the rest of Zexis will be headed to that Shadow Moon to try to head off whatever doom Nia has foretold. Karen might be having issues, but Simon at least isn't the least bit fazed at the prospect of trouncing an entire moon if that's what world peace requires.

Back at Innovator HQ, Revive comments that the world isn't the only thing being revolutionized -- Setsuna himself is undergoing a revolution, judging by his prowess in combat. It's the only explanation for why he's not outright dead from cellular damage from that bullet back when. Could he be a sort of natural-born Innovator, Earth's first? In any case, the battle for Earth's future is entering its final phase, now that Lelouch and Milliard -- two of the most unpredictable sorts Ribbons has ever seen -- are at the Earth's helm. Time to get and Louise and Billy Katagiri ready for the eventuality that some of the plucky Zexis folks actually make it to the this seekrit hideout.

The five Colonial scientists, by the way, are still keeping mum on the Zero System. They too are beyond the Innovators' ability to second-guess, and have vowed to take their own lives at the first sign of anyone using truth serum on them. Ribbons is unconcerned, quite certain that his Gundam can handle whatever Zexis has planned. And as for that dark moon thing, plummeting to the surface and all? Totally unconcerned, and maybe even a plus: if Amuro was right about souls being trapped by gravity, maybe this is the perfect excuse for the populace to vamoose.

No, what Ribbons is worried about are some traitors close to home. Or, did Rijeene really think he didn't know how she was supporting Liumei? Ribbons, after all, is essentially the "creator" of the Innovators, and his Neural Wave powers lay bare any plots his "children" might try to hatch. One thing he didn't expect, however, is for Rijeene to freak and outright shoot him on the spot. Rijeene, it seems is determined to be the one to guide mankind, and is willing to go so far as to reawaken Elgan and somehow force him to divulge the Black Knowledge and the key to Veda as well. Uhh, sure -- you go, girlfriend.

## CHAPTER 52B. End Game, the Final Battle

It turns out that Yuusar's little alliance pack with the Federation has one major catch: it doesn't become active until a certain condition is met. That would be "world peace", achieved at the point of guns that Insalaum is helping supply. Call that a gesture of "gratitude" for taking Insalaum's refugee



people in. Lady Une will take point on integrating the Insalaum common people into Earth society, but all the commanders know that it's going to be a long, prejudice-marred road. Still, that the Federation won't have to face Insalaum in pitched battle is pretty good news.

Schneizer wants to put the Arcsabers to work right away squishing the Super-United States. He doesn't want to leave Zexis duty entirely to non-Earth forces, but he does want a way of whittling away at Yuusar's power a bit; like Lelouch, there's something in Yuusar's eyes he doesn't think he can trust. He claims to have readied several trump cards to help him clean up the mess he made when he failed to separate Zero from Zexis, and means to start with a card that Zero is going to feel most poignantly.

Word reaches Zexis about a mysterious explosion near the island housing the Japanese exiles. It seems that whoever was responsible deliberately staged the explosion so as to not hit the island itself: a bluff, using a F.L.E.I.J.A. as ammo. And the bluffer wastes no time phoning Zero up -- it is of course Schneizer, who's got all the nukes and all the smugness on his side. But it's not the hostage crisis at the heart of his call: it's his choice of replacement emperor now that Charles is dead. He presents Nanaly, who declares herself Zero and Suzaku's enemy.

In her mind, threatening people with nukes is no different than the threat of Zero's Geass, and calls her brother and Suzaku out for lying to her all this time. Did they think they were trying to protect her or something? Lelouch processes this remarkably quickly, and tells her not to flatter herself. If she thinks she's somehow entitled to others' protection, she's the very epitome of the toxic old feudal culture. He tells her that he fought the whole world for one person's sake alone (his), and that if she wants to ally herself with the man he's going to crush, that's her problem. Yikes.

As she stammers and falls silent, Schneizer says that the Super-United States are as good as toast with the addition of Insalaum to his cause. He challenges Zero to a duel in one week's time at Mt. Fuji and hangs up. Now, most of the other Zexis folk wonder why Schneizer would stoop so low as to mix Area 11 up in his vendetta. The better question for Lelouch and Suzaku is how it is that Nanaly is still alive. Clearly Schneizer pulled some shenanigans and saved her from the previous blast, but why didn't C.C. at least realize she hadn't died? C.C. tells Lelouch that she's not God -- she can only sense the condition of people directly bound to her via Geass. Maybe Sayoko, who just conveniently turned up out of nowhere, can answer that question? Like on the other path, she's left her boss Diethart for reasons even she can't adequately articulate.

Lelouch is in fact more rattled by this turn of events than he wanted to admit in Schneizer's hearing, but again as on the other path Suzaku tells him to go pull himself together. When he acquiesces, he promises to be Zero's sword, and tells C.C. to be his shield.

Word of the impending fragdown has circulated throughout Area 11, and everyone with half a functioning neuron is fleeing somewhere safe... like the Tokyo Settlement, which totally couldn't be blown the fuck up by nukes or anything. The Student Council is watching the flood of refugees from the relative safety of Ashford Academy, discussing how odd it is to hear about the Federation army battalion Zexis battling the Federation's central government. Milly's been hearing things in the course of her news career, and the rumors are that Zexis has done the world far more good -- and has many more celebrities in its ranks -- than the public knows.

Even Nina is back among her Council friends, and Milly has to remind her to

keep a low profile. The budding scientist is, after all, on the run from the government after fleeing her military lab -- and stricken severely by her conscience after inventing the world's leading WMD. Milly tells her to take as much time as she needs to figure out what to do with her life; after all, that's worked out great for Shirley! Wait, isn't she dead? NOT IF YOU WERE AWESOME several missions back and got enough Zero Points. Anyways, Shirley's back on the scene, filling out the ranks of the Council once more. Those absentees are currently busy rocking world events, and Milly has to be given lots of credit for having such an awesome circle of friends.

Oh, that whole hiding-from-the-military thing? Totally ineffective where Lloyd and Cecil are concerned. They've come at Suzaku's request to pick her up...

As the battle lines form up at Mt. Fuji, Gino is having serious second thoughts that he won't let on. Anya can't explain why, but she feels like something is different about her lately. Bismarck tells them to shut up, believing that once Zexis is defeated the world will peaceably fall in step with the Federation. ORLY peace? Meanwhile, this is the first time some of the Zexis pilots have seen this Japan's Mt. Fuji, which looks like something out of Blade Runner thanks to the massive Sakuradite mine. Is this an indictment of Britannia's callous environmental policy? Sure, why not, though it's kind of late for that several dozen missions into the game.

Rumor has it that Schneizer, de facto head of the Federation, won't actually be participating in today's battle... as though it's beneath him or something. For that matter, C.C. isn't planning to sortie either -- Zero's got plenty of allies without her and her new Lloyd-designed mech getting involved. Hiirou's attention is fixed on Schneizer, a different sort of threat than that Treize or Zechs pose. Zero knows Schneizer's got more up his sleeve than just dangling Nanaly in front of him, but there's only one way to find out what that is...

The Mobile Dolls don't seem to be immediately bum-rushing Zexis, content to hang out near Mt. Fuji for now. This can't be anything good, and Zero assures Xingke that he's already busy trying to decipher their stratagem.

Gino isn't really surprised when he gets his ass pounded: he knows full well that his heart wasn't in this fight. Seeing as how Suzaku is actually getting things done, maybe he'd make a better role model than this Bismarck creepster? Whatever he ends up doing, Karen hopes Gino won't disappoint her. Anya however doesn't give up so easily: she's convinced that she amounts to nothing, and therefore has nothing left to lose. Jeremiah rushes to her side, vowing to give her the duel she needs. Anya thinks him weak for his reliance on technology, meaning to take his picture for personal Wall of Shame. But Jeremiah is a lot harder to kill than he looks, and if she's going to take a picture, he's going to autograph it for her with STEEL.

Autographs wouldn't do her much good, given how she can never remember things right anyway. Maybe it's Alzheimer's. MAYBE IT'S A TOOMAH! Protip: it's not a tumor. Jeremiah kicks in his Geass Canceler, and suddenly it's like clouds part inside Anya's head. She knows "Orange" did something to her, but what? She goes off to ponder the topic, and Jeremiah follows to help keep her safe.

Bismarck just sucks, incapable of grasping the fact that Zero comes before One in computer sciences. With his defeat, the signature Knights of the Round are history. However, there's no rest for the weary yet -- Zero frantically orders everyone near Mt. Fuji to GTFO ASAP. Schneizer, it seems, has stolen a page from Zero's playbook and detonated the Sakuradite mine, producing one hell of an explosion. An eruption, in fact, and if the

environmental lobby was irate before they have now officially just gone to plaid. Schneider himself finally appears to gloat, riding a fucking 3 kilometer-long flying fortress: Damocles, whose vast destructive powers are, of course, purely there for the pacifism.

With him are a bunch of Insalaum's brain-hacked DBs, and in control of them is Marilyn. Her participation at Yuusar's behest is NOT going to bring world peace any faster, which was the ostensible reason behind Insalaum's peace treaty with the Feds, but then again maybe that's what Yuusar had in mind all along. Not that Zexis needs worry their little heads over it: Schneider's packing a little something something that will end the war right quick.

Yeah, it's more F.L.E.I.J.A.s, the display of which is supposed to (quote-quote) make Zexis surrender on the spot. Schneider makes a show of being OH SO EMO when Zexis doesn't, and with even more genuine emohood Nanaly asks to be the one pushing the proverbial Big Red Button. She'd rather bear at least some of the sin for this mess, since she can't do jack shit otherwise. Schneider puts her in the safest part of the fortress. Cornelia doesn't like him maneuvering Nanaly into a role like this, but he starts waxing philosophical about how the common people NEED to be ruled by fear. Even peaceniks still count on a police force, right? Crime will never stop. Lusts of all sorts will never stop. So what's wrong with building a system to give people the kind of peace they want?

And here Cornelia thought Schneider was building a small Star Destroyer just to destroy Zero, but nope, it's to be an unassailable terror platform for keeping the world's rabble in line. In Schneider's view, peace is a mere illusion, and always has been -- what's wrong with administering a little punishment^Wass-raping if it makes that illusion a reality? Cornelia yells that no one but a God is allowed to lecture humanity in that way, and Schneider smirks that that's what he intends to become... assuming "the people" want him to. Diethart sure wants him to at least, and Schneider has Kanon take Cornelia off his bridge before she causes him any more bother.

What does Zero make of all of this? Put it this way: in the world he and his fellows seek to create, nobody like Schneider exists. I know you are but what am I, is Schneider's reply, with the postscript that he hopes this is mankind's final fight. Uh huh. But Zero needn't ask Zexis to "borrow" their strength to bump off his brother: the Zexis members all want Schneider out of the picture as bad as he does. What Zero needs to do is give the order, and that he does with gusto.

Obviously Zero has the largest axe to grind with Schneider, but surprisingly the next in line is Roger. Ever since the debate over Zero's fate, Roger has figured Schneider as having the face of an angel and the heart of the devil himself. He had really wanted to unmask Schneider's lies in some suitably public forum, but world events have forced Roger to simply blow Schneider the fuck up. Oh well. Lelouch meanwhile has learned an important lesson that seems to elude Schneider: the world needs something better than self-righteousness.

Now, it takes a lot to shoot down a 3-km mobile fortress, but Zero and Suzaku have it wired, thanks to a little help from Nina's latest creation. Ougi then has the Ikaruga punch a hole in the Damocles' Blaze Luminous barrier to let the two inside. There, Schneider sighs and puts into motion is "final plan", and Diethart is ready to broadcast every second of it to the world at large.

Zero goes to Nanaly's room, where Schneider and Diethart are waiting for him. Diethart has taken Nanaly hostage, though Schneider was notably not in any

hurry to stop him. Schneizer's objective is to force Zero to apologize to the world for all his misdeeds, causing the Super-United States to abruptly collapse. Zero expected something like this from his brother, and Kanon and Diethart are SURE that there's nothing Zero can do about it, even with his Geass. This guy must be retarded as well as Nazi, since there's an infinite range of things Zero can, in fact, do about it.

What Zero chooses to do is pull out a gun and shoot Diethart in the shoulder, missing Nanaly by mere millimeters. One thing Schneizer never expected is Zero actually abandoning Nanaly, and Diethart (who apparently never knew about the battle with Mao) is certain that Zero Geassed himself beforehand into not caring about Nanaly. Zero responds with more gunfire, growling that he'll not use his Geass again. There's no need to, anyway. He then asks Queen Nanaly for her forgiveness, saying that he may be forced to take her life after all and vowing that, if he does, he'll take his own shortly thereafter.

Schneizer realizes that his brother has come prepared for death, and tries to claim that he too has that much cojones. Zero points out that he's full of it, grown ossified and arrogant from years of controlling the game instead of playing it for real. Schneizer recovers his composure quickly, declaring that now that he knows where Zero's head is at he can execute him without further delay. Zero seems to smirk at that, and says it's time for yet another chess analogy. NOT that Zero has just applied checkmate, or even that he's a King... in fact, Zero names himself as just one more pawn in the Zexis armada -- and like all pawns, all he can do is advance. But remember what happens if a pawn should make it all the way through the enemy's defenses? That's right, mother-fucktards: \*PROMOTION\*!!!

Promotion apparently involves lots of explosions, as Zexis troops carry out instructions to fire on Zero's location from outside. And let's not forget his knights Suzaku and Jeremiah, who run to the rescue now that the guards have all been dealt with. Even Rolo is on hand to make extra sure nothing goes wrong, and the time has finally come for Schneizer to admit defeat. Does defeat taste like dying? A question from Zero first: was Damocles truly meant to rule the world? Naw, it really was a death-weapon intended for peaceful purposes in Schneizer's mind.

As on the other path, Zero dismantles Schneizer's argument in favor of a "static" peace by pointing out that stasis isn't really "living" life, just "experiencing" it. Charles was obsessed with yesterday, Schneizer with today, and only Zero among them looks for tomorrow. With hope. Schneizer gets sick of hearing it quickly and tells Zero to just kill him, so that Damocles too can vanish in a burst of nuclear fire and purge him too. Nanaly protests at this point that it was she who committed the sin of firing the WMD, and Zero tells her that everyone commits sins during their life... himself included. He believes himself unfit to hand down such judgement, and instead has Jeremiah lead Schneizer and his party away. Lest Schneizer misunderstand though, Zero warns him that he's going to drag Schneizer down to where he himself has ended up. And remember: "Lelouch" himself is gone now.

What to do about Diethart, who's foaming at the mouth in rage at Zero coming back from beyond "The End" of his tale. Zero regards him with what might be pity, recalling how badly Diethart wanted to document the revolution of the world. He then announces that Damocles is to be Diethart's, to use as he sees fit: if he wants to change the world, he'd better damn well roll up his sleeves and do it himself. Diethart begs to at least have Zero Geass him or something, and Zero shouts that Diethart isn't worth the effort. As Diethart runs off, Zero observes that the "Zero" Diethart wanted is already dead.

Nanaly is then left alone with her brother, or at least the man who once was.

Zero is now the kind of (highly practiced head-shooting marksman FPSer always ganking you online) cold-blooded dude who would point a gun in her direction. Or maybe, she figures, he's just scared to face her. She opens her eyes, having broken Charles' Geass by force of will alone. She tells him she was prepared to stop him with nuclear force, after all the lives he's trampled, and he asks if she'd rather he left the both of them trembling in constant, impotent fear of their lives. As on the other path, Lelouch figures out quickly that what Nanaly is really trying to do as they argue is take all the blame on herself.

But this time, he also realizes that Nanaly no longer needs him to save her. Having told him everything in her heart, she demands to know why he's still too afraid to show her his face. How unfair! Just then someone walks out of the shadows, telling Zero to get back from the queen. It is, to both Zero and Suzaku's utter astonishment, Euphemia! Privately, she's happy beyond words to be able to see Suzaku again. Publically, however, she declares aloud that Suzaku is no longer her knight after pointing his sword at the Federation. He is to leave her sight, and go wherever and do whatever he pleases. Cornelia is by her sister's side, announcing Suzaku's official ouster from the Knights of the Round (which may or may not matter depending on whether Britannia even exists after today). Euphy figures that this is the only way to save Suzaku and Lelouch, and Suzaku is really glad to see his erstwhile girlfriend still alive. He has a brief moment to thank Cornelia for letting him see Euphy alive, and Euphy quickly tells Zero that she still believes that he truly wants to work with her for peace, despite the terrible events of that fateful day. Lelouch thanks her in turn, if "thank" is the word, for allowing himself to finally remove himself from Nanaly's presence.

Before he does, however, Rolo uses his Geass to create a little bubble for Lelouch to say a private goodbye to Nanaly. Lelouch thanks his "brother", and takes off his mask. He thanks Nanaly for becoming such a fine, self-sufficient person, and tells her he'll always love her. He then bids her a final goodbye, re-dons his mask, and bids the three princess a grand farewell as Zero, the Man Who Will Change the World!

Back outside, it's been confirmed that the princesses have cleared out and that Schneider and friends are safely imprisoned aboard the Ikaruga. All that remains is to wreck the Damocles, and in it the gibbering Diethart whose dreams of New World Order producer are rapidly coming to an end. Before Zero can give the order to fire however, a barrage comes in from overhead and blows Damocles away with more or less one volley. Its origin is a MASSIVE battleship situated near the White Fang capital ship Barge, where one must assume Treize and Zechs are held up sex0ring each other ad nauseum. A weapon like this is clearly as dangerous as Damocles was, and is obviously Zexis' next target.

The new battleship is called the Libra, and turns out to be what the five Colonial scientists have been building at gunpoint all this time. Its only weakness seems to be that the previously-fired main cannon can't be fired repeatedly -- but the scientists are working on that. Not that they expect to be done by the time Zexis come to get them, regardless of Carns' orders to the contrary. White Fang seems to subscribe to the Schneider school of peace-through-terror, and distressingly Treize admits that he's not as "elegant" at it as Schneider was. Rather than hang a Sword of Damocles above the world's head, Milliard simply wants a big enough battering ram that NO ONE's stronghold would feel safe. Which ever side wins the battle to come, mankind is about to reach the Next Level(tm), even beyond what Ioria imagined. The plan is to breach Veda's defenses and broadcast the whole thing to the world in realtime, and on that at least Dr. J is even happy to help. Oh, and one more person is needed for the plan: Rilina!

## CHAPTER 53A. Falling Moon

We find Gaiou doing something very un-Destroyer-Of-Worlds-ly: gazing up at the moon and thinking. Thinking about how badly the Anti-Spirals must want this planet demolished, that they'd enlist the help of some REALLY annoying friends...

Now, with the Earth in imminent peril, one might naively expected a global exodus... given how there's a colony\_fleet of spaceships conveniently parked nearby and all. One like the Frontier's president, say. But Lelouch has not authorized the Earth's peoples to head for the exits, going so far as to execute a few influential string-pullers who tried to privately head to space. Howard wonders if Lelouch is trying to murder the entire populace, but if so, it looks to be a murder-suicide insofar as Lelouch himself shows no signs of leaving. With the Surface-Colony war resolved, Mishima expects the remaining Earthlings to refocus the remains of the Federation around the Colonies once the Moon falls -- if "Federation" is the term for the monarchy Lelouch has orchestrated.

In any case, Mishima figures this Earth is a lost cause, and says it's high time to get back to the Frontier fleet's original mission to the galactic center. The Fold System is basically repaired, but before the fleet can leave there's still the Vajra menace to take care of. Mishima tells Howard that the Vajra next has been pinpointed, as has their "queen". And though Ranka Li (and Grace, for that matter) have gone missing, Mishima's got her replacement all lined up...

Back at Atami, the non-combatants are painfully aware of the Shadow Moon's approach -- looming larger in the sky by the day. About the only good news is that it exerts no gravitational pull on the Earth, due perhaps to the dimensional distortion surrounding it. If there's one thing Tsubasa's sure of, it's that that moon isn't long for this world: Kouji and his mates are going to pulverize it to save the world. Again. It's just kinda what they do.

Mishima's sources seem accurate on at least one point: nobody is being allowed to leave Earth. Milly's hanging out at the Academy, since the world's media is basically on forced vacation during the crisis, and confirms that even the high nobles of Britannia have no access to space. People are plenty pissed at Lelouch and his government, but there's no force that can oppose the Federation and White Fang militaries, and no time to even try with the Shadow Moon bearing down. At least there isn't panic and rioting in the streets, but if this is "world peace", there's going to be "Malice at the Palace" before too long.

As if on cue, Lelouch gets on the mic and sends a message to the world. It has been uncovered, he says, that the message of the so-called "Anti-Spirals" is merely a vicious prank by HACKERS ON STEROIDS, just like the whole "Wiseman" business. Apart from the lulz, their objective seems to be projecting a world-wide hologram of the Shadow Moon moving to cause panic. The hacker base has now been pinpointed, and as the Federation army moves in for the kill the people of the world should expect the Moon to return to normal shortly. Let the people fear not, and conduct themselves in an orderly, rational fashion... or get IRL permabanned for disrupting society, whichever they prefer.

This is of course all lies (except maybe the banhammer part), meant to keep the people from freaking out any more than they already have. Lelouch himself has an awful taste in his mouth after threatening the world, and not exactly happy to get a "sympathy" card from the head of the Innovators, who say they'll be "watching over" the world. What this really means though is that both they

and he are equally powerless -- only Zexis has any hope of stopping what's to come, and if they can't, the world has no future anyway. Or so his gut tells him anyway. The fact is, he and Milliard are just as scared as everyone else, but they've done the best to set the world up for a brighter future in the hopes that this crisis is over.

There's a bit more to it than just gut feel, of course. Lelouch did get a glimpse of the Black Knowledge when he faced down Charles, and though he hates to admit it, he finally understands what the hell Elgan is up to. Word is that the Colonists are brimming over with sympathy for their terrestrial comrades, lingering resentments washed away as the final phase of the farce Treize gave his life to orchestrate. All except for Carns, who's thrown in his lot with the Innovators in the hopes of seeing the Earth punished. One of two things will happen: either Zexis will pummel the Shadow Moon and then the Innovators themselves, or Lelouch's enshrinement as the wickedest emperor in history will come a bit earlier than planned. Assuming of course that even the Colonists have a future...

It seems, by the way, that there's some sort of commotion in the Dark Continent... one which Lelouch has no interest in trying to quell just now. As he knows firsthand, these are the kind of people whose drills reach the heavens, no matter how much pressure is applied from above. Better to let Kamina's scions do what good they can in peace.

At least 640k people have evacuated into a kilometer-long underground shelter which just conveniently happened to be buried near Kamina City -- a present of sorts from the previous culture to modern man. A culture which, lest we forget, got its ass handed to it by the Anti-Spirals. The shelter is SO not going to withstand Moonfall, which is why Roshii had to lie like Lelouch to get people to go cower there. About the best Roshii knows how to do is to save the immediate residents of Kamina City by flying them to space in the massive Ark Gurren. Roshii's feeling pretty bad about hiding the existence of Phase 2 from the Federation government and only focusing on saving his own people's butts, but his only other option -- full disclosure -- would have probably just accelerated the Anti-Spirals' timetable and denied anyone the chance to escape. Without any irony, Lee Long says (s)he's glad to have helped Roshii do as much as he did.

The good work isn't over yet, though. Booting up the Ark Gurren will require plugging the darn thing into zombie-Spiral Lord, who's the only one who can actually get the thing to operate. Somewhat like the Lagann only responds to Simon, in fact. The boot sequence goes through and the Spiral Engine comes online thanks to Lowgenome's can-do attitude, so here's the scenario. Once the moon falls, no terrestrial shelter will stand up to the shockwave. The blistering heat will make the surface totally inhabitable for one year, and asking the existing Colonies for help would just strain their resources too far... so the Ark Gurren will do what the Frontier fleet was designed to do and seek out a new home for mankind.

Lowgenome, or what's left of him anyway, calls Roshii a good leader for never losing sight of the big picture. And that's really what's been eating Roshii all this time: he'd rather be out there fighting, not forced to make decisions for others. Anyways, that's a worry for the future -- for the present, the Ark Gurren takes off as soon as the final citizens get loaded.

So it comes down to this: Happy Fun Ball turns out to be the giant disembodied head of Jack Skellington. Which is damn peculiar. The sight stirs memories of the battle with Gaiou, and it should -- this is what brought Gaiou's memories back after all. And if Roshii thinks he can make a clean break for outer space, he's sadly mistaken. Out from the Shadow Moon come a large horde

of Mugan, which the Ark Gurren's defenses are entirely too feeble to handle. After all, this thing is supposed to make the Spiral-based lifeforms despair and all.

What really sucks about this is how the Spiral Engine actually runs on emotion, and with hordes of depressed mo-fos aboard the horsepower is going nowhere slow. In fact, even the bridge crew -- or especially the bridge crew -- are down in the dumps, and Roshuu realizes that he's finally hit his limit. Fortunately... Dayakka is on hand! What he's supposed to do is rather unclear, but fortunately he's not the only ally Roshuu has.

Simon and Viral are at the vanguard of the Zexis onslaught, reminding Roshuu that it's only ever really over if you give up. Remember that his is the drill that pierces the Heavens! Insta-morale for the team, and a new lease on life for the Ark Gurren, which doesn't have any actual weapons to defend itself. Guess those pesky Mugans will have to be kept at bay then.

When even Zexis can't keep one of the enemies from approaching the Ark Gurren, Roshuu figures all is lost. Emoboy has to be reminded that the Ark Gurren is, in fact, a Gunmen in its own right, and that means Simon can combine with it. Of course he can: nothing is too outrageous for the leader of the Gurren Gang to pull off! Of course, nothing is too outrageous for the Anti-Spirals either, and the two head Mugan manage to revive enough to pull off a combination of their own. Two on two battle? No problemo.

Defeating the symmetrically-docked bad guys jogs something in Lowgenome's memory. He urges Simon to go to the surface of the Shadow Moon, which would be a lot easier without Eim getting in the way. This will not be the "final" battle, for which a certain Important Person must be present... no, today is about keeping a full-blown Spiral Nemesis from happening, and for that, the Earth must be destroyed. Even he never expected things would get this bad thanks to the Abyss opening.

Well, if Eim is gonna step into the firing line, that's his problem as far as Crow is concerned. At least one person agrees with Eim though, Metarl, who means to put the Earth to good use once mankind has been cleansed from it. His plan is to teleport all of Zexis to the World of the Dead!

That's bad, isn't it? Well, it sure ain't good. Shin Dragon reacts to whatever Metarl has done, and Kei and friends can sense the effects without the need for fancy instruments too. Something big is about to go down, and as if in anticipation, a certain group of people have come to pay a visit...

#### CHAPTER 53B. The Final Victor

Schneizer's duplicitous ass will going to live to see another day, and the credit goes to Nanaly and Euphy. They've got the idea that Schneizer will make a good devil's advocate for debates with the Super-United States, and one can only hope that this might be the first step in healing the rift between the two sides. The fact that Euphy is still alive at all might help heal the rift between Suzaku and Zero, though signs point to that being a long process. The good news is that Euphy herself has forgiven Zero for the whole mess, and the fact that the two of them took out that F.L.E.I.J.A. is a pretty good sign. They certainly won't have to do it alone.

Watching the merriment from the sidelines is Noin, who's gotten info from Cinq Kingdom about the huge battleship the team will be facing. It's called the "Libra", and the G-boys aren't thrilled to hear that their mentors are the ones that built it. They've given Treize the perfect new vantage point from



which to look down upon the world's peoples, and the latest intelligence reports note that he's got Rilina with him. She's presumably gone to find out what Treize and Zechs are really up to, but Hiiro doubts Zechs will heed his sister's words any longer. Rilina presumably knew that and went anyway, and that thought puts The Look(tm) into Hiiro's eyes. Someone's gonna get real dead, real fast at this rate.

Quatro's pondering Treize and Zechs' ploy too, and asks what Zero makes of the Libra. An arrogant gambit Schneizer would be proud of, incompatible with world peace. Duh! ...Or not, maybe: Quatro can only conclude that the Libra is some kind of joke, and not meant for Zechs to fight Zexis. If anything, Zechs is hunting the ills of mankind itself -- something that Zero, who wears a mask before his own sister, can probably understand better than most. Not that Quatro is speaking from experience or anything.

If Rilina is going to exert any influence over her brother, she'll have to go through Dorothy first -- and Dorothy is convinced that Milliard, like her, is interested mostly in peace through war just now. It's just too far-fetched to Rilina that her brother would truly desire a peace built on depriving the people of their freedom, and Dorothy thinks of that as Rilina's limit... a limit Milliard doesn't share. Dorothy leaves Rilina alone, promising to prove that peace will follow this fighting, and unfortunately all Rilina can do is emo about it.

But then a new challenger appears: it's Milliard himself! Rilina doesn't give him the warmest of greetings, shaming him for claiming the Peacecraft name while acting like a tyrant. Milliard isn't impressed, citing how the peace between Earth and space just now is unprecedented. Maybe things are quiet, but they're not peaceful at all -- according to Rilina Peacecraft, who apparently is the self-evident authority on such things. Milliard likes how strong his sister has become, but says that that strength isn't what the world needs now. Hopes she, of the two of them, can keep her innocence. He, as he embraces her goodbye, has clearly already lost his.

The enemy come into view, and at first the team are glad that they're only facing Mobile Dolls: easier to fire when there's no risk of killing someone. Rolan takes a different view however, warning against the slippery slope of getting used to the thought of violence without consequences. The pain and rage of fighting other people is actually productive, in a certain sense. And given how nobody would voluntarily choose to experience suffering, this fight must be ended pronto.

It finally dawns on Zero that Treize and Zechs aren't trying to win the most probable victory like Schneizer would, but have something else in mind. The more powerful Newtypes can sense his realization, and like Zero have no intent of letting them get away with it. Hiiro presumably concurs, but his top priority is rescuing Rilina, held somewhere aboard the Barge. He'll have Zexis at his back, and boatloads of Milliard's troops at his front... and Mr. Bushido waiting in the wings (wasn't it nice of White Fang to take him in?). Crow thinks he knows why the Arcsabers haven't joined the White Fang cause: makes sense for Yuusar to let the humans duke this one out themselves.

As the battle unfolds, Zexis realize that the whole thing is being televised live to the whole world: either the work of Veda or someone with comparable multicasting gadgetry. Making a spectacle out of humans killing humans would fit the holier-than-thou Innovator M.O., but Zero is savvy enough by this point to realize that someone else must be responsible. Not that Ribbons has any interest in stopping the broadcast, believing no doubt that Zexis is going to go down in flames. He's about to be learned, thinks Amuro, that there's much more to humans than that...

Hell, the Innovators even had the gall to send the Libra a message, wishing both sides good luck in battle. Milliard and crew will need it more than most, seeing as how they've deliberately fed themselves into the Zexis meat grinder. The Libra is pummeled in short order even as Hiiro races inside the Barge, and Treize gives the order to for a fighting-abandon ship. Shit is about to get even more really real than the last time reality set in, and if that doesn't compute for you, try this:

Hatred, rage, sorrow and love are about to have a quadruple date with destiny. That's what Bushido thinks anyway, and dudes in Cato masks are always good for entertainment. Hiiro's the one busy actually doing it though, killing his way through all the guards to reach Rilina's room. He tells her he wanted to see her face once more before the final battle, and she nearly breaks down in tears. Why Milliard and Treize are bent on spilling this much blood for "peace" is beyond her, but Hiiro points out that they're even willing to have their own blood spilt in the process. For that reason, he has no plans to halt the battle -- and Rilina had better watch the fight with her own eyes if she isn't convinced.

He's going to defeat Treize and Milliard, and if Rilina lives long enough, she'll get to see that peace she so desperately wants. That's the only thing Hiiro can do for her and all peace-niks like her. He swore to protect her, and this is the only way he knows how. Rilina fears that Hiiro means to lay down his own life in the process, but he asks her to believe in him. Lady Une then shows up, asking Hiiro to leave Rilina in her care as Treize instructed. Hiiro accedes, telling Rilina that life is in fact pretty cheap these days... especially his.

At least Hiiro can now concentrate on fighting, and that's important since Libra's main reactor is still operational. That means Carns can crash the damn thing into the Earth, causing massive devastation and essentially wiping both Federation and the Super-United States off the map. This will make the Colonies the new center of humanity, something Carns views as necessary if mankind is to have a future at all. Dr. J agrees that mankind needs some kind of shock to restore its respect for life and fear of war, which is what Zero had suspected: they only wiped out Damocles to demonstrate their even more terrifying terror-weapon.

Treize and friends are, in fact, trying to teach mankind a lesson in the futile cycle of power kowtowing to greater power. Carns, insofar as he was trying to be that greater power, is going to be very disappointed by the fact that the scientists want the Libra to fail (including how they hacked the main gun to be unable to fire repeatedly). Dr. J credits the "Zero" Gundams for showing him this vision of the future -- and by that he means both the Wing Zero and the Double-O. Cripes, was the Wing Zero really part of Ioria's plans all along? Well, the scientists no longer care much, hoping to leave the world to a more decent group of people than they style themselves to be.

Dr. J's final admonition to Hiiro is to not self-destruct like J's about to any more. He then detonates the Libra's main reactor, sending everyone left aboard to wherever Ioria is now. Wufei is livid at Treize for all the lives lost in pursuit of this "lesson" of his, and that's just as Treize and co. like it. Whoever wins this fight will have brought about world peace, and what grieves people like Camille the most is that brainboxes like Treize ought to have come up with a better way to get peace than to kill half the frigging neighborhood in the process of acquiring it. Sorry to disappoint, Milliard is not. What is is, is eager to get this over with. And by this point, so am I.

Mr. Bushido gets a warrior's end of sorts, if you ignore the fact that he's not actually dead. Farewell to Gundams at least, as the core truth of the Way of the Warrior finally manifests: one must lose one's life, to gain it. Setsuna for one hopes that Graham will live on, and fight on, as a better person.

It's much easier for Milliard to become an hero, knowing that THE Hiiro will look after his sister. As on the other path, Treize has one final speech about how God will not smile upon those who wage war with weapons whose human hearts have been removed. Milliard meanwhile offers up a defense of his war, ostensibly to protect the weak from the strong. Hiiro once hated the weak, for their inability to say what they feel and their constant cowering from an attack that might never even come. Milliard tries protesting that it's the strong that make the weak that way, but Hiiro has finally learned the Truth: there are no strong people in the world.

Surely Milliard can see the future, thanks to the Epyon if nothing else. It's not about his blood-stained past, it's about what he can do going forward. He and Hiiro exchange one final blow, and Hiiro comes out on top. He also deliberately avoids striking Milliard in the cockpit, lest Rilina start bawling. Milliard accuses Hiiro of being too pure, and too kind... the very same reasons, ironically, that Hiiro is fit to live while he is not. If it's folks like Zexis who will create the future, it's the least Milliard can do to watch them do it, with a warrior's eyes! Let the people of the world turn all the pages he drew -- let them curse his name, but remember the truth.

With the unseating of the Federation's top two military figures, the war is ovah! Time for the Federation to return to being a democracy, what with the king dead and all. All the people must join their voices in figuring out where to go from here, and putting down all the guns would make a pretty decent start. Let everyone know that now, the 21st Pan-Dimensional Century, is the end of war. Hopefully everyone's learned enough from watching this battle that they'll do the right thing. And in case there are some lamers who don't get the message, people like Zexis will be around to set them straight. The new target is the "history of war", and if there's anyone willing to cast Magic Missile at the darkness, of course it's Hiiro.

Shooting down the darkness (and with it, the Barge) doesn't end all war on the spot, but it's kind of a nice start. It next falls to Rilina to forgive Lady Une, and more importantly to forgive Dorothy and convince her that maybe, just maybe, mankind's seen enough tragedy for one lifetime. When Dorothy finally relents, Rilina has a private moment of silence out of respect for all Zexis has done, before resuming her good work at trying to help mankind's wounds heal. All that remains now is the pact with Yuusar, and God only knows where that will end up...

Back on the Surface, Schneider still can't believe that Treize and Milliard actually went through with their plan -- it's too far-fetched that they could actually stir the spirit of the masses with their ideas of war-forged peace. They probably would have failed if they'd made their appeal with words, but instead they appealed with their own lives. It's unpardonable that they mixed up so many other lives in their quest, but the result is undeniable: even Schneider feels like he's been schooled a bit in what it means to risk life for an ideal. The princesses three seem to buy that he's turned over a new leaf, and enlist his assistance in the renewed (and this time, genuine) peace talks with the Super-United States. It seems that Zero's dreams for the world are about to come true, thanks to all his and Zexis (and Suzaku's!) hard work. The question now becomes, what to do about the Innovators and Insalaam. Schneider has to wonder what Treize and Milliard had planned there...

Speaking of the Innovators, a large posse of them just showed up near the moon, in great shape to menace everybody. Only Zexis is in position to intercept, natch. Meanwhile, the new Getter team sense that something uber-bad is about to happen -- especially given that Shin Dragon is starting to respond to it. Maybe that's why they've gotten some visitors just now...

#### CHAPTER 54A. World of Despair

Lo and behold, Zexis have been sucked into a pocket dimension run by smartass^Wfartass Metarl. Eim narrowly avoided his steely clutches, but something else did not: a FRIGGING IMMENSE Gunmen that Lowgenome says is the real form of the Shadow Moon. Nia seems unhappy that Metarl loused up her plans for world blamimation, but even she has to admit that "world domination" requires, above all, the world in question to go on existing. Metarl tells Nia that the the Earth is not going to bend over for them, not with the pieces of the Ultimate Power coming together, and Nia as much dares him to live through this. She's confident that Simon won't be so lucky, or any of the others on the cusp of Evolution. The rest of the Earth can be readily destroyed once they're taken out.

She's got a pretty big mouth for a mere page-girl, and aims it at Zexis once Metarl vanishes. The Cathedral Razangun will be their DOWNFALL... that is, if Metarl's little toys can be taken out of the narrative first. She tells the inquisitive team that this is literally the World of Despair. Like, their despair, all of it, made manifest as a world. Now, some of the Zexis folks weren't the brightest students in school, and the word "despair" is conspicuously absent from their inner dictionaries, but Mars at least is feeling the love^Whate from that Devil Ring with every second he stays in this place. Guess it behooves the team to bust out fast, huh?

The cannon fodder get foddered upon in no time flat, but the Cathedral Razangun proves to be a lot tougher... seemingly impregnable, in fact. But Simon knows that discouragement is precisely what the enemy wants, showing what Nia calls "visceral" understanding of what Evolution means. Ryouma her a hypocritical bitch for letting the Innovators Evolve unchecked, but Nia corrects him that the Innovators, strictly speaking, haven't "evolved" at all.

Such insatiable, bestial hunger can be dealt with in any number of ways. The problem are the Spiral Lifeforms, which don't venture outward, but upward toward increasingly forbidden realms. Who the hell decides that, huh? The Anti-Spirals, in Nia's view. Ryouma, however, takes a different view altogether, sensing the approach of something special. It's that paragon of evolution, Shin Getter Dragon, AND both Setsuko and Rand. Is this a case of BERE GUUDO TAIMINGU, or yet more deus ex machinations by the writers? Well, the claims is that Traia pulled a Zone Breaker out of her ass and rescued the two Sphere-bearers, whose mecha are suspiciously in tip-top shape, so you be the judge...

Even with all this help, the 5XL Gunmen isn't easy to destroy. Just stopping it is an accomplishment, which Metarl shows up to congratulate the team on before Simon can try to bring Nia to her senses. Metarl is one CONFIDENT dude, claiming that it is the Power of Darkness that keeps him immortal and undying. But really though, it's about time that he take off that frigging mask, to reveal his true self: Zhul! It is he, along with Muge, that are behind the Darkness bullshit...

...and guess who shows up! Supposedly this World of Despair is also the

Realm of the Dead, where the fact that they got their asses nuked last game counts for nada. And in fact, it is the very spirits of the dead gathering in this place that gives Zhul power. So he sics them on the party, draining their vitality so they can watch as he and Muge take over the Earth. It among all planets seems most suitable for the Inheritors of the Black Knowledge to inhabit, though nobody's figured out until now just why.

Apparently the Sphere-bearers haven't awakened their powers enough to just find out on their own, so the two evil masterminds gloat and fill everybody in. Their true objective is to control the Origin Rho, the power governing all phenomena. No mere energy source as the puny humans seem to think, Origin Rho is not generated by the Spheres or the D-Extractor system: those are merely tools for expressing it. In truth, Origin Rho is an animistic power imbuing all things, and it shines most brightly in the radiance of stars, literally the power of death and rebirth. Yea, even black holes, even the Big Bang itself, are manifestations of the Origin Rho's might.

Admittedly it sounds like a tall order for mere humans to somehow wield the power that brought Something from Nothingness, and could return it again. The puzzling part is, if it's the stars that have so much Origin Rho in them, what's the point of pursuing the Earth? Mum's the word on that, since Zexis are about to get their asses killed on the spot.

Or not: the latest in the string of conveniently-timed arrivals is none other than Marg. Call this a silver lining of the fact that this is the Realm of the Dead: he's dead, so he's able to show up and give the team a much-needed morale boost. What's more, among the dead here are many that died because of Zhul and Muge, so Marg has an easy time convincing them to rebel and rejuvenate poor Mars. The final push comes from Marg himself, who exhorts Mars so much that he's finally able to break free of the Devil Ring. Of course, this pisses off the bad guys, and of course, they deposit more foes to fight...

Muge's death is fairly anti-climactic, and Dancougar team don't sound too worried about the possibility that he might just revive again somewhere or somethen else (after all, he is the incarnation of Evil(tm) and whatnot). Zhul is far more surprised that Muge is incapable of resurrecting in the land of the dead of all places. He himself is capable of about one revival, but with the power of Love(tm), Mars is able to overcome the ensuing counterattack and smite Zhul once and for all [at least until the next game or whenever...]

All this fragdown has re-re-reconfirmed for Nia what she knew all along: the humans and all their rump-shaking action are Public Enemy Number One. Seeing the Cathedral start up again, Lowgenome has an interesting idea: why not try to hack into its computer core? Viral finally figures out how Roshu has sort-of-resurrected his boss, but Lowgenome tells Viral not to sweat it -- becoming an AI like this is kind of fun. He directs Simon to directly interface his Spiral Power [is that what they're calling it these days??] with the Cathedral's core, knowing that what awaits within is...

...the Anti-Gurren Lagann, piloted by a genuine Anti-Spiral. Is Simon fazed? Duh, of course not. Especially since the Anti-Lagann is a total pushover. It's got the typical "oh, just TRY to be awesome" and "until we meet again" bullshit going, and as it detonates Nia ejects. Simon claims at this point to be willing to kill anyone who threatens mankind, even Nia, but he hesitates at the last second. Nia says that that hesitation is the fatal weakness that mankind tries to pass off as "love". But what if she's the one hesitating? Witness the fact that she's still wearing the ring Simon gave her!

Oh snap! Simon's just caught on to what the Anti-Spirals are up to here: making him kill her would be the most despair-filled trap of all. Not only did she stop him from falling into that, the fact that she's appeared in person must mean that the real her is crying for salvation between the expressionless mask! She can't contradict him, and he manages to force his way past her to royally screw the enemy nucleus. Yeah, spiral-related puns are all the rage these days.

Cathedral vanquished, the team find themselves back in realspace. Lowgenome's had a hard day hacking its systems, and his controllers give him some well-deserved time off. Nia is finally back to her old self, safely aboard the Gurren Lagann thanks to Simon's heroics. Roshii now knows beyond any reasonable doubt that he'll always be deficient in the manhood department compared to the Gurren Gang leader.

You'd think it would be time for a triumphant return to Earth... "but you'd be wrong". Turns out the Frontier Fleet has gone off without permission to kill the Vajra queen, and without a qualified singer, it's anyone's guess how they intend to pull it off...

Traia had a little help from Carlos improving the Zone Breaker, which works via the usual magical Dimensional Energy tech. It took all her lab's resources, but it was worth it to save the two Sphere-bearers (and tag-along Mail). Crow gets busy filling them in on recent developments in the Sphere sphere, and Rand gives him a physical letter (yes, analog mail, who knew!) from Traia that turns out to be a bill for the Zone Breaker... a BIG one. Why is it that the harder Crow works to erase his debts, the more he seems to accumulate?

As the rag-tag fleet goes off to see what the hell Mishima intends to do to the Vajra, Simon takes a quick tour of the Ark Gurren. Pretty snazzy stuff, but not really cut out to be the new Zexis flagship (Getter Dragon can serve that role maybe). The Ark Gurren is going to abort its colony mission and return its residents to Kamina City, but it seems that Simon should be able to instantaneously summon it to his side for combination purposes... even out at the Neo-Planets, where the Vajra nest is supposed to be. Even as Simon thanks Roshii for doing such a good job as Kamina City's ruler, Roshii describes himself as a rotten human and submits himself to judgement for all the lives he was about to sacrifice.

Simon simply punches him in the face, saying that that's how everyone got "corrected" where he was from. Toerr is human. To get socked in the kisser is how humans should repent them of their mistakes -- it makes good motivation for trying to make amends. And amends, he believes, are always available. With Roshii's confidence restored, Simon can go off to battle with a clear conscience. Oh, and one little tidbit from Lowgenome that Lee Long wants Simon to hear. It has to do with the Vajra, and it's up to him and to Ranka what they do with the info...

#### CHAPTER 54B. The Final Battle, Until Endless Evolution

The Invader herd near the moon is nothing if not "vast", and getting vaster by the moment. To the extent that their motives can be understood by humankind, it seems like they're focused on massing their strength and not actually attacking (yet) -- in Mishima's view they're waiting for the arrival of their ruler. When that ruler appears, the world is probably toast, and Mishima wants the fleet to get back to its original mission before that happens. No time to think about "evacuating" the Earth or anything of the sort, especially now that the Fold System is back online. The only loose end is taking out the

Vajra queen, and Mishima's got a plan for that. Yessss, soon "his turn" will begin in this whole mess.

Zexis is very well aware of the Invader menace too, and mean to go confront it. The plan is not to kill as many as possible before dying however, a lesson the old hands want the youngsters to learn very well. Crow isn't so bullish on the team's chances, but intends to do what he can to give the world enough of a future that he'll have some time for repentance. Margret meanwhile is getting nervous about Insalaum's next move, seeing as how the Federation is about to be reborn. Crow tells her that one can only hope that Insalaum decides they can be friends with the new Federation, and that everything ends peacefully. Esther as usual doesn't like watching Crow and Margret getting all lovey-dovey right before a big battle, but I say if life's short, try to enjoy it!

Yup, lots of Invaders. We call this a "target-rich environment". It gets richer when their butt-buddies [no wait, that's way too undignified. "Ass-allies"? Posterior Comrades? can space-monsters even do that?] the Vajra show up, with a different paint job and a new attitude that has Basara on edge. No word on what their deal is, other than that they're out for Zexis blood.

As the fight proceeds, Eureka starts to sense some sort of hatred from the Vajra. Before everyone says "no duh!" it turns out to be the sort of hatred that comes from the Vajra being controlled... by none other than Nia! The Anti-Spirals have apparently pressed the Vajra into service for Phase 1 of their anti-mankind plan, Phase 2 being so apocalyptically destructive that even Simon isn't worthy to get a straight description from Nia.

This kind of sounds ominous -- so ominous in fact that Holland has gotten his ailing ass back into the cockpit to help out. With him are Anya and Gino, who astutely point out that there's no Britannia or Black Knights anymore: only one world and one vision. Hell, even the S.M.S. (or at least Luka and Ozuma) are all in on stopping the Invasion, as are the pilots of Shin Getter Dragon and the missing Sphere-bearers. See the other side for how Traia and her ZONE Breaker got their asses out of jail.

ALSO showing up are some extra jumbo-size Invaders, proving that the ones the team's skirmished with so far are just peon grade in the grand scheme of things. The good news is that at least the team can now confront the real menace directly instead of just worrying about it in the abstract. If you can call that "good".

Zexis is starting to get too good at this, so just to keep things interesting the Invaders finally send in their boss, a hideous fusion of Corwen and Stinger who are eternally merged in grotesque mutual buttsecks or something. It's icky times two, or probably to the \*power\* of two as Youko (the 1337 m4th t3ch0r) puts it. Of course something that big and that gnarsty has to talk the team to death before actually firing the death rays, so what commences next is a history lesson.

Once upon a time there was this thing called the Oort cloud, and in it numerous solar systems with planets and shit. And no life AT ALL. It took those funky Getter Rays, source of all life and driver of all evolution, to cause liquid water to condense on the Earth's surface and start the cycle of life, leading all the way up to the greedy humans. At the same time, the Getter Rays have shown the Invaders that the two species are actually one, and of the lineage that sowed life into the Ort Cloud in the first place.

Hold the phone. Does that mean that continued bombardment by Getter Rays is going to turn mankind into big (or tiny) ugly mo-fo's like these guys? Not If Kei has anything to say about it: she's convinced that mankind is in

charge of its own evolutionary destiny. As the other pilots pile on, the theory is advanced that the Invaders are only ravaging, destroying fucktards because their hearts are that way. Their counterargument is this: there's a whole shipment of Despair headed their way, and the Invader body type is perfect for surviving that Despair.

In short, it's a feature, not a bug. And since the humans need a further course in just how pathetically insignificant they are, the Invaders gesture toward the Shadow Moon, which is... moving! This is the Anti-Spiral's dreaded Phase 2: crashing the whole frigging moon (battle-station! Happy Fun Ball! whatever...) into the Earth. Of course it must be stopped, and that means blowing this popsickle stand within five turns in order to have any chance to intercept. Damned if the Invaders get to live on the Earth after its indigenous residents are wiped out!

StingWen (CorGer?) has a fuckload of hitpoints, but when it comes right down to it there's one of it and N murderous members of Zexis. What drives such nobly-intentioned bloodletting? In Gai's case, it's an outpouring of memories: memories strong enough to actually fuel evolution itself. And Gai's not the only one: many on this team have things in their hearts that drive them forward. The head Invader scoffs at this, vowing to kill them all in a flood of Getter Rays and moving to summon even more Invaders from elsewhere in the universe. External bombardment won't be enough to stop it, so someone's got to go inside and make something go boom. Gai is going to take the assignment, but Ryouma insists that that final blow is his team's role.

As Ryouma pushes the Getter Reactor into explosion mode, the scenery suddenly changes to a strangely familiar scene. It's a vision of themselves, seeing themselves, recalling the reason they were chosen as Getter warriors in the first place. The time has not yet come for their epic battle in the abyss of time...

Was it memory? Tragedy? Whatever it was, it blows StingWen away entirely, its last words that the Invaders' species is eternal! Thus end (for now) the starting Demons of Destruction you might remember hearing prophesied about way back when. Getter Robo is only gone for a short while before rematerializing, still with a mission to fulfill in "this world". Happy ending, and stuff.

And BTW, there's a moon to stop!

Down in Kamina City, people are being hustled aboard the Ark Gurren even as more spill into the ineffectual shelter below ground, much like on the other path. The Shadow Moon is going to really fuck things up if not stopped...

## CHAPTER 55. "Y-o-u-r S-o-u-n-d"

Grace and Brela are on the verge of deciphering how the Vajra communicate with each other, thanks to watching how Muge manipulated them in the last battle and a bit of borrowed processor time on Veda. Something very peculiar seems to be afoot with Ranka, and Grace tells (the absent) Ranshe and Doctor Mao that their daughter and granddaughter are about to start tearing each other to shreds. And when they do, it'll prove that Grace has been right all along: mankind can and will surpass the Protoculture! And as for Brela, well, he's basically a mindless puppet now, disabled when Grace used her override code on him... which she wouldn't have done if not for him stealing Ranka and trying to head to the Vajra nest on his own. Oh well, at least that let Grace steal Ranka in turn. As word comes in that the Vajran queen is folding her way, it sounds like everything is in readiness.



Ranka's absence is forcing mankind to consider drastic measures, including recruiting Sheryl to fill Ranka's shoes for disturbing the Vajran order. The same V-type Contamination that's killing her has also imbued her voice with weak Fold Waves that Mishima intends to amplify and weaponize. It's anybody's guess how much of that Sheryl can take, but conveniently (if you can call it that) the waves get stronger the closer the illness brings her to death. Nobody has yet figured out why Ranka's songs generate Fold Waves without her having V-type Contamination, or why both ladies' songs produce totally different Fold Waves from Basara. What they have found out though is that the Vajra differ from humans in at least one fundamental way.

Humans reason with their brains, and it's to be hoped for that any other life form with a sort of brain could, to a greater or lesser extent, be reasoned with. The Vajra don't actually have brains; instead, their Fold organs also serve as nodes in an information-exchange network that spans an entire herd. The individual Vajra literally have no "heart" to be moved by Basara's or anyone else's songs, but each Vajra herd is in essence a collective intellect.

So uh, how did Ranka's songs affect them if person-to-person communication is impossible? Well, Mishima believes that Ranka has essentially betrayed mankind and sided with the Vajra. Normally V-type Contamination affects the brain, but there is the theoretical possibility that a human could have the infectious cells end up in the rest of their body instead. That would involve a pregnant mother being infected and passing the trait onto her fetus. And guess what: the 117th Expeditionary Fleet that Ranka came from probably had quite a number of cases of V-type breaking out. Mishima's theory is that the Vajra themselves see Ranka as a comrade, and want to capture her as a fulcrum to aid in the takeover of mankind.

What's more, it seems the huge Vajra the team fought during the Breaking wasn't really the Vajra queen after all... and the real one has been busy feeding back all the combat data she observed into making even nastier Vajra for her counterattack. If left unchecked, odds are pretty good that human weaponry will simply stop working... making this operation the last, best chance for survival.

Alto as usual gets pissed off at the thought of one of his girlfriends being treated like an enemy spy, and demands to know what Ozuma makes of all of this. Ozuma isn't sure, but he can tell Alto that, as a man, Ozuma's done the best he can to keep this women in his life safe. If Ranka has sided with the Vajra, it's of her own volition. Ozuma's been acting on his own volition too, and wonders if Alto is man enough to do likewise. Alto storms off, leaving Jeffrey to discuss in more level tones the contents of Ozuma's special report: that Mishima is endangering the fleet for his own personal glory in undertaking this anti-Vajra operation. Such naive action is probably the result of letting Grace pull his strings -- she of the Vajra research back aboard the 117th fleet and the suspicious connections to all the recent Vajra attacks. It seems to be she, not Mishima, that Liumei referred to as an Innovator collaborator. Zexis is going to have to hurry if they're to avert some kind of disaster for the Frontier fleet.

Basara's take-home from all of this is: who cares if the Vajra have brains or not, so long as they have hearts for his music to move. This is a mostly retarded notion that might have a kernel of truth: information can be exchanged in ways inscrutable to outside observers. None of this has done anything to improve Alto's mood -- he's seething over Ozuma apparently telling him that real men ignore orders and do whatever the hell they want. Takeru tries to cheer him up, now that the effects of the Devil Ring have been

vanquished by the power of LOVE(tm). Maybe that's what Alto really needs, is to figure out once and for all the answer to his love triangle. Fair warning: none of the rest of the team sound receptive to the polyamory option, except maybe Kishimo. Oh JUST KIDDING, hahaha \*snork\*

Alto likes getting trolled about as much as the next guy with nukes mounted to their fighter aircraft, but he has to admit that he's been dodging that among many issues of late. But no longer. If Ranka's songs will truly destroy this world, a world with so many people trying so hard to survive, then he'll kill her himself. Crow and Lockon show up at this point and tell him to stop stressing himself out so much. Trying to force the issue is a great way to lose sight of your real goals. Conversely, Crow was once told that he seems to need something hanging over his head to focus himself on who he really is. Maybe Alto is too much of an actor, playing the role he thinks those around him want? Whatever the case, Alto is sure to regret whatever he's about to do if he does it for the wrong reasons.

The question is, just what is it does Alto really want?

Elsewhere, the Battle Frontier has set up a special stage for Sheryl to perform on. Mishima tells Sheryl he's expecting great things from her on behalf of mankind, but she's in no mood to hear his honeyed bullshit and asks him politely but firmly to GTFO. Marina, however, Sheryl asks to stay a bit longer -- apologizing for dragging the pacifistic woman all over. Marina smiles and says it's been quite educational, especially regarding the actual meaning of what it is to "fight". And she also knows that Sheryl won't be singing in order to "fight" the Vajra. Sheryl has finally realized just how much she loved singing and having people listen, and she's going to be leaving the world the same way she entered it: with nothing but herself. As Marina too walks off, Sheryl thinks to herself that she still has some regrets left, but there's nothing else she knows to do.

So what she can do, she'll do to death. Literally, maybe. Mishima meanwhile gets on the mic and tells all the fleet members that it's time to seize their dreams of new frontiers away from those evil, murderous Vajra that dog their every footstep. This is to be Holy War, and the Galactic Fairy's songs will lead them to Vwikutorii!!! Actually, the data Grace left behind says that the chances of victory are a shade over 80%, and that's before using the helpful gadgetry the Innovators loaned him. President Howard is more than a little worried that there wasn't enough time to prepare the whole fleet for this kind of battle, but Mishima points out that it's probably safer to not have any stragglers. Besides, if Mishima doesn't hurry, his links to Grace will become obvious to everyone.

Sheryl's song certainly summons some Vajra, and the first wave fall easily to the Frontier's gunnery. Mishima thinks things are even better when Zexis shows up to help, but boy is he about to be surprised. Alto can hear (or feel) Sheryl's singing through her earring, and Sheryl for her part desperately wants Alto to come and hear this, her final concert. Only he can give her the courage to truly finish her songs. Alto in turn now knows that no one can or should fly alone, and he's going to do everything he can to save the people who taught him the lesson.

Grace then unleashes her secret weapon, using the mind-controlled Ranka to power up the Vajra. She tells Ranka that the humans are the real enemy. Surely, Brela tells her, her mother would want her to do so. The results are dramatic: all Mishima's proud firepower is obliterated in an instant. Grace's true plan is now clear: SHE wants to be the queen of the Vajra!

Alto meanwhile knows that the figure shown singing cannot be the real Ranka --

who never ever would have used her songs to actually make war worse. He yells for his fellow pilots to attack the illusion, and Jeffrey gives the order only to have Mishima protest that he's the one in charge here. Jeffrey, finally fed up with his bullshit, drops his level exterior and yells at him to shut the fuck up and take the fleet out of danger RIGHT THE FUCK NOW. Basara (and then Ozuma) kick into gear, and the fight is on.

Shooting the ginormous Ranka in the forehead enough will result in something very unexpected showing up: the Macross Galaxy! What the hell is it doing in this universe? Grace's doing? It's not immediately clear, but what is clear is that the Galaxy's got a swarm of Ghost X-9's aboard, and despite stern regulations sorties a bunch of them in an attempt to ruin Zexis' day. Brela also sorties, telling an irate Alto that it's his and Ranka's destiny to fight by the Vajra's side. Then again, he sounds like a frigging robot and probably is pretty close to one thanks to the Galaxy's fleet's famed cybernetic technology.

Alto calls out to Sheryl to lend him her strength while he goes to rescue Ranka: he wants her to sing a song that will open Ranka's eyes. Alto, for the record, is sick and tired of hearing Brela tell him he's unworthy of Ranka. Ranka, in essence, is Alto's wings... and when Brela gets his ass rebuffed, the path is clear to go save those Wings from the forces of evil.

It seems like Alto and Sheryl's combined voices may be getting through to Ranka, but something else is afoot: Grace has gotten busy "doing protocol" with the Vajra queen and is now having SERIOUS delusions of grandeur. This, she claims rapturously, is the almighty power that even the Protoculture feared... and no need for no steenking Little Queen anymore neither. In simple terms, she's cybernetically implanted a piece of Fold Quartz into her own body, letting her use the Vajra's info network to gather information from the entire multiverse in realtime. And once mankind has more of the Fold Quartz implanted in them, everyone's minds can be harmonized and all wars ended.

Yeah yeah, "You will be assimilated" etc. etc. Those who agree will be subordinated to this egomaniac... and those who refuse will simply be killed by the Vajra. Ranka figured in because she was the only human who could directly communicate with the Vajra, and lest there be any doubting Thomases among Zexis, Grace reminds them that all their greatest foes thusfar were bent on unifying the collective will of mankind. Now she'll be the one to seal the deal!

As though to welcome the new Queen, a bunch of differently-colored Vajra show up, along with a bevy of tame Invaders (normally the Vajra's mortal enemies, but hell good help is hard to find these days). Sheryl's Fold Wave amplifiers seem to be on the frizz, so it's time for Basara to swing into action. Or try to, anyway: Grace already has the power of numerous people united in her being.

Mega-Grace is ugly as hell and twice as durable, but luckily Basara is too stupid to get depressed. As he sings his fool head off, Alto reemerges triumphant with Ranka in tow... right into the line of fire again. Before Grace can blow them out of the sky, Brela reemerges, having come to his senses when Alto blasted his ass. Amuro yells to Setsuna to crank up the Trans-Am system to full power, the better to show Grace what unified human will really looks like.

What it looks like is... Evangelion, sort of. Sheryl is about as emo as anyone else would be when they've just literally burned their life out, so Ranka has to literally slap her out of it. Alto reminds the ladies that they're both the reason he can fly, and even Brela exhorts Ranka to sing more and reawaken all the long-lost human parts of his combat cyborg body.

As Zexis' members all draw close to each other (in accordance with Ioria's plans, one supposes), Grace furiously orders the Vajra to take them all out. Ranka meanwhile tells them to stop, and Simon gives her the key: her "Aimo" song: according to Lowgenome, that very song is a Vajran love song that Vajra herds sing when they encounter one another. Now that sure 'nuff is the weirdest thing I've heard all month, but it works like a charm.

The Vajra start fending off the Invaders instead, giving Alto time to drop the singers off at the Frontier and pick up an Armor Pack at long last. With the firepower sorted, it's time to get rid of Grace once and for all. Grace just can't comprehend why the Zexis bumpkins don't recognize the next phase of human evolution when they see it -- maybe because it involves sacrificing an unending stream of Vajra to maintain the lifestyle?

One of said Vajra isn't a fan: Ai-kun provides terminal guidance for Alto to strike the fatal blow. Before Alto does though, Basara suggests that Grace be given one last dose of the music she helped produce.

With Grace gone, the Vajran queen and her troops Fold away. Brela explains that the Vajra have realized a) they think different from mankind, and b) humans too can do Fold-based communication, which c) made it clear that they aren't the Vajra's inevitable enemies. All thanks to Ranka's singing, of course. How he knows all this is, of course, totally not explained.

The remaining loose end is Mishima, for whom the jig is, unquestionably, up. Fudou (remember him?) shows up just long enough to cause a little delay, letting Cathy and Ozuma catch up to him. They've got proof galore about the coup d'etat he was planning, as well as his Fold Quartz dealings with the Imperium. Their plan is to not reveal everything right away, instead holding him in perpetual blackmail in the hopes that he does right by the fleet as it resumes its journey. Cathy does however permit herself the satisfaction of slapping her (former) fiancée. Apparently Fudou's been helping ever since the S.M.S. squad split up, glad to pitch in on the amazing prospect of coexistence between human and Vajra.

Sheryl? Completely rejuvenated. Brela? Still an asshole. Shoji? Still hopeful he can get back together with Louise. That will require getting rid of those Innovators, who've been lying low all this time... but no longer! Ribbons decloaks (figuratively) to give Zexis a little reward for solving the Grace problem: the uncloaking (literally) of his flag ship...

#### CHAPTER 55B. The God of Darkness, Reborn

The Innovators are watching the mess on Earth with a mixture of false sympathy and "I told you so"-ism. The main questions are, how will Zexis stop an entire moon from falling, and, what's gotten into Setsuna these days? Revive is convinced that Setsuna has begun Renewal, both from how he fights and from the fact that his cells haven't all simultaneously called it quits. Setsuna may be a sign of things to come, but all that will be moot if the Earth is destroyed. That would force the Innovators to take over the Colonists, or maybe hitch a ride aboard the Frontier fleet for parts unknown (which Ribbons thinks Ioria would have approved of).

Louise and Billy get sent to keep an eye on things, "just in case". Meanwhile, all the professors' research records have been totally wiped out, including all data on the Zero System. That's okay with Ribbons, who's attention is focused solely on his own plans. Hell even if the moon does reach the Earth, it'll mean nothing more than a good chance for mankind to do what Amuro called

"freeing their souls from gravity". As on the other path, Ribbons confronts Rijeene on his treachery, and as on the other path, Rijeene just up and shoots him. The plan now is to reawaken Elgan and force him to spill the beans on the Black Knowledge.

The Shadow Moon's approach to the Earth unfolds basically as on the other path, with those still on the surface pinning their hopes on Zexis. Rilina's got a message for the world's huddled masses, and it begins on an ominous note. Not only is mankind facing annihilation, but she has no power and no words of prayer to contribute. What everyone can do is think good thoughts about the joint force of their best and brightest who are up in space busting ass. Let everyone accept their fears, and share their hopes with those around them, and try not to like, riot or anything. Keep it classy, y'all hear?

Not everybody heard, so Gaiou has to choke a bitch or two to keep the peace, or at least threaten to do so. Seeing Rilina fight for order without firing a shot is inspirational, which means that he doesn't just pulverize the townsfolk stupid enough to be out on the streets giving him lip (or in the case of one little boy, a compliment). Before long, Marilyn shows up. Though she longs to kick his ass for messing with the ZONE, she's been sent to actually pick him up...

Roshiu's forces are no more effective on this route than on the other, but as on the other route, Zexis shows up to save the day.

Where things get different is when Asakim shows up, greeting his fellow Sphere-bearers. They're in no mood to play "Name That Constellation" with him in the middle of battle, figuring he doesn't give a shit about the Anti-Spirals anyway, but he says that ain't so. See, Eim opened the Abyss specifically to set the Anti-Spirals in motion, not having the faintest idea what would happen to he himself in the process.

So what exactly does Asakim know about all this? That his hope lies amidst a future of despair, and peril to the Fundament itself -- for beyond them lies the power to break the chains of Karma! ...Which is all very well and good, but he gets rebuffed in all of three actions and smirks his way off again without mentioning anything more of interest (except that he seems to be bromantic with Gaiou these days). WTF?

The enemy boss Mugan start out split in two. When divide-and-conquer results in only their rectums getting conquered, they Combine and try again. Same result, so attempt number three involves a pesky assault on the Dai Gurren. Now it's Simon's turn for combination (after reminding Roshiu not to be a pussy). This works like a charm, and makes everyone momentarily very happy inside.

Happiness goes "WTF?" again when the Shadow Moon transforms into its real form, a fucking ginormous Gunmen. Intimidating? Yes, but also *\*really\** hard to miss. A few hits later and the Gunmen is disabled but still plunging to Earth. Something stirs in Lowgenome's memory at this point, and Simon is hastily dispatched deep within the Gunmen to seal the deal. But before he can move, Metarl shows up to gloat and to please save Mars's Earth. He does this by teleporting ALL the combatants to the World of Death, which would sound ominous if not for the fact that there's an Intermission immediately thereafter...

## CHAPTER 56. Beyond

Did you really expect Ribbons to die easily? You know, for a moment there,

you kind of did. Ribbons is very much alive AND mentally linked to Veda, something even Rijeene didn't manage. While Rijeene gets kudos for waking up Elgan, he also gets the gift of lead from Ali for being a treacherous bastard. Apparently shooting treacherous bastards with a handgun doesn't burn many calories, so Ribbons sends him outside to deal with Zexis.

That leaves him alone with Elgan. While Ribbons may not have accessed the full Black Knowledge, the tidbits he did get are more than sufficient for him to rule the world. He plans to make Elgan spill the beans on the rest, but only after he makes Elgan watch his chosen Zexis forces get crushed. Now, in case you suspect Ribbons might actually be bright enough to pull this off, consider what he's named his interstellar space battleship: the "Celestial Being". Yup, that is originality for you.

Then again, maybe those die-hard Colonial scientists are partially to blame. They failed to escape during Rijeene's little rebellion, so they too get to watch the battle unfold. What we have therefore is the secret ruler of the world, the even more secret architect of the world's government, and the not-quite-as-secret-but-still-kind-of-covert traitors against that government. All of them are joined by a single thread: that Ioria guy we keep hearing about. Has the time finally come for his ultimate plan to come to fruition?

Zexis is understandably surprised to see a giant jellyfish-esque thingie materialize up ahead. After all, the Innovators have been invisible, out of sight -- they've designed a secret place to play their games. That place is now out in plain sight, and Ribbons is all "I've got the GN Drive, and Veda, and this here ship, plus I'm an Innovator -- I am \*GAWD\* Almytee!!" Zexis meanwhile are furiously licking their wounds [what wounds???] after the previous battle, and trying to dodge the Celestial Being's long-range death ray... which for a change is NOT for purely peaceful purposes.

The death ray is dangerous enough that Zexis can't flee, but they can try to attack between shots. That's where Ali, Louise and a lot of really bad life insurance risks come in. Shoji finds calm in formulating the battle as a simple struggle to get Louise back -- a neat metaphor for the "future" Zexis, the singers, and indeed all right-thinking people are trying to defend. Even Lasse is back on the job, miraculously cured of the V-type Contamination the same way Sheryl was. Sumeragi gets the honor of ordering the troops into battle, meaning to settle the Ioria score once and for all.

Ali, in a way, is a casualty of the times: the age of universal war is drawing to an end, and with it the habitual theft of innocence and happiness that is the warmonger's stock-in-trade. The original Lockon might not rest any easier with his arch-enemy's passage, but those still living might.

With the enemy reeling from the Zexis onslaught, an opening presents itself for the Ptolemy-2 to barge into the Celestial Being. There's hordes of Automata to deal with and Veda to localize, but the biggest hazard to Sumeragi is Billy. He blows a hole in the wall and orders Sumeragi to surrender, claiming that domination by the Innovators is the ideal state for inferior mankind. After all, "true" freedom amounts to abnegation of the moral contracts that make "society" possible in the first place, amirite? No, not rly. The "future" that the Zero System showed Billy is meaningless in Sumeragi's view: what matters is atoning for one's mistakes and actually making things better with your own hands... concepts beyond Billy's comprehension.

Andrei is in no position to keep Louise "safe", what with his suck-assfulness and relative lack of hit points. Louise meanwhile is not apt to simply accede to Shoji's efforts on her behalf, so with Setsuna's encouragement Shoji has to smack her upside the head, then talk some sense to her.

Contrary to Sumeragi's little speech above (perhaps), a future gained through combat isn't good enough: it's all about mutual understanding -- something she should have seen from watching Zexis' "aggressive negotiations" with the Vajra. Louise is totally torn between hatred for the CBs and sympathy for her former boyfriend's point of view, and it looks like her personality is going to be ripped asunder when...

...more bad guys show up: "Gaga"s, powered by the same Trans-Am that Setsuna uses (sort of kind of). They lack regular weapons and are basically designed to suicidally ram themselves into the Zexis mecha. Will the CBs be destroyed by their own technology? Will Louise kill Setsuna in a fit of pique? Has the social distortion started by the CBs spread to far!?

Fuck no, Setsuna declares. He fires up his Trans-Am to its fullest extent, broadcasting a warm light that helps Shoji and Louise finally have a meeting of the minds. The same goes for Soma and Andrei, where Soma points out that Andrei might have considered trying to understand his dad before killing said dad for the crime of not understanding him first. DOH. As Andrei starts BAWWWing like a mo-fo, Soma tells Allelujah that she's returning her body to "Mary" as soon as the war is over. Allelujah tells her to save that decision for later -- she is herself, after all.

Even Billy benefits, finally freed by Setsuna's light from the Zero System's nightmare. Still conflicted, he can at least admit at long last that he's loved Sumeragi (aka Kujou) all this time. The threat of bloodshed is averted just in time for the Colonial scientists to run over and divulge the exact location of Veda so Sumeragi can get back to the front lines. They have plans of their own for making right all the things they've helped wrongify, and tell Ian and Billy that the future will be in their hands now. Doctor J's final message to Hiro and friends is to "fulfill their obligations".

Setsuna has vowed to change in order to create the future, and that's not good news for the Innovators. From somewhere or other comes Rijeene's voice, telling Healing and Revive that Setsuna has proven himself truly Evolved: an Innovator among Innovators. Andrei promises to take the now-unconscious Louise somewhere safe, and Shoji is prepared to trust him. Before the other Innovators can cause more trouble, the Epyon and Lancelot show up on Lelouch's orders to punish those who would turn the Federation to their own ends (ironic, one might say).

There seem to be infinitely many enemies to battle, and it's something of a relief when Sumeragi emerges with Veda's location. That means it's Tielia's turn for heroics, and to do so he'll have to face Ribbons himself, with Veda's core hanging in the balance. Ribbons wants to know why Tielia would want to turn on his fellow Innovators, but Tielia finally has an answer for that. He and his fellows aren't Innovators at all, but life forms modified to try to hasten the manifestation of Innovation: in short, the Innoveyed!

Yeah, but what if an Innoveyed were to evolve further? Ribbons figures he's beyond everyone know, and means to shoot anyone (like Tielia) who disagrees. After all, who but he has the right to make Ioria's plans his own? Nobody, it turns out: Elgan has a gun too and isn't shy about shooting at Ribbons -- a person whose very being Ioria's plans reject. That's the whole reason why the Colonial scientists stole the Zero System in the first place!

Elgan then entrusts Tielia with the final vestige of Ioria's plan, the keyword to the "Black Knowledge" (Kuro-no-Eichi): "Chrono H". Just switching Romanization systems doth not a secure password make, but evidently Ribbons wasn't smart enough to figure it out before now. Veda abruptly severs its link with him, and Tielia quickly seizes all control instead. Elgan tells

Ribbons that overconfidence was his undoing just now, and in fury Ribbons starts shooting indiscriminately at the elder(??) statesman... who yells for Tielia not to care about him and to concentrate on his own work. Ribbons then vows to burn EVERYTHING down and start anew.

That will be hard with Tielia deactivating all those pesky defensive drones. For once, Tielia is glad he was born an Innoveyed, as those abilities have allowed him to save everybody's bacon. Thanks to total link with Veda, he now knows the entirety of Ioria's plans. The CBs armed interventions were a gambit to force the world to draw close together, whether or not the CBs themselves survived to see it. Ioria's rationale was that it was too dangerous to allow mankind to head into its future still clutching the sparks of internecine warfare. Ioria foresaw the need for mankind to converse with other species, as merely the first of many trials ahead, and before being able to understand others, mankind first needed to understand each other.

The true meaning of the "Innovators", as per the dictionary definition of the word, was to be the vanguard of that new breed of humanity. The Double-0 was the main vehicle for awakening the natural-born Innovators like Setsuna, along with its sister Zero System. The two mechanisms were supposed to link with Veda to open up infinite possibilities for mankind, but Ioria knew full well that the premature appearance of Innovators could forever blockade mankind from reaching its destiny. The Zero System in particular was seen as a sort of driver's exam for Innovators -- a will unshakable enough to master the Zero System was indispensable for the road ahead.

The consequences of inferior Innovators falling prey to the Zero System would be dire indeed: at worst, all mankind would succumb to its nightmarish visions. The Colonial profs therefore stole the Zero System from the CBs' ken, meaning to keep both it and the Colonies safe and to counter the CBs in the event that things went pear-shaped. In fact, Dr. J and the others didn't even really believe in Innovation at first, but damn if Hiiro didn't master the Zero System and help mold the man who would master the Double-0. In fact, the Zero System and Twin Drive enhanced each other, and if Ioria in fact anticipated that much, he's a far better man than any of the profs.

They feel their role is now over, and their final act will be to destroy the giant beam cannon they helped build (with themselves on it). Carns shows up at this point to try to stop them: he's convinced that the Earth must be made to pay for its sins (just as Ribbons promised him). Dr. J tells Hiiro that what happens from here is up to him: his only advice is to not self-destruct like Dr. J is about to do.

Well, there's only one target left now: the same man who saved, led around, and then lorded over Setsuna. It's Ribbons himself, determined to be the shadow ruler of mankind in perpetuity. No thought has he for coexistence, for mutual understanding, only for getting his hands on the original GN Drive and Zero System to make his power complete. Well, he's gonna get those things alright: right up the pooper!

Ribbons just cannot get it through his head that he should use his vast powers for Good(tm), and finally even Amuro gets fed up with his holier-than-thou act. The final showdown comes down to him and Setsuna, and Ribbons is convinced that if he loses, his whole existence will have been meaningless. Umm, hello? Mankind is supposed to work together, dumbass! Ribbons' main problem is that he insists on looking down on mankind, even on the eve of his own demise.

With Ribbons gone, all the other Innovator forces fall silent. Zechs and Suzaku note that nothing now stands in the way of their final battle with



Zexis, and announce that they'll be waiting on the Surface. True Peace isn't on hand yet, but it's just gotten a lot closer...

Marina really has to wonder why her path and Setsuna's don't cross more often: the two of them both love peace so much and all. She also wonders what is it that keeps him going: all the scars, all the sins he's chosen to shoulder: will eliminating war really fulfill him that much? Such a lonely life, giving happiness to others while scarcely touching it himself. She can only pray that that day will come for him. In the meantime, she's got a lot to tell the people back on Earth about what she's experienced in space, and can only hope that she'll be able to chat with Rilina about all of this at some point.

The Zexis team go into the Veda core room, where Elgan lies slowly dying. He's done his best to enact his best friend Ioria's plans, living over 300 years in the process. "Elgan Roddick" was his real name from back when Ioria was still alive, but for most of the intervening time he's been known by another name: Ji Eidel Bernarl (no, not the one the ZEUTH folks know! Thank god...) He's this parallel world's version of the ZEUTH world's evil supergenius, though in this case his powers aren't nearly as advanced.

This one's powers mostly extend to long life and the ability to communicate across dimensions, but all of the parallel copies have at least some special abilities. This is because one of them, somewhere, came into contact with the Black Knowledge: a compendium of all lore past and present, and a fragment of the Ultimate. To him who receives the Black Knowledge will be all things known, in payment for which he shall also know a Future of Despair. See, all life forms in existence face a Fundamental peril, one that transcends dimensions and would bring all to ruin. The ZEUTH folks glimpsed it briefly in the Black History warfare recorded by the D.O.M.E., whose construction was likely aided in some way by Ji Eidel. As, Roger surmises, was Paradigm City's founder Gordon Rosewater.

In ZEUTH's world, with its circular timeline, the Black History fragdown was in the past, but in this world, it is still to come. Neat, huh?

The Black Knowledge exists in many forms on many planets, but the version Ji Eidel found must have been truly something, if it affected not just him but all his doppelgangers in other parallel dimensions. Perhaps the happy-go-lucky facade of the one from ZEUTH's world was an attempt to flee from the truth? In any case, Elgan found out about the Black Knowledge just about the time he met Ioria, a man obsessed with assuring a future for mankind. Elgan agreed to be the boots on the ground watching over mankind and gently raising the people who could see to it that Ioria's ideas came true (that would be Zexis).

Many people in many worlds have tried to resist the peril as Elgan and Wiseman have... Gaiou, in fact, raised his army of Dimensional Beasts in the first place in order to fend that off. This raises a slew of new questions, but Elgan conveniently chooses this moment to die. His final advice to Zexis is to not lose (duh!) and to keep their eyes facing toward the future, as Setsuna has done. What Setsuna does from now on, will be up to him as the First Innovator to decide.

Elgan's eyes close for the last time, and in his angelic voice Apollo bids this Accursed Wanderer a peaceful sleep. Zero radios in at this point, having hacked into Veda while nobody was watching. He says that while running society with Information is an interesting idea, he prefers a more direct method: fear. He announces that the traitors Rilina and Nanaly are to be executed in Area 11 in one week's time, the result of them questioning his plans in person. He wonders rhetorically what they're so upset about now that

all the fighting is done, and pretty much does everything he has to to provoke Zexis into coming to confront his ass. This could be tough, as he's got Damocles and its F.L.E.I.J.A. arsenal at his disposal, plus the newly reconsolidated Federation military. Let their final battle commence in a week, and let it be wicked!

## CHAPTER 56B. Spiraling into Hell

This is basically the same battle from the other route, where Metarl and Zhul are in league and want the Earth, undamaged, for themselves -- much to Nia's annoyance. She points out that everyone here is going to get their ass judged, including the Lord of Darkness (that would be Metarl) when "he" shows up. Who "he" is isn't clear, but odds are decent that it might be Sunshine given Metarl's given epithet. Will the sun set forever tonight? Not on your fucking life, if Simon and friends have anything to say about it.

Metarl vanishes, leaving behind a motley assortment of bad guys for Zexis to fight. This is really nothing more than an annoying waste of your team's time, but at least you'll get some XP from it. Nia tells Simon that this is the World of Despair, which would sound ominous if not for the utter lack of any real threats to the team's well-being. Well, Takeru's life is being sapped by that Devil Ring contraction, but like all misbegotten sex toys there has to be at least some way of removing it.

Nia gives the same speech about humans being greedy like the Invaders, and Metarl a.k.a. Zhul does the same tag-team entry with Muge. Fear the wrath of the Dead(tm)! They also give the same speech about Origin Rho and its connection to the Spheres. AND, like on the other path, Marg shows up to save his brother's bacon. Cue another round of monsters.

Muge and Zhul combined can only offer token resistance, which clears the deck for the wrath of Nia and the 1337 h4x0r1ng \$k33lz of Lowgenome's head. See the other path for the full details, such as they are. Simon spearheads a little expedition deep into Nia's ship's core, only to confront the Anti-Gurren Lagann.

The bad guys in this universe seem to have the mistaken impression that ever increasing despair will eventually make the team quit. Simon and friends are simply blind to the menace that is supposedly "creeping up behind them", preferring instead to pulverize what lies ahead. The Anti-Spiral almost finds this amusing, and tells the team to enjoy their relative peace while they can.

Mind you, Simon almost falls for Nia getting out of the Anti-Gurren Lagann and daring him to physically squash her. He has the good sense to realize a despair trap when he sees it, and in no time flat Nia is back to her old self (horrifying cooking and all). Result: the team returns to real space, leaving the Cathedral Razengan slumbering in the abyss between dimensions. Lowgenome decides to take a long nap as well, and everyone agrees he's earned it.

Now comes the next menace: Yuusar, AND Gaiou! Yuusar announces that he's actually ceded a treaty with the same guy who laid his world waste: Gaiou is now Gaiou I, Holy Emperor of Insalaum. That would tend to mean that Insalaum's alliance with the Earth is now null and void, and in case that's not astounding enough, Yuusar announces that they've emplaced yet another ZONE on Mars. He intends to use it to fuel yet another full-scale war with Earth, and almost too obviously dares the Earthlings to stop him. He'll be waiting on Mars and whatnot, with the fate of his nation hanging in the balance.

What. The. Hell. Before the team can even start to decide what to do about this new turn of events (hint: go kick some ass), word arrives that the Frontier Fleet has found the Vajra's nest and is going to demolish it. How's that work, with Ranka missing and no way to power the Fold Wave Amplifiers? Ozuma growls that "they" have moved faster than he expected, and Zexis hastily regroup for the trip towards the Neo Planets.

See the other path for the Rand+Setsuko rejoining the party confab. The new material is Yuusar's surrender to Gaiou, which Margret is sure would never have happened under normal circumstances. Had this been an age of peace, Yuusar should have made a fine king for their people... instead of rapidly leading those people to ruin. Margret now knows what she has to do, and asks Setsuko not to try to console her overmuch lest that resolve waver. Esther has the vague idea that Yuusar spent lots of time with her while she was a DB, and that actually he doesn't want to fight at all, but all that will be academic until after the team does something about the Vajra menace.

Simon gives Roshu the pep talk (read: my fist, your face) from the other branch too.

#### CHAPTER 57A. Zero Requiem

Louise is doing pretty well, all things considered: her headaches are receding, and according to the medical staff she's even finished her regimen of anti-cellular damage meds. Somehow or other all the ill effects of the Pseudo-Solar Reactor have been washed away. This is good, as it means that Louise has the time to get to know the real Karen (as opposed to her facade from school). On Louise's finger is a beautiful ring Shoji once gave her -- despite all that's happened, she was never able to make herself discard it.

Shoji has been mostly busy helping investigate the Innovator ship, vital cultural artifact of Ioria's that it is. For the most part it's being put into cold storage until the world calms down and an orderly investigation can occur, and Andrei will even be among the forces left to guard it. Billy will be in charge of the whole process -- still awkward around most women but quite relaxed around Sumeragi.

The two tell Louise that they're headed to Earth to battle Lelouch: not because they hate him, but because they feel an obligation as his friends to stop him. Sort of like with Shoji and Louise, except that Louise is even more than a friend to him. There's more to be said between him and her, and Karen excuses herself so they can have some privacy. They all promise to meet up on the Frontier fleet again once the war is over, and Louise's rehabilitation has run its course.

Speaking of Lelouch, it seems he managed to save Liumei from sharing her brother's fate. She'll have VIP seating for the big execution in recognition for her role as a CB agent; the rest of the world will have to watch via realtime netcast. Still, Diethart is quivering in anticipation, which is even creepier than it sounds. Preparations are also being made to fend off the inevitable Zexis offensive, with the surviving dregs of Arrows -- led by Arthur, now that Homer's committed suicide -- making up the first wave. The second wave will include Milliard's newly-upgraded Mobile Doll System (conducted by Dorothy), and goodness-knows what else.

After the functionaries leave, Lelouch has some time alone with C.C. and Suzaku. They want to know if he's regretting any of the events that've led up to today. Nope: regret is something he left behind long ago in the Shinjuku Ghetto, or so he claims. He's kept up appearances even in front of his sister

Nanaly, aided (if that's the word) but an inability to find any other way of doing things despite bending all his brainpower to the question. C.C. at least finds it all very pitiable, but like Milliard, Lelouch can no longer turn back... or afford the luxury of treating his sister any better than the rest of the pieces on the board.

Showing more concern than she normally lets on, C.C. asks if Lelouch hates her for altering his life with the gift of the Geass. On the contrary: it's thanks to her that he was able to take his first real steps under his own power. Lelouch says that everything after that is entirely on his own head: a remarkable show of candor that C.C. has never seen before. But true to form, she vows to be his co-conspirator till the bitter end. Perhaps so, but there are places he can go that even she can't follow.

Rilina and Dorothy then have their little disagreement from the other path. This time when she finally sees Milliard, she refuses to acknowledge Lelouch's approach to "peace", even if it costs her her life. In fact, she's hoping that her death will at least serve as a message to the world about how mistaken Lelouch is. Milliard counters that mankind must change, and that Lelouch has managed nothing less than poise mankind on the starting line. Yeah, via FEAR. The conversation goes nowhere, and Zechs bids her a final goodbye.

Over in Kumen, the Federation army troops are being recovered to help prepare for the showdown in Area 11. That sounds like the government doesn't view the rebels as a threat, and that only emboldens the rebels to, well, rebel. Let the Emperor Lelouch know that there's still plenty of people ready to resist him! Roshu and the folk in Kamina City too are inclined to join the rebellion as soon as Lelouch should fall, and unless Roshu is much mistaken, that's precisely what Zero wants. Nina certainly understands this, and back at Ashford tells her classmates to take a good, hard look at what Zero is really up to.

Even the perpetual hard-luck bad guys have a lot to think about. Kan Yur has the idea that going and answering Lelouch's call for strong bodyguards would be a good use of resources. Timp and Beck know better, realizing from their long dealings with undesirables that the emperor is not playing to win. At about this time, Marina shows up and offers the starving trio a hot meal at the refugee camp. They're not exactly accustomed to accepting charity, but when she then offers them work, helping out with physical strength that she herself lacks, Timp and then Beck accede. If this is the depths to which they've sunk, may as well waste no more time in starting the long climb back out. Marina is proud to be doing her part to make the world a better place, and can only hope that everyone else has similarly noble goals.

Of course someone has to disrupt Lelouch's parade to the execution site, and that someone is a large contingent of rebels and Black Knights. Katy and her men have merely acted as the vanguard for the real attraction, which is Zexis in the flesh. Some of the best special forces-type pilots have gotten busy rescuing the condemned, and most are already under Cornelia and Guilford's care -- they just happened to have independently been waiting for the best chance to strike. Hiiro gets to escort Rilina to safety, giving them a much-needed chance to chat.

Rilina can't understand why Lelouch and Milliard are so determined that blood must be spilt to bring about peace: that's the rhetoric of despots. Perhaps, but insofar as the two of them are prepared to spill their own blood to see it happen, Hiiro finds himself willing to take them on. Lest Rilina forget, Lelouch went to an immense amount of trouble to prepare today's spectacle -- all with the goal of stopping everyone fighting. Once Zechs, then Lelouch are defeated, the fighting will cease, and if she lives long enough she'll

get to see real peace. That chance is the best the fighters like Hiiro can offer the peace-lovers like her. She'll just have to trust him to keep his twin promises to both keep her safe and to not die in the process. And in the interim, Lady Une vows to keep her well cared for. Having said all that, Hiiro's farewell to her sounds awfully final...

Zexis' arrival signifies that the other rebel troops can skedaddle and avoid getting caught in some epic crossfire. Gino and Anya, however, have opted to stand and fight as citizens of the world.

The red and blue Mobile Dolls are different than the others, expressing as it were a "humanity" in their movements. That's Dorothy, at the controls of the Mobile Doll Command System that Milliard has so graciously given her.

Guess who wants to crash the party? Who else but Eim, drawn by all the lies that Lelouch has overspread the world with. Supposedly all the falsehood causes his power to grow ever more, and he's now able to Body Divide at will. He's also unable to hold a level conversation, and that means one thing: kicking his ass without further hesitation.

Eim starts going into total gibberish mode as his Sphere power builds, and even Crow has to admit that getting rid of him is looking like a tall order. This is about the time when Asakim shows up, having freed himself from that ZONE. Eim taunts the Sphere-hunter, claiming that he's no match for Eim now, and that means Eim's going to need a little punishment before dying. Riddle me this: just why did Asakim voluntarily go into the ZONE? Rand and Setsuko know why: immersing himself in all that Origin Rho energy was a gambit to figure out how best to use his own abilities.

As on the other path, he unleashes might of the Inquisitive Sea-Goat, neutralizing all Eim's lies. AND as on the other path, Yuusar shows up and takes Eim's life (and Sphere) before Asakim can. Perhaps upset by this Asakim taunts Yuusar with the knowledge that had Eim not arranged for Insalaum's downfall, he'd have done it himself in order to activate Yuusar's sphere. Yuusar curses him, and the person who let him out of the ZONE (that turns out to be Gaiou, not Asakim himself). It seems Gaiou and Asakim now have interests in common, and Asakim does intend to take Yuusar down in fullness of time. For now, though, Gaiou wants to watch Yuusar and Zexis duke it out.

His plan is the same as on the other path: use yet another ZONE on Mars to power a renewed takeover of the Earth. Someone's obviously got to put a stop to that, and that someone is Lelouch and his trusted troops! He accepts the declaration of war, but requests that Yuusar and friends take off for now and conduct the final battle on Mars -- he's got some "trivia" he wants to settle first.

In fact, the stage is set for one hell of a grudge match with Lelouch, who has fully abandoned the moniker "Zero". Only he, in his words, is capable of ruling this world. Rilina tried and failed with kindness. Charles tried and failed with competition. The Innovators tried and failed with supervision. Only with him at the controls can the world reach a new stage. Maybe so, maybe not, but what all sides agree on is that this battle will alter the course of world history one way or another.

When Jeremiah gets shot down, Anya gives pursuit, seemingly annoyed at how weak he is that he has to rely on help beyond his own abilities. In reality, she's just projecting her frustration over her own faulty memory, and when Jeremiah realizes she's been Geassed, he uses his Geass Canceler right before his mech goes kablooie. Anya is stunned, feeling

as though some sort of clouds in her mind just cleared.

C.C. seems unsurprised that she lost, and drily amused at herself for still keeping score after all these years. Truth be told, she's the one who's been closest to Lelouch all this time, a fact that makes Karen more than a little sad. Suzaku meanwhile doesn't seem as broken up over losing his mech as one might expect -- Hiiro at least knows that Suzaku's battle isn't over yet.

Milliard and Hiiro have one last little war of words as his mech starts piling up the damage. Hiiro hates how Milliard and his ilk keep claiming broadly to be protecting the weak, when in fact they're doing no such thing. Milliard counters that it is the strong that make the weak, as the Earth made the subservient Colonies. Hiiro said that he once hated the weak, people quivering in fear of getting shot, unable to speak what's on their mind, et cetera. But he's now realized that there are no Strong in this world: everyone is Weak! Hell, Zero already destroyed the old institutions that kept the Colonies and Earth at each others' throats: why can't Milliard see that furthering that conflict is pointless now? Well, if Milliard is determined to get his ass beat, Hiiro will just have to oblige, deliberately avoiding Milliard's cockpit though lest Rilina get all emo. Ahhh, now that is communication, that is strong-heartedness in action -- just the sort of pure gentleness needed to build the world ahead. And if so, Milliard is determined to live long enough to see it in action. He then breaks free and flies off, warrior till the end (whenever the end might be...)

Graham goes out like a warrior, living by finding out how to die properly. Well, figuratively speaking: Setsuna senses that he's still alive, and still capable of the struggle needed to live on.

The real fracas is with Lelouch though. Outwardly he wants Zexis to hate him as much as possible, as though to make them get it all out of their system. He as much admits it via psychic friends network to Eureka. This is in essence a teachable moment, meant to sear into everyone's minds the qualities they'll need going forward. The farewell is especially painful with Karen, who Lelouch has to outright make hate him to make her strike the final blow.

When the Damocles suffers fatal damage, Lelouch heads for the exit, claiming to be able to rebuild everything so long as he lives. He scorns Diethart's pleas to be allowed to come along, saying that no man like him is fit to see the world to come. The same goes for Liumei, who unlike the hapless cameraman has made peace with her impending end. Lelouch will let the Damocles, icon of the old order, be their grave. Oh, and no getting Geassed for Diethart: he's not worth it.

Lelouch ejects in the Shinkirou, but even its defenses can't fend off all the Zexis firepower aimed in his direction. He then has to try to escape on foot, furious that the people of the world are watching him sink so low. Cornelia and Nanaly show up to block his path, though they won't be able to stop him with Jeremiah on hand for protection.

But hark, who's that masked man?!? It's ZERO, who agilely eludes Jeremiah's (token?) attempt to fend him off and plunges an awesome sword deep into Lelouch's chest. The mantle of Zero has in fact now fallen on Suzaku's shoulders, part of Zero's plan to first concentrate, then sublimate the world's hatred via his own death. It will be on Rilina and other peaceniks like her to finish the world's transformation into one where discussion, not force of arms, brings the people together. This is "Zero Requiem", fulfilling the hopes

that Lelouch and Suzaku glimpsed in C Space.

Lelouch notes that hopes are a bit like Geasses, seeking in others what one cannot do for oneself. In that sense, he's sort of just Geassed the whole world to become a better one. He's also just made Suzaku a hero [not, not an hero] AND punished him in one swift stroke: Suzaku can now never remove the Zero mask outwardly again. Nanaly makes her way over to her stricken brother during all this chitchat, discerning with a touch of his hand what he's really been up to. But of course it's too late, for the man who broke and remade the world. Let them all curse his name, and remember the truth.

Hiroyuki knows the truth, having seen it via the Zero System. Wufei figured it out too, as did Crow, but they all knew that trying to stop Lelouch would have just made things worse. Lady Une conveniently gets up on the PA system and announces Lelouch's death, and the beginning of the world's renaissance, right on cue. Seems that Milliard and Treize were in cahoots too. There is going to be beau coup angst now, especially for Nanaly and for Karen, who's going to need serious counseling to accept that Lelouch is actually dead.

Lakshata is at long last reunited with her lifelong partner-cum-nemesis Lloyd. Was there any other way, she wonders? Who can say? All Lloyd knows is that Lelouch made the call himself, and he just did his best to offer support. What Lelouch did is kind of in keeping with the larger arc of Science: epicycles of failure that still contribute to overall forward progress. Call it "evolution", or "progress". Or something.

Lady Une tells Rilina that she's discharged all the obligations Treize gave, offering Rilina the chance to take final revenge for her father's death. Rilina is done with revenge and war, and offers her hand to Lady Une to take going forward. Dorothy is furious about war going out -- what did her father die for if not more dying?! Umm, how about some living instead? Indeed: it's time to stop all the sad fighting, and when Dorothy finally gets with the program Rilina vows to herself to keep walking the path Lelouch and the others prepared for them (after a brief pause to mourn their passing).

...Except one thing: Lelouch isn't dead! He wakes up in the Ptolemy-2's medical room. He is very startled to be alive, unpleasantly so in fact, and isn't getting much sympathy from the other commanders gathered here. They note that the world in fact isn't all wine and roses just yet, and want from him what he wanted from Suzaku: to be Zero for life and to complete the peace process. Remember how Elgan once gave Zero full authority over Zexis? Well Elgan's last words were that he still believed in Zexis, and in the future. Sumeragi says that the entire team is still obligated to live up to his faith, and Zero in particular will not be permitted to shirk it.

Lelouch can run if he wants to; nobody on Zexis will try to kill him a second time. But of course he's not going to -- after listening in silence to the lecturing, he sucks it up and accepts that all different "Lelouch" incarnations are toast: only Zero remains. They've even got a mask ready for him, and once he's got it on they expect a full disclosure of everything he's been up to all this time -- and none of his usual prevaricating either. He warns that it's a long story, and it's pointed out that it's a long trip to Mars. Indeed. Well, with him as Zero and Suzaku as the Knight of Zero, Zexis should have little to fear at least. He bids farewell to all the people whose safety now depends on him and his mask, especially his beloved sister.

This is, like, the same Macross Frontier fragdown from the other path. So. Not. Transcribing it.

Be sure to have Alto shoot down both Ranka and Brela. If he's got >70 kills, this will get him the YF-29 Durandal.

Sergei goes down in a big hurry, as does the warmongering Sarchez. Louise however is a tougher nut to crack, and it's up to Shoji to persuade her back to the Light Side when she's cornered.

Disabling the Battle Galaxy allows Alto to rush inside to save Ranka. Just as he does, a whole host of white Vajra, full of hatred, show up... as do a herd of Emerge. Something even bigger materializes in front of the fleet, and it seems that Ribbons might finally be ready to make an appearance.

Saji finds Louise in what remains of the Battle Galaxy's hangar. Her mind is being torn in half by her love for him and her artificially-enhanced hatred of the Celestial Beings. She collapses in a heap, and things look pretty dire for the star-crossed lovers.

#### CHAPTER 58A. Flash! The End of Evolution!

What do you suppose Marilyn has been up to all this time? Working her way into Yuusar's bed, that's what! She's good at keeping this sort of thing secret from the watchful Arcsaber guards, so she's waiting enticingly for Yuusar when he gets back. As she removes his makeup, it turns out that Yuusar is actually in very bad shape, suffering so much that it's a struggle to stay conscious. What on earth keeps him going? The power of Love, but for what? Whatever it is, Yuusar asks Marilyn to help him hide his weakness under another layer of makeup.

Back aboard the Ikaruga, the team try to make sense of the battle they just fought. Billy seems to be a decent guy, though his fear of women gives Crow's a run for its money... or so you would have thought, until Margret came along anyway. What's she been up to? No comment, from the writers. Anyway, Jeremiah has been busy un-Geassing everyone Zero ever affected, eradicating that particular scourge from the world at large. All that remains is to restore true peace... and to help Zero and Suzaku relax a little along the way. That is, if Zero doesn't choke himself first trying to drink ice tea through the eyeslit in his mask. Even Gino and Anya get to join in the fun, now that Anya is free of Marianne's Geass.

The question is, will Zexis really be up to the task of taking out Yuusar, now that he's all hard-core and stuff. Esther vaguely remembers enough about him from her time as a DB to somehow not want to fight him, but if he insists on sending half a billion Insalaumians in to conquer the Earth, there's no choice but to fight back. The conflict is reminiscent of that between Earth and S-1, whose residents traveled through time at their dictator's behest in search of a little lebensraum. Even after the dictator was toppled and the war halted, the surviving S-1-ians weren't much welcome on Earth and had to head out to space in search of a home.

The Insalaum folks may face a similar fate, given the most unfortunate way they and the Earthlings met. Crow too is going to have to find a new way of paying down his massive debts once the war's over, given the lack of major foes to fight in the Re-Blaster. The war ain't over yet though, as evidenced by the huge horde of Invaders who've shown up in the fleet's path near Mars. Have they finally come to extinguish the light of the sun for good?



There is a serious fuckton of Invaders, and every single one of them is in very bad luck for having run into Zexis during this mission. On the other hand, they have a lot of friends -- the kind of friends who \*don't\* help out when it might have made a difference. Among the second wave are Corwen and Stinger, who've fused with each other in a truly awful display of yaoi. This happened on the other path too: the whole history of Getter Rays finally gets told.

Are the humans going to accept the invitation to give up and join the Invaders? Duh, no. And apparently the humans aren't the only ones opposed: Insalaum and the Vajra are pitching in as well. This means that Zexis gets to concentrate on fragging CorGer, who seems to suffer from standard-issue villain overconfidence.

StingWen has a fair question when the inevitable ass-handing occurs: just what is it that powers Zexis? Crying babies, like the Ideon? Nope: Memory! It's the thing that connects the doings of the past into impetus for the future. This sounds pretty absurd CorGer, so they fire up their Getter Ray generation and attempt to summon yet more Invaders to the area. Their immense bulk makes it unlikely that an external assault will carry the day, so the Getter Team decide to take one for the Gipper and detonate their reactor from the inside.

Very heroic, and when they do there's a psychedelic vision of an eternal battle yet to come. Can still has living plouz?

So fall the Starving Demons of Destructions. The End, except not because Yuusar's ass is still hanging around. He won't even let Margret try to talk to him, and shuts Esther down promptly when she opens her mouth. He taunts Zexis for having trouble dispatching such "puny" enemies, apparently ignoring how much his own troops must be depleted from the war. Or maybe he's gone totally psycho, threatening to turn the entire remaining population of Insalaum into DBs to advance his agenda. If there's two things that would make Margret hate him forever, it would be calling her a traitor to her face (twice) AND threatening her entire nation with the same fate that claimed her brother. He does both.

## CHAPTER 58B. Revolution

As on the other path, Ribbons proves unkillable by Rijeene. Rijeene is killable by Ribbons, who wants Elgan to reveal the final key to the Black Knowledge. First though, Zexis has to perish, and that's what the spaceship called the Celestial Being is for.

Zexis is already pretty tapped out after all this fighting, and it's not looking good with even the Emerge ready to fight mankind. Have they reversed their decision to coexist with humanity? Eureka sure seems worried at least. What's worse, Louise doesn't seem to be breathing as Saji's retrieved her from the enemy ship. Can it be that she's dead after all this?!

Setsuna grits his teeth and has the Riser recombine with his mech. He assures a furious Amuro that Zexis will strike Ribbons and all his sinister schemes down, though to do so they'll have to hack their way through yet another round of bad guys -- bad guys who seem outfitted to be suicide bombers. Suicide bombers powered by the Trans-Am system, no less!

And, just for extra measure, Andrey shows up and starts shooting at Setsuna, blaming him for Pieres's defection. Has Amuro seen the futility of his position now? Nope. Holland then delivers a grand speech about how he doesn't

want anyone else to be as assholeish and poisonous as he used to be. Sumeragi agrees and the Ptolemy-2 uses Trans-Am speed to dash inside the Celestial Being, where wave after wave of Automata await.

Even worse, Billy is also waiting to deliver the same little conversation he has with Sumeragi from the other side. Setsuna also has his Innovator awakening, letting Saji and Louise, Andrey and Soma and Allelujah, Sumeragi and Billy, and even Suzaku and Zero understand each other at last. The ailing Holland and Sheryl experience some kind of sexual^Wspiritual healing as well. And Louise? Simply asleep, and ready to be carried somewhere safe by Andrey. Emerge: gone.

What the Innovators need to learn is their direction isn't necessary for mankind to advance. If having two of their own shot down isn't proof enough, Katy, Patrick and some former enemies of the CBs show up as reinforcements. Sumeragi figures out Veda's location in short order, and Hihiro helps blow open a path for Tielia to get close enough to put the info to good use. Katy's can't stay long, as there's lots of other Innovator forces nearby to fend off, but the seemingly unkillable Patrick sticks around for a bit of payback against the boss of his former nemesis.

We then get the same scene as the other path, where Elgan helps Tielia take over Veda from Ribbons using code "Chrono H". Yup, switching Romanization systems is all-powerful. With Veda's abilities safely in the hands of Zexis, and all those stupid self-destructing mecha offline, Ribbons shows up in person. He blasts Tielia's mech, disrupting his immediate ability to interfere further, but Hihiro tells Tielia to combine Veda's power with his Zero System to figure out how to shut down Ribbons' troops once and for all.

That sounds pretty dangerous, but Hihiro's the sort of guy who eats danger like breakfast cereal. Ribbons must now face the fact that he's crap, as Tielia announces that both Setsuna and Hihiro represent the kind of people that Ioria was hoping to bring into the world.

The Plan goes like this. In order for mankind to pass the many trials awaiting it -- including the probability of conversing with aliens -- it must first be united. The embers of war within human hearts are an impediment to that, and the CBs' armed intervention was part of a gambit to extinguish mutual hatreds and bring humanity together... whether or not they lived to see the day. He foresaw the need for a true "Innovator" with the ability to bring people's hearts together directly, and the Twin Drive system was meant to foster that ability... as was the Zero System, whose precognitive would have fused with Veda's processing abilities to open up a world of possibilities.

Of course, it would be heinously dangerous for a weak-hearted person to have all that power, so the Zero System also was to serve as a trial mechanism... and as a counter against someone from within the project misusing it. Hence the scientists' flight to the Colonies. As it turned out, this pitting of their Zero System and Twin Drive against each other actually fostered both pilots' abilities, resulting in two people who have overcome all their hesitations. And if Ioria forecast even that, someone's gonna have to have a word with him in the afterlife.

For now, Ribbons insists on spouting every egomaniacal cliché in the book. Clearly, he's got to go. But before he goes, Grace pokes her nose in, all gooified and tentacle-ridden like a redshirt from *The Thing*. She's on the same ego trip as the other path, and poses the same danger of world domination. That is, until Basara and the other singers kick into gear,

and Setsuna unites everyone's hearts (again).

Yay, Sheryl is still needed. Yay, Brela isn't 100% asshole. Yay, love is in the air. And yay, that damn "Aimo" song makes all the Vajra give up and go home, when everyone on the team sings it. This is the point where Alto will get to fly the Durandal if you fulfilled all the conditions.

Ribbons simply cannot wrap his head around the thought of coexisting with regular humans. THAT is why he can't have nice things. Grace basically can't have nice things because she's a manipulative bitch, eager to climb to the summit of the world on the backs of the poor Vajra rank-and-file.

After both bosses are toasted, it's time to head to Mars and settle things with Prince High-And-Mighty. Almost. First we get Elgan's death scene (as per the other path) where he explains that he's really Bernarl. And that Gaiou was building his army of DBs to help protect mankind from the coming apocalypse, not to hasten its demise.

#### CHAPTER 59A. The Last Holy Emperor

Unblown is going to be leading the first wave of defenders against Zexis. Victory, she claims, is assured. And thanks to the gracious king for giving her the chance to find out, for the first time EVAR, what Science(tm) is all about. The fact of the matter is that she's actually been an emo all these decades on account of not getting laid [no, seriously], and means to make up for it now through an orgy of violence.

Speaking of sex, Marilyn stands at the ready. She and the surviving Arcsabers are ready to follow Yuusar into a full-fledged war, but the question is, is he ready to lead them? Well, no worries on Margret's account -- Yuusar never so much as touched her hand, so he's not pining away for her now. What he is doing is kind of shriveling up like a prune thanks to his Sphere's power, and he can no longer bear the sight of himself in a mirror. Nor can he use the Black Sheep Sphere to lie to himself about his chances.

Marilyn tells him the fairy tale of the "Generous Prince", a golden-and-bejeweled statue that once graced a certain small hamlet. Seeing the poverty of the townsfolk, the Prince asked the sparrows to pluck off his finery and distribute it, leaving himself a denuded, shabby wreck afterwards. Though the statue was reviled and eventually torn down, the Prince's heart was filled with happiness to the last. Marilyn sounds like she might have actually turned over a new leaf for real, knowing for the first time the joy of making someone besides herself happy. She needs only one thing from her Prince now: the command to give herself fully to the cause of Insalaum. Why Yuusar seems so bound and determined to do "whatever it takes" for Insalaum's future, when that's the best way to lay that future low, is anyone's guess...

Margret meanwhile is stealing herself for the showdown with her former boss. Unlike Crow and the others, she does not yet consider herself a true member of Zexis. Rather, she is fulfilling her ultimate duty as an Arcsaber to save Insalaum from those imperiling it. Translation: Yuusar. Once he's dead, then she can get her driver's licence updated. Plenty of Insalaumians are waiting for a chance to change things, though it's highly unlikely that the Earthlings will all suddenly just kiss and make up.

And what will Zexis' legacy be in all this? You know, with only two maps remaining and all. The short form is that Larger Forces(tm) orchestrated the upheaval and renewal in the world -- Zexis' role is essentially masked by the larger arc of the Federation's military. No big deal though -- it's not

like any of the pilots want to run around fighting nonstop. Better that Zexis just fade back into the shadows than make front-page news.

So the final two battles are forecast to be: 1) Yuusar and co., and 2) Gaiou. Yeah, that's right -- mister Lord of Destruction himself is sure to show up for some kind of throwdown once the victor of the conference finals is decided. Maybe the team can at least get some useful info about the upcoming MENACE (in all caps) everyone keeps prophesying about, before bashing said head in? Or maybe Asakim might turn up in a talkative mood?

Anyway, things have gotten past the "chewing bubblegum" stage, and the ass-kicking is about to commence. Again. For the first time. Anyway, Crow and Yuusar's tiff will be the star attraction, pretty much destined ever since Crow took out the Knight of Knights back when.

Margret's guess about low Arcsaber morale proves to be right on the money: many in their hierarchy are openly expressing doubts about the wisdom (or honorableness) of invading another\_dimension just because their own was laid waste. However, that's where Unblown and Marilyn come in. See, you thought they'd seen the light, went from bad to good. Got the religion, as it were. Their only religion is crazy-ass violence, and always will be: just that now it's directed at dissenters in their own ranks!

None of the soldiers has the courage (stupidity?) to step forward when Unblown asks for volunteers to be executed for cowardice. Which kind of seems strangely obvious for some reason. Better, it seems, to die on Zexis' swords than on a couple power-tripping bitches' from closer to home. Unblown insists on driving the first wave to their deaths personally, telling Marilyn to go hang out with Yuusar and watch how an old lady can fight.

The only silver lining is that Yuusar hasn't yet turned all his citizens into DBs. But with the new mega-ZONE, that's just a matter of time. And don't expect they'll be half-assed versions like Esther was neither, on account of all the Dimensional Energy at her command. Nice story, sis. Too bad the Arcsabers' fear is apparent -- strike Unblown down, the implication is, and it's one more short hop to Yuusar and then another conference banner to hang from the rafters.

Unblown doesn't die easily, deciding first to show people a little of the Dimensional Science she's been enlightened in by Yuusar's awakening. Using the power of the ZONE to amplify her artificial Revive Cels, she turns herself into a DB: an Exa-Adamon! Eureka fears that Unblown is going to obliterate her soul in the process, but I suspect she's the only one worried about that. Most everyone else is worried about making sure Unblown and her unholy creations never see the light of day again.

No problemo! About the best you can say for her is that she sort of recaptures a bit of her wasted youth at the moment of her death -- cryptic enough that even Eureka can't figure out precisely what she was trying to accomplish from all of this. Yuusar finally shows his bishie face, sniffing that his servant's Dimensional Science was all smoke and mirrors after all -- kind of harsh when the last words on Unblown's lips was that her life was Yuusar's.

Then again, Yuusar's view seems to be that, even if Unblown had the gall to open the forbidden door, she lacked the balls to actually step through it. He's talking about Origin Rho, though he supposes that the feeble Earthlings have no idea how important their planet is to that almighty power. Ahh, is that why Muge and Zhul worked so hard to take over the Earth? Yup: thanks to nothing more substantial than the Law of Plot Convenience, the Earth

turns out to be a special depot for accumulating the Origin Rho power of countless other planets.

Turns out there are 12 such nexi, one per constellation, and in each, a Key. The Earth is ideally situated for drawing out the power of the Twelve Constellations, and Yuusar thinks he's man enough to control the torrent of Dimensional Energy his Spheres are trying to draw from said Earth. That much power could make DBs out of all the remaining Arcsabers, and if that isn't enough out of all the remaining common people. Winning this fight will make him the true Holy Emperor!!!!!!

That's too many exclamation points for Margret, who calls upon those Arcsabers to remember their original purpose of defending their nation against all foes... external and internal. Yuusar has clearly gone all assholic, and needs killing, and even if the Arcsaber regulars are too craven to help out, at least they decide to bug out while the bugging is good. That's right bistaznich, nobody loves you any moar!

Yuusar starts laughing hysterically for being revealed as the Emperor with the "new clothes" instead of the Generous Prince, even as Marilyn reaffirms her loyalty to the guy ['s sexual prowess]. There's one thing that she and Crow agree on: it's time they finally ended their duel once and for all. This doesn't last long. The sight of her shedding her last drop of species-treacherous blood makes Yuusar get all hot under the collar, putting the power of the Inexhaustible Water-Bearer on full display.

By this point though, everyone is thoroughly sick of hearing how Yuusar is supposedly doing all this for his people. Notice how all his people have abandoned him? Yeah. But here's the thing: the whole reason he's been fighting all this time is to heighten his Sphere powers into enough of an inferno that he can eventually beat Gaiou. But he's got a backup plan too: in the event that he were to lose, he's got someone in mind to mend fences with the Earth: none other than the hero Margret!

Zero understands right away what Yuusar is up to: turning himself into a lightning rod for the hatreds of the people, just so he can die and wipe them all clean. What bugs Zero most about this is that even he never expected another person to actually go through with it -- and for that matter, neither did Sumeragi or any of the other Very Wise(tm) people on the team. Chalk that up to a little assistance from Eim's Sphere, perhaps.

Now, the option was open to make Unblown the scapegoat for all of this, but Yuusar took the position that it was the royal family's responsibility for letting her open Pandora's box in the first place... just as it was for losing to Gaiou's forces. Crow tells him to shut the fuck up and not blame past mistakes for this current campaign to ruin so many lives. It's Yuusar's fault for not finding a way to overcome that defeat, the way the Zexis folks have. Call him too gentle for his own good, perhaps?

In any case, with Margret left holding the bag for Insalaum leadership, Asakim arrives to collect Yuusar's soul. Rand and Setsuko can sense the pain Yuusar's going through thanks to his Sphere's debilitating influence, and Crow is surely well aware of how unshakably resolved Yuusar is. With a brief benediction of "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust", he strikes the final blow.

This, it seems, is the cue for Gaiou to appear, and for the rump^Wsoul-shaking final battle to begin. But first, a little interlude while Marilyn finds herself slowly dying amid the wreckage of the Insalaum flagship. She suddenly remembers how the tale of the Generous Prince ends: even the Sparrows

themselves die. Hey, at least they were happy too...

#### CHAPTER 59B. Insalaum Turns the Tables!

See the other side for Marilyn's little date with Yuusar, including the tale of the Generous Prince. There's a major difference though: Gaiou is at the controls, and interrupts the billing and cooing to order Yuusar and Marilyn to the bridge. That Yuusar would bow the knee to the selfsame person who laid his country waste is supposed to indicate how badly he wants to win this fight. It actually indicates how monumental a retard he is, but saying it that way isn't terribly romantic.

Near the Neo Planets, Louise is doing surprisingly well considering her ordeal. All cellular damage from the Pseudo-GN Drive has miraculously vanished, though what may never vanish is the memory of the terrible things Louise has done. Fortunately, she's got the rest of her life ahead of her to turn over a new leaf -- as Lelouch and Suzaku have done after unending hours of reviewing their lives. They're a good example for the citizens of the world at large, who must learn to set aside their differences in order to truly claim the victory Zexis has prepared.

Louise too bore the seeds of redemption with her: even in her darkest moments she never cast away the ring Saji gave her. Saji's been busy helping survey Ioria's ship, but the initial investigations are wrapping up. The plan is to keep the ship on ice for now, and undertake a more thorough investigation once the world is truly at peace. Andrei will be among those guarding the ship until that day, and none other than Billy will head up the operation. Saji will of course be part of the final mission to Mars, not so much to fight per se as for the purpose of "creating the future". Translation: someone's gonna get shot. All the same, Louise promises to wait for Saji's return, saying that she'd love a chance to chat with Setsuna too.

Marina meanwhile is saying a prayer of sorts in her heart for Setsuna, the boy whose generosity to his fellow man has cost him so dearly in pain. Why is it she can do so little for him, when he and she seem so agreed on the need for peace? Setsuna turns up as if on cue, telling her he sensed her presence during his last battle. She did too. ...Words aren't exactly forthcoming when the two of them face each other like this, but the fact that they can understand each other a bit is already a plus. They may never see each other again, but Marina sincerely wishes him a safe journey and hopes that he too will find happiness one day.

Alto, the singers, and Brela have been watching this from a distance, musing on their own role in the upcoming battle. Brela is still convinced that Alto isn't worthy of Ranka, though his own account of his relationship to Ranka is as her "fan". Will Alto choose between the two singers? Not until after getting back from Mars at least, which gets a sort of knowing/contented sigh from THE REST OF THE FRIGGING TEAM who have somehow been lurking in the bushes nearby all this time.

Zero has figured out that Yuusar has probably submitted to Gaiou's rule in a bid to secure his people's future -- a pretty wrong-headed way to go about it and no mistake. But Crow tells Margret she shouldn't let it get to her, and Margret gives her "Arcsaber till this is over" speech from the other side. See also the "Zexis' place in history is less than a footnote" speech. The fragdown with Gaiou, and probably with Asakim, has all the pilots ready and raring to go. Even Crow is ready to go out there and get PAID IN FULL, not such much for the money itself but for the clean break it will let him make with his own sordid past. And it doesn't hurt that there's a decent chance

of h0t lurvIng\$ once the battle finishes.

For that to happen however, everyone is going to have to shut up and start fighting already. Gaiou feels this frustration keenly, telling Unblown to stuff it when she tries to propose some tactics. Since she's never had sex in her life she doesn't seemingly know (or care) what he's talking about, insisting that she be allowed to lead the first wave and wear Zexis down a little before Yuusar all swoops in heroic-like. Uh huh. Asakim sardonically wishes the Inexhaustible Water-Bearer the best of luck before going to cozy up with popcorn and scotch. Yuusar promises all his fallen comrades that he won't let their resolve be in vain...

As on the other path, the Arcsabers are sharply divided on whether any of this is remotely a good idea. And, as on the other path, Unblown and Marilyn force all of them to fight and die for their lord anyway. Emphasis on the word "die". Margret plays on this heavily to try to keep enemy morale low and Zexis hacks and slashes their way toward Unblown, and happily most of the Arcsabers do the smart thing and bail.

As on the other path, Unblown does her whole "You got real ugly" thing, but this time Asakim is on hand to admire the grotesquery... and to hunt down the other Sphere-bearers. When Banjou challenges him on what he's really up to, he informs the team that they, like he and Elgan, were all eternally cursed by the Stigma of the Origin Rho. And rather than be fuxorated for all eternity or something, Asakim would rather be the predator.

He doesn't last long on the battlefield, but that -- he smirks -- is all part of the plan. Oh, and don't plan on beating Yuusar easily either. Marilyn and Unblown have the same sorry exit as on the other path, and for some reason Unblown's death in particular has Eureka very sad.

Their deaths bring out Yuusar and Gaiou, who are about ready to start the final fight. BUT not quite...

Why? To make the game an even 60 episodes, evidently. And to give Marilyn her final death scene too...

#### CHAPTER 60A. A Future of Renewal

As promised, Gaiou's ready for throwdown with the victor of the Earth/Insalaum semifinal. Gaiou's motives are, from a certain standpoint, noble: he wants the strongest fighters to turn into the strongest DBs to fend off whatever transcendently horrendous menace he's tasked with facing. Ah, but it's not just him: thanks to their Stigma, all the ZEUTH pilots -- and now, all the Zexis pilots -- get to suffer like he and Asakim for all eternity. Well, that blows. Blame that damn Origin Rho stuff.

Asakim smiles and points out that it would go a lot easier for the Zexis folks if they just let him have their souls. Not that they have a choice: Asakim's black cloak is draped over them all! Mu-ah-ha-ha! and stuff. Actually that's pretty lame as a threat, but Gaiou is picking up the slack something fierce. Far more frightening than his usual bluster is his level assertion that, now that they know his mission, the Zexis folks are going to live, and die, with him. Especially if they want to save the Earth.

Any chance of talking it over, and maybe Zexis opting to help him with his mysterious mission of their own accord? Gaiou isn't interested, saying that putting the team out of their misery is the best he can do for them. This, kiddies, is what we call a "facade": something is seriously eating Gaiou, and

Zexis knows it. It's fair to say that this won't be the same boss fight that ZEUTH faced before.

...Especially not when Gaiou utilizes all the pent-up Origin Rho in the ZONE to cloak himself with the same impregnable field as protects that Luke Adamons. Only this time, there's no weak spots for the snipers to exploit. And if that isn't daunting enough, he brings out his "True DB" army for backup. See, he's not allowed to fail at his grand task, and that suits Asakim just fine. The main question is: how is Zexis supposed to prevail? Asakim has it that none of the Sphere-bearers are capable of stopping this massive ZONE, but Crow certainly doesn't agree. If anything, it designates Asakim as the team's principal target: only after he's taken out can the ZONE be demolished.

Now, Asakim is the type of menace that doesn't actually die when you kill him. There's that Infinity Prison thing his soul is trapped in, you see, and before you know it he'll be reborn and back on his dark journey to... wherever. This recent nightmare has been bliss for him, etc. etc. Now, Rand and Setsuko are pretty nice people, and they intend to give him a nice present: Oblivion.

Well, kind of: they've thought of a better use for him, using his powers to seal away the ZONE (and him with it). Astonishingly, he actually states that being put eternally to sleep isn't a bad turn of events. C.C., cursed with being up and about (and hawt) eternally can legitimately wonder which of the two of them has it worse. Not that she has any regrets now though.

Gaiou means to keep Asakim's dream alive, and with the ZONE and its shielding offline, he activates the full power of the Vishlakarla. This giant, armored form is the true nature of the Dimensional General, and the General is something of a storyteller. Long, long ago, in a dimension far, far away, mankind encountered the worst of all conceivable enemies. It crushed stars, caused the moon to fall, and blotted out the sun. The saints proclaimed that the Apocalypse was at hand. The sages insisted that man had violated a taboo. In any case, the last hope was to be found in the Generals, willing to forsake it all for the greater good.

There were four Generals, tasked with traveling the galaxy in search of warpower to fight the... whatever it is. Gaiou was numbered among them, but was defeated and fled... across spacetime, ending up in Insalaum. Though he lost friends, family, memory, and even hope, he always cleaved to his basic mission of gathering the power to fight back against the primordial menace. Sure the ZEUTH folks (and the Zexis folks, for that matter) are bad ass -- that's precisely why he needs their power, with or without their consent!

Here's the thing though: Gaiou isn't precisely burdened by his mission. Rather, the reason he was chosen as General in the first place is that he simply loves fighting that much. So-called "evil" simply means getting things done, and so-called "lust" is the power that fuels it. If there's one thing Gaiou won't stand for, it's Zexis trying to judge his fight according to their own aesthetics.

Evidently all the talk of his mission was just window dressing. What he now articulates is a very new idea: so long as he himself is willing to be shot now and again, he claims the right to shoot as many other people, as often, as he wishes. When asked if he could bear to say that in front of all the people he turned into DBs, he smirks that DBs ain't got no human reason left in them. He means to enrage Zexis with material like this, wanting them to fight him with blind rage. They will fight him all right, but out of a desire to live and protect instead of to destroy mindlessly.



And should Zexis lose, Gaiou promises to burn down both this Earth and the Earth ZEUTH come from.

Basically, it's on. That is, until it's off again, and Gaiou seemingly reveals that it was the inflammatory bullshit, not the bit about his heavy mission, that was the lie. Gaiou's chosen to go out like a shooting star, naming himself a fallen hero who's paid the price for stooping to use the Violation System (aka the Revive Cells -- "Violation" System just sounds so much more accurate).

Ultimately, coming to love fighting itself was his undoing: the guardians of the world ought to do so out of benevolence, not bloodlust, But hey, given that Zexis has kicked his ass, they should be equal to the trial he's been trying to protect them from. One thing he can assure the team of: the world is filled with much more fighting than they could ever imagine, and if there's any law in the multiverse, it's that peace is always followed by war. Nobody can promise eternal peace -- it has to be constantly re-earned. And let the team not show mercy to their foes: they aren't allowed even a single defeat, if they truly want to protect that most precious to them.

His last words are to let him rest in peace... and that he really wanted to eat at least one more hot dog. This infuriates Ryouma no end, and he's not the only one. Still, that's about as much closure as you're going to get out of this game. Cue everyone saying "yay the battle's over!" in a zillion ways: not poetic of me to put it that way perhaps, but if you've every played SRW before, you know the drill.

Shocking no one, Azadistan will finally join the Federation, trusting Lady Une and Schneizer to help organize the Federation under Nanaly and Rilina's able leadership. Margret meanwhile is leading a colonization effort on -- where else -- Mars! Gee, guess Insalaum didn't have to tussle with mankind for Earth after all. This is going to be a lengthy process for sure, and Rilina can only wait patiently till Hihiro comes back home and they finally get to hit the sack.

Takeo General Company? Totally swamped with orders, now that they're no longer on a military footing (and given that the ZEUTH and Zexis worlds are now permanently joined by the Abyss).

Daiguard? Still on the scene, and back to its civilian defense role... and still fending off Heterodynes.

Kurogane-ya: still dishing out massages and quality hot springs thanks to its cadre of shady employees. Kouji is back to training there harder than ever, meaning to be ready when the next pan-dimensional menace shows up. Boss is so fucking not going to beat him, evar. The new Getter folks are hanging out there too, though it won't be long before they return to the Dark Continent to seal Shin Getter away until the plot demands it get unsealed again. Ashura has left for God-knows-where, and Kouji can only hope the next time they meet it won't be as enemies. But if it is, he and his mech will be ready!

Shotarou and Ox: still doing the ICPO thing. Sorry to those partisans of the second-tier super robots, but all the second-tier super robots and crews are doing their usual stuff: moral-supporting the planets oppressed by Zhul and generally do-gooding around. Maybe Roze and Mars can finally get it on without the threat of a world-exploding mech overshadowing them non-stop?

Dancougars: totally sidled up to the bar assessing the young hi-tech workers and -- no, wait, wrong cougars. The Dragons' Hive contingent, including Sandman's contingent, are also back to defending the world from the shadows.

The Nova pilots will be returning to their former occupations (if you can call "homeless" an occupation, in Kamon's case), while the ZEUTH folks will be heading back to the other Earth for now.

Totally Superfluous Gundam (not to be confused with super-fluid Gundam, which might actually be cool) and friends: bidding the Heim farm goodbye and heading home as well, full of stories to tell Kiel. Gregor and friends plan to remain behind and provide security, and since there's already a Renton and Eureka on the other side, this world's favorite young lovers will be staying put also.

Kiriko and Fiana: off on a sightseeing trip, trying to learn about something besides war.

Xabungle crew: also ready to head back home, leaving Kamina City and its denizens behind. Simon's got a ring ready to propose to Nia, and it might be nice if he got around to actually doing so before Youko goes back to her students out in the boondocks. Viral promises to tell Timp that Jiron's gone home, if he ever runs into the outlaw cowboy.

Frontier Fleet: totally heading to the galactic center, once repairs are done anyway. Brela's totally vanished, leaving Alto to wonder what the hell his relation to Ranka was. So uh, is he ever going to choose between the two idol singers? Probably not. The team does assemble to bid farewell to Fire Bomber and the Aquarion folks, resulting in an impromptu concert and much outpouring of manly bromance.

Eternal: going home with its complement of Gundams. Amuro makes it clear to Quatro that the Innovators and Treize have reinforced his resolve to not let anyone force a way of life on the common people. HINT HINT. Which is not to say that certain extremists like Yuusar didn't contribute to peace, despite themselves as it were.

G-boys: totally getting integrated into the Federation at Lady Une's invitation. Say hello to the Preventers! But that's for next game maybe. Hiroyuki and Setsuna say goodbye mainly by staring at each other, which by now is par for the course.

Ashford Academy: finally welcoming Louise back. Ougi and Toudou have joined the fledgling Japanese government, but Tamashiro has actually opened a bar and is doing well enough for himself. Viletta is now married to Ougi and is a full-time Ashford P.E. teacher, and the other Knights of the Round are seriously considering formally enrolling as students as well. Gino, for instance, has designs on becoming Karen's paramour, though Anya is mostly content to help Jeremiah run his orange orchard. That would be irony if it wasn't so damn obvious. Don't forget about Zero and Suzaku though: although they can't ever become students again, what they can do is seriously mess up anyone who dares threaten the peace everyone's worked so hard for. And hey, at least Zero's got C.C. as his long-term girlfriend: maybe the Power of the King isn't quite as lonely a thing as originally made out to be...

Rand and Setsuko: totally going home. There's loads of questions about the Stigma remaining, but they won't be solved until at least the next game anyway so there's no point in worrying about them. And with Asakim sealed away in the ZONE, maybe they won't have to worry about Sphere drama again? Uh huh. SUUUUUURE.

Turns out that favorable alignments of the Abyss for travel between worlds happen about once per year, so it'll be awhile before ZEUTH and Zexis can meet again. It'll be one happy reunion, one supposes.

At long last, it's time for Crow's reckoning. Crow's calculated that he should be owed 150k credits, and even Traia comes up with 145k... but only means to pay 100k, and not out of a desire to keep Crow working for her. That damn Coin Drop System is expensive enough to cost 45k, leaving Crow with 100k. More specifically, installing the system itself was free -- but not the coins that it actually drops. Lucky for him there's still lots of DBs to go around fighting...

#### CHAPTER 60B. Renewing Dimensions

This is, you guessed it, the same as the other mission 60. We start with Yuusar's speech about how the Earth is optimally positioned to draw forth the Origin Rho contained in the 12 Zodiac Constellations, then watch as Gaiou enlists the ZONE to make himself temporarily invulnerable. That, plus his personal army of golden DBs, will make for a rough day at the office. Yuusar has the brilliant idea of gloating about this, ordering the other pathetic Sphere-bearers to just up and give their Spheres to him, since like, he can put them to such better use. And since the Arcsabers seemingly failed to even slow Zexis down, he vows to execute their survivors personally once he's done with Zexis itself. What that really does is paint the big neon bullseye right on his crotch: all his power, all his bishieness, won't make him or anyone else happy...

All this turns out to be an elaborate ruse: what Yuusar does when his strength begins to flag is ask Gaiou for a powerup. So of course Gaiou complies... and promptly gets blown away by Yuusar. Yuusar had { intended to beat Zexis and use its Spheres to overwhelm Gaiou, but this method works just as well. Well, for him that is: Zexis' pilots opinion is that without his bullshittery, the peoples of Insalaum and Earth could have got along just fine.

That, as it happens, is precisely what he wanted. To even Zero's chagrin, he's pulled off the same gambit of drawing the people's hatred unto himself, then sublimating it. Who gets left in charge after his reprobate ass is kicked? None other than Margret of course! The fact nobody realized this till now may be thanks to Eim's Sphere of lying your ass off, but whatever the case, Zexis isn't having this extreme sacrificial way of atoning for Insalaum's past failures. WTF was he thinking?

He was thinking Margret could handle everything. The one fly in the ointment is that Gaiou is a tad stronger than even Yuusar thought, coming back on the scene that evil -- pure, sacrifice-everything will -- is how to REALLY get things done. He transforms into True mode, using those DBs as armor and summarily obliterating Yuusar's ass before any yaoi fic'ers even get the chance. Crikey.

But fear not, yaoi fans, for Asakim is still around and appears at Gaiou's call to strike the FINAL final blow. In response, Crow summons up the posse and seals Asakim away "forever" inside the ZONE. Neato. See the other path for all the attendant moralizing.

Quo vadis, Gaiou? He tells the Swinging Scales that in a dimension far, far away mankind encountered the worst of all enemies. The details are on the other path, but the summary is that he wants to add Earth's stalwarts to his army to help get payback for his former failure a dimensional guardian. Or... maybe he just loves fighting! Maybe he [or the writers] are schizophrenic?

Anyway, you're actually given a choice whether to join this charade. If you say "yes" (option #2), Crow admits that Gaiou's "evil" power is kick-ass. Choose option #2 again, and Crow declares that in order to defeat a demon like Gaiou, he'll just have to show him what an even bigger demon looks like! This makes Gaiou really happy, so happy in fact that he goes all level 99 and jillions of HP on the team. He warns them all that if they come with one iota less than their very best, they, and both the worlds they protect, will become lakes of fire and whatnot.

If you say no either time, you'll get away with a fractionally easier battle on account of Gaiou having fewer HP. But that never stopped you before, amirite? In any case, Gaiou is the master of cryptic references to every multiverse-spanning menace ever, and in such a way as to maximally piss the pilots off. Been there, done that ain't the half of it. AND, given his Ace Bonus (you did check that, didn't you?) he's got a decent shot at casualtying at least part of the team if they're not nimble.

Nimbleness goes with the territory for this crew though, and it seems that Gaiou will fulfill neither his own, nor Asakim's ambitions after all. He sounds satisfied with the massive fracas it took to beat him down though, certain that if Zexis can handle him, they can handle what's coming up next. And that is what exactly?? Question mark! Nope, he's not saying, meaning you'll just have to play the next game to find out.

One thing for certain: every age of peace is always followed by an age of war. No one, but NO ONE, can promise otherwise. The only hope is to keep fighting until the next peaceful period arrives, and given how much war is gripping the multiverse these days, it sounds like the Earthlings have their work cut out for them. As on the other path, he asks for a little peace and quiet as his life of battle ebbs, wishing only for one more hot dog to munch as he goes.

The denouement is basically the same as the other path, and as usual is long as hell. There's a bit of a banquet thrown in as the setting for the conversations, where Zero (unwilling to take off his mask) damn near chokes to death drinking through a straw, and where the musical sorts start singing their lungs out. Simon sort of half-proposes to Nia, and Holland (amazingly still alive) has Eureka and Renton promise to look after his friends circle's children down the road.

Kiriko/Fiana and Allelujah/Mary get quality sendoffs from the team (despite Kiriko's attempt to slip out quietly). The rest of the CBs and G-Boys are committed to being minute-men, on standby in case new enemies crop up. The same will go with the S.M.S. pilots, though on the agenda will be romance as well as combat readiness. Maybe Hiroyuki should make a little time to go apologize to Rilina for ripping up that invitation though...

Shit gets real when Traia asks how things are going between Crow and Margret: after all, isn't Crow supposed to be some huge woman-hater and stuff? Esther in particular is very interested in whether Crow will renounce his gynephobic ways. Crow can punt on the question (option 2) and defer making that change in his life till his debts are repaid. OR he can conclude that one instance of lousy ramen shouldn't damn all ramen stands in existence, and praise Zexis for having so many good women (Setsuko included) to help him change his thinking.

In either case, Esther saved Traia the strain of asking Crow the question herself. Not that she needs Carlos to remind her of that. Carlos is up to his usual glad-handing ways, but inwardly he assures his departed friend Gaiou that Zexis can keep fighting the good fight in his stead.

Yay, send off for the ZEUTH folks back to their own world. As per the other path, the residents of this world can see them again at regular intervals. Margret will be busy leading her people's colonization of Mars, but the next time she sees Crow, she'll have a certain question for him. Traia knows what that means. But first, there's the final reckoning scene to do.

If Crow is sticking with his gynophobia, you get the calculation scene from the other side. But if Crow has turned over that leaf, Esther insists on Crow choosing between herself and Margret before the finances are tallied. Traia won't allow that to happen, in part because Traia herself insists on being part of the choice set. Is this a ploy to make the final dialog like infinitely longer?

Anyway: Esther is of course happy if Crow chooses her, glad to tag along as crow goes and works off any remaining debt.

If you select Margret, Esther is pretty bummed at first, though Traia gets her to brighten by reminding her that she's the one who asked Crow fair and square for a verdict. Margret, Esther concludes, is a choice she can get behind.

She's willing to congratulate Traia if Crow goes that way, though Traia cheers her up by telling her that Crow probably just made the "safe" choice (under the circumstances) and that Esther will surely have further chances to win Crow's heart. Crow quietly thanks Traia, since she (apparently) entered the derby just to give Crow this out. I have to wonder...

At any rate, see the other side for Crow's debt, which hasn't been reduced all the way on account of the CDS. And with that, it's ZA ENDO!

This document is copyright MNeidengard and hosted by VGM with permission.