

M200 Log1

■ February 2nd, 13:00.

"That's all for today's sniper training. Please remember tomorrow's schedule and arrive on time. Of course, I still hope none of you will ever have to use this knowledge in the future." A wave of knowing laughter rose in front of me. "The instructor's got a sense of humor!" the dolls said.

I didn't respond, simply watching these new field operatives leave.

The dolls excitedly discussed their anticipation for their first missions. No one noticed the faint sigh I let out.

"Instructor"... huh?

I packed up the sniper rifle used for training. It felt so light—almost weightless compared to the weapons I once wielded on the front lines... I could hardly remember how that felt anymore.

I'm supposed to be a tactical doll, not... some instructor.

After leaving Griffin with Kalina, my past combat experience led to me being recognized for my sniper skills, and I was appointed as a sniper weapon tester for the Non-Military Forces Administration.

Developing new weapons isn't something that happens overnight, so the testing assignments were always spaced far apart, leaving me with a lot of free time.

The firing range became my main haunt when I was bored.

But when the only sound echoing in my ears was my own gunfire, I always felt like something was missing.

Maybe it was some passing field operative who thought the range was underutilized, or maybe Kalina thought I'd been idle too long and wasn't productive enough. Either way, one day I gained a new role—on regular days, I was a weapon tester, but in between testing assignments, I became an "instructor," teaching sniper skills to newly joined field operatives. And through these teaching sessions, as the gunfire at the range began to overlap, I finally understood what had been missing.

Teammates.

The feeling of fighting on the front lines.

The process of constantly improving myself in combat.

Yes, it's been too long since I left Griffin, since I left the front lines.

There are, of course, some former colleagues here at the Non-Military Forces Administration, but there aren't many of us, and we all handle different roles. Most of the time, I only hear bits and pieces about them through Kalina.

Having been away from real combat for so long... my skill level has probably plateaued, hasn't it?

The hundreds or thousands of practice sessions since then have just been repetitions of what I already know. Even my sniper accuracy has stopped improving.

Sometimes, during a break from practice, I'd try to imagine reuniting with the Commander and everyone from back then.

But now, I've started to avoid doing that.

If I stop participating in real combat and keep regressing like this... will I really still be qualified to stand alongside everyone, by the Commander's side?

"...structor? Instructor?"

Snapping back to reality, I saw one of the field operatives who'd just left standing at the door.

"Ms. Kalina is looking for you," she said.

"How have you been feeling lately? Balancing testing duties and teaching—doesn't it get a bit overwhelming?"

Kalina looked up from her screen, appearing somewhat tired. Though I couldn't see what was on it, I'd guess it was piled with all sorts of approval documents.

"No, compared to you, I've got it easy."

"Is that so... If anything comes up, let me know right away. If it's something I can fix, I'll try."

"Mm. For now... there's nothing."

A brief silence.

Kalina's gaze wandered over my face again, and I lowered my head.

Why did she say it like that? Did I mess something up at work?

"Um..."

"I didn't call you here for anything big," Kalina interrupted my quiet question without noticing, "There's been an errand recently—an outdoor task. We need to deliver a letter to the Zuccherò Café in CHE-02. I checked, and everyone else is busy. Your teaching session just wrapped up, and there aren't any new weapons to test for the time being..." Her voice gradually faded from my auditory module.

An outdoor task? Does that mean actual combat?

It doesn't seem like it. The mission sounds like it's just delivering a letter... What kind of letter requires a tactical doll to deliver it personally? Is it confidential? Are there any verification measures I need to be aware of during the handover? The Zuccherò Café... Who is it for?

It's been so long since my last field assignment. This is a rare opportunity—I need to act professional...

"M200?"

"Ah!" I looked up. Kalina was still staring at me, though now there was a hint of concern in her expression.

"Are you willing to take on this task? Five days, just deliver the letter, no further requirements. Think of it as a chance to relax. CHE-02 has some places worth checking out."

I looked at the letter Kalina handed over and took a deep breath.

"I think... I can do it. Please entrust it to me."

M200 Log2

■ March 3rd, 14:30.

"Ding-a-ling—" I pushed open the door to the Zuccherò Café.

It was a small café, nestled on a relatively bustling commercial street in CHE-02.

The decor was cozy and warm, with guests scattered in small groups filling the seats. Not far away, a petite doll with a single braid was serving coffee to customers. The whole place didn't seem like it would have any connection to the Non-Military Forces Administration.

I stood at the entrance, not stepping further inside. Soon, a figure from the other side heard the doorbell and approached me—

It was... Springfield?

"Oh my, M200, you've finally arrived! I've been waiting for you for a while," she said.

"What's going on? Springfield, why are you... Oh, so you're the recipient of the letter?"

"It's been a while, and you're still as sharp as ever. When Kalina told me you'd be the one delivering the letter, I was really looking forward to it." Springfield's smile was as warm as ever. "This is my café. What do you think? Easy to find, right? Come, sit over here."

Springfield led me to a quieter corner, and we sat down, chatting like old times.

It turned out the café wasn't just a café—Springfield was secretly taking on commissions and handling intelligence work on the side. The letter was likely one of Kalina's assignments for her. G36—now called Centaureissi—was also working here. Springfield mentioned that once she returned from a supply run in a couple of days, we'd be able to meet.

Perhaps because it was a long-overdue reunion, I felt much more at ease and ended up sharing more about my recent life with her.

Springfield listened attentively and smiled. "It sounds like you're doing pretty well at the Non-Military Forces Administration."

"Am I...? Actually, I—"

A clattering bell interrupted as it rang through the café.

"The usual—one caramel macchiato. Springfield... hm?" A familiar voice quickly approached from behind. I turned around.

"WA2000?"

"M200?"

I couldn't believe I'd run into another familiar face! W—Makiatto's tone was as recognizable as ever. Though she tried to sound indifferent, she sat down honestly enough, probably still happy about our reunion.

The three of us kept chatting. It turned out Makiatto was also part of the Zuccherò Café crew, though not a regular server. She dropped by occasionally to hand off tasks, gather intel, and grab a coffee.

Our conversation shifted from catching up to sniper rifles. Makiatto griped that the pay from her commissions wasn't enough to upgrade her gear, while I broke down the cost-effectiveness of the latest sniper accessories on the market. Springfield listened with a smile.

This is nice... It's like being back in the old days.

I'll have to thank Kalina properly when I get back.

"Here's your caramel macchiato" Soon, the petite doll brought over Makiatto's order. To my surprise, she'd prepared something for me too.

"Seeing you've been in the shop so long without trying our signature blend felt like a shame.

This is a Citrus Latte, prepared just for you by Sharkry. The fresh orange scent pairs perfectly with reuniting with old friends~" She quickly glanced at the three of us.

"Oh, we got so caught up chatting I forgot to bring you a coffee. Good thing Sharkry's on it," Springfield said with a laugh. "Your intake module's still functional, right?"

I nodded and took a small sip of the coffee.

"Hm... The orange aroma hits strong at first, then there's a subtle floral note as you savor it. The fruit acidity is bright, and the aftertaste... sweet but not cloying. This isn't just syrup—it's got to be quality beans too. The swan latte art on top is gorgeous. The Zucchero Café's offerings are flawless... Uh, I don't know much, but that's what I picked up. Thanks for the treat."

Sharkry's eyes visibly lit up, and she thanked me for the feedback with excitement yet maintained her elegance.

Makiatto's eyes widened. "That's 'not much'?"

Springfield seized the chance to tease Makiatto about pouring less caramel syrup into her coffee next time.

The scene before me was warm and harmonious. It felt so good.

Everyone who'd left Griffin had found new companions, new goals.

Except me—I felt the gap between us growing wider...

Springfield patted me, and I quickly hid my fleeting disappointment.

"Oh... I'm fine. I just... I wish I could keep moving forward like you all do. Running a café while still staying sharp in combat..."

"What are you overthinking for? Being an instructor at the Non-Military Forces Administration doesn't mean your combat skills are slipping, you know? It's just less free than taking commissions yourself," Makiatto said, frowning, clearly puzzled by my gloom.

"Hehe, if you miss the battlefield that much, M200, why not join us for a commission?"

Springfield glanced at Makiatto. "Makiatto, you came to see me just now—did you have something to say?"

"What... Hmph, it's nothing big. I just picked up a commission and stopped by for a coffee before heading out. M200, if you really want to give it a shot, I-I wouldn't mind taking you along."

"What a coincidence. Why don't you go with Makiatto, M200? You've still got plenty of time before you need to head back, right?"

"I... Can I do it? It's been years since I last went on a field mission with the Non-Military Forces Administration. I'm worried..."

"Then why not take this chance to rediscover that combat feeling? With you along, Makiatto's commission will surely go safer too, right, Makiatto?"

"Uh... I guess so." Makiatto looked like she wanted to argue but eventually nodded in reluctant agreement.

I didn't think Makiatto would need my protection, but this was a rare chance for real action...

"Okay, I'll go."

With some unease, I accepted their kindness.

M200 Log3

■ March 4th, 09:07.

After all these years, I stepped onto the contaminated zone's soil once more, following Makiatto.

Dangerous collapsing radiation, abandoned towns... The data from my past consciousness overlapped with the scene before me.

This commission came from CHE-02's security department, tasked with periodically clearing out the bio-remnants around the city's outskirts. The target location was a gathering of small tarantula-like creatures—numerous, but individually not very threatening. Makiatto and I found a nearby ruin for cover and began the cleanup.

Only the sound of gunfire rang out, shifting from staggered shots to simultaneous firing. Two minutes later, Makiatto spoke.

"Hmph, this mission's way too easy... M200, how about we make it a competition?"

"...Compete in what... Sniping distance?"

"Exactly. Winner takes an extra ten percent of the reward. How's that?"

"But I wasn't planning to take any of your reward..."

"Hey, are you trying to make me look like I'm bullying you into working for free?"

"That's not what I meant..."

"Then stop talking and let's start!"

Load, aim, fire.

The motions I'd repeated thousands of times at the range felt smoother now. Time seemed to slow, my vision sharpened, and my sniping efficiency gradually surpassed Makiatto's... just a little.

It seems... my skills haven't deteriorated that much? Or maybe the range practice paid off?

"It really feels like the old days, heh."

"What's that? I-I just haven't gotten serious yet! Don't forget I've beaten you before!"

Makiatto's dissatisfied voice crackled through the comms, sounding exactly like it used to.

"Yes, yes. Back when we fought together, you'd win and then run to the Commander for praise—"

"Hey, hey, hey, don't bring that up!"

Makiatto never quite closed the gap I'd opened, and the small tarantulas in my scope dwindled to almost none. We chatted sporadically about past missions and how everyone was doing now, inevitably touching on the Commander.

"Just a while ago, I helped that idiot out with something. Hmph, if it weren't for me and Sharkry, how could that fool have gotten intel spanning the Yellow and Green Zones so fast?"

Working with the Commander? That's great...

"After leaving Griffin, I haven't been able to contact the Commander at all... Makiatto, it must be because of your outstanding skills that the Commander sought you out and asked for your help."

Years away from the battlefield have left me rusty in real combat.

If this keeps up, even if I get the chance to reunite with the Commander someday, I probably won't be able to assist them anymore.

"Hmph, of course! That idiot might be average at other things, but they sure know how to pick the right people for help."

"...That's great..." As I said it, I fired another shot—but this time, I missed.

With one final shot, Makiatto took down the last remaining tarantula.

The comms channel fell silent.

“Ahem, I didn’t expect you’d still hold up so well after being away from the front lines for so long. D-Don’t get too full of yourself—I’ll win next time!” Sensing my low mood, Makiatto sounded a bit awkward.

“...Those things I said earlier, I-I didn’t mean anything by them.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

It’s just my own inadequacy—how could that have anything to do with the people around me?

Makiatto said no more, holstering her gun and walking toward me. I straightened my clothes and stood up.

I’d heard the Commander had a long-term partnership with the café, so I’d planned to stay in CHE-02 until my assignment ended, hoping I might get a chance to see them... or at least hear their voice.

But now, it’s time to head back.

M200 Log4

■ March 4th, 09:17.

I brushed the dust off myself, waiting for Makiatto to reach my side. At that moment, a sudden exclamation from Makiatto burst through the comms channel.

But soon after, an unusual tremor rippled through the ground beneath my feet.

“Wah—!”

I quickly looked up. Not far away, yellow sand clouded the air as a sizable figure, accompanied by a swarm of dark shapes, emerged from underground. They sprayed webs toward Makiatto while rapidly closing in.

A pack of tarantulas!

I should’ve realized sooner! With so many tarantulas around here... their nesting grounds must be close!

I hurriedly checked the supplementary info for the commission: “Although burrowing tarantulas retain their pre-mutation solitary habits, due to environmental influences, these bio-remnants tend to establish nearby nests in the same area. Please exercise caution.”

Damn it, I should’ve noticed earlier!

“Don’t—don’t come near me! Get away, you bugs, aaah!” Sporadic gunfire echoed through the comms.

I quickly scanned the scene through my scope. The dust was starting to settle, but visibility was still poor—I could faintly make out Makiatto, like a small wooden boat amidst a surging tide of tarantulas, stumbling as she desperately dodged. The smaller tarantulas were faster, and a few seemed about to reach her, but she knocked them back with her rifle butt.

Makiatto’s performance is top-notch—she should be able to retreat to a safe zone—but she’ll need some time to regain her composure. I have to buy her that time.

What should I do? I can’t reach her in time at this distance. I remember the burrowing tarantulas’ weak point is their eyes... Let’s try it. Even if it’s just supporting fire, it’s better than nothing!

I immediately dropped to the ground, loaded my rifle, took a deep breath, and locked onto my target through the scope.

Makiatto stumbled and fell! A burrowing tarantula reared up, raising its forelegs high, its eyes exposed above the dust—Now!

The shot hit its mark, and the tarantula collapsed. The sound of gunfire snapped Makiatto back to her senses, and she broke through the encirclement, retreating to safety.

“M200! Cover me—let’s take them out!”

Some time later, the chaotic ground finally fell silent.

“Hah... hah... Finally done. Those were tough bastards...”

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt, right?”

“How could I be hurt?! ...But, good thing you were here. Me and these bugs... we don’t get along.” Makiatto shot a disgusted look toward the tarantula nests. “Too bad we couldn’t wipe them all out, but they’ve taken a heavy hit. They’ll probably relocate their nests soon. How about we head over later and destroy their nesting grounds in one go? That should count as a complete mission, right? M200... Thanks for earlier. Ugh—that was so embarrassing!”

“...Actually, Makiatto, did you do that on purpose?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You’ve been in and out of the Yellow Zone far more than I have these past years. You must’ve known there could be tarantula nests nearby, right? Even without me, with your combat skills, you could’ve handled it easily. Not shooting their eyes at close range—was that just to give me a chance to take the kills and cheer me up? Just like in the sniping contest earlier—after fifty meters, the gap between us never changed...”

"I know you did this because you and Springfield planned it. I'm sorry my skills aren't up to par, making you both worry about me..."

"Hey!"

I flinched. Makiatto had somehow walked right up to me.

"What are you going on about all by yourself?! Fine, I'll admit it—I went easy on you in the sniping contest... but only for the first half! The gap stayed fixed later because... because I couldn't catch up to you! And the burrowing tarantulas? That was genuinely an accident! Do I really have to admit something this embarrassing...?"

I lowered my head, unable to meet her eyes.

"And another thing! Stop doubting yourself all the time! Even you can do things I can't, okay? I've been drinking Sharkry's coffee for ages and can only say if it's sweet enough. You had it once and picked up on the... what was it, fruit acidity and beans?"

"That's not exactly a skill worth bragging about..."

"How is it not? Tweak your sensory modules a bit more, and at 'Zucchero,' Springfield would praise you a hundred times a day! The café down the street would be dying to poach you!"

"But I want to be useful to the Commander... And clearly, in the contaminated zones, the Commander only needs capable dolls like you, Makiatto. You worked so well together before, while I'm not even worth a commission from them..."

Yeah... Knowing how to taste coffee—how could that possibly help the Commander?

"Ugh, you idiot... A-Although 'Zucchero' and that guy work smoothly together now, it..."

Argh—fine, I'll just say it! At first, our collaboration with the Commander wasn't that seamless either... The commissions from the Commander only came because Springfield fully tapped into her intel network..."

"At the start, I was a little worried too. After so long without working together, I wondered if there'd be any slip-ups... A-Although that guy's easy to read! But after years apart, I was afraid I might not keep up in some areas... And then, midway through the mission, there was a small mistake... For a moment, I got scared—what if they thought leaving me behind back then was the right call? That'd be a disaster!"

"I-I'm not saying I was weak or anything! I just didn't want that idiot getting too smug! But in the end, Sharkry and I completed the commission perfectly, and our partnership solidified."

Makiatto crossed her arms, stammering through her story of working with the Commander. ...So even Makiatto has her worries?

"So what I'm saying is, being apart from the Commander for so long and feeling anxious about it—it's normal! It's not just you. I feel it, Springfield does too! But once you reconnect, you'll see—they might look different, but they're still the same old Commander. And... that idiot never judges us by 'useful' or 'useless,' right?"

"True... The Commander isn't like that."

"Besides, over the years, they've changed, and so have we! Whether it's on the battlefield or in everyday life, you clearly have your strengths. If you keep putting yourself down, you'll end up grinding away those shining qualities yourself. If you're really worried about your skills, then—then do what we're doing now! Come train with me in real combat every now and then. When the time comes to work together again, we'll show that idiot what we've got!"

I looked at Makiatto, arms crossed and puffing up indignantly, and couldn't hold back a laugh.

"They might look different, but they're still the same old Commander. And... that idiot never judges us by 'useful' or 'useless,' right?"

"True... The Commander isn't like that."

“Besides, over the years, they’ve changed, and so have we! Whether it’s on the battlefield or in everyday life, you clearly have your strengths. If you keep putting yourself down, you’ll end up grinding away those shining qualities yourself. If you’re really worried about your skills, then—then do what we’re doing now! Come train with me in real combat every now and then. When the time comes to work together again, we’ll show that idiot what we’ve got!” I looked at Makiatto, arms crossed and puffing up indignantly, and couldn’t hold back a laugh.

“W-What are you laughing at?”

“Heh... I can only say, that’s so like you, Makiatto. Thank you! I get it now!!”

“T-Thanks for what? I don’t get it!”

Makiatto’s face flushed red then pale, while I just kept giggling.

So, everyone feels the same as I do—I’m not alone...

I’d been so caught up in worrying and sulking that I overlooked how the Commander wouldn’t do the things I feared. I’ve been so unfair to them.

Yeah, I can’t keep going like this.

“Then I won’t say thanks.” I flashed Makiatto a smile and strode toward the tarantula nests.

“Let’s wrap up the mission and head back to report!”

M200 Log5

■ March 7th, 15:10.

I stood at the station, waiting for the intercontinental train back home. I'd originally come just to deliver a letter, so naturally, I was returning empty-handed.

But the three people seeing me off each held something in their hands.

"Here, this is for you... I-It's one of my hair ties! When you start overthinking again, look at it and remember what I said! If that doesn't work, give yourself a little tug with it to snap out of it!"

I took the gift from Makiatto and tied it to my ponytail. The long red hair tie fluttered in the breeze.

"With this hair tie, Miss M200 looks much more playful and cute than before." Centaureissi, who hadn't been at the café a few days ago, had finally made it to see me off on the last day.

"Hmph, of course! I carefully—er, casually picked it out!" Makiatto tried hard to suppress the grin tugging at her lips.

Centaureissi stepped forward and handed me a paper bag with the Zucchero Café logo, containing a box of tiramisu.

"We didn't host you properly this time, and I'm sorry for that. Please, Miss M200, do visit 'Zucchero' again. I heard from the manager that your sense of taste is incredibly sharp. I'd love to have enough time to ask for your help in refining our flavors."

"Sure, I'll definitely come back during my next break."

"M200, don't keep your worries to yourself anymore—we'll all help you. Oh, and this is from Sharkry. She had to stay behind to mind the shop, so she couldn't come see you off."

Springfield handed me a postcard. The back was filled with encouraging words written in glitter ink, and the front featured... a personal photo of Sharkry.

"If you want to rediscover that combat feeling, maybe try requesting field assignments from Kalina. Your excellence is obvious to everyone, and I'm sure Kalina would seriously consider it. By gaining experience and improving through your work, when you reunite with the Commander, M200, you won't be outshone by any doll."

"Thank you... Thank you all."

With the three of them watching, I boarded the intercontinental train back to Kyiv. As departure time arrived, the train sped away from the station.

There were no windows, so I couldn't look back at them, but their words of guidance and comfort still echoed in my ears.

I can't let their trust in me down anymore. With that thought, I opened a comms line to Kalina.

"M200? You're on your way back? How did the trip go?"

"Yeah, everything went smoothly. I'm on the train now."

"Good to hear."

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

"Go ahead."

"I was thinking, since the testing and teaching duties aren't too demanding... I'd like to help the Non-Military Forces Administration with some field assignments in my spare time. I can do it well—I won't cause any trouble. Please trust me."

"Oh? What's with this sudden interest?"

Over the comms, I recounted everything that had happened during the trip and shared my true feelings.

"So that's why you've been so down... No wonder 'Zucchero' managed to untie your emotional knots in just a few days. Sending you there was the right call."

"What... W-Was it that obvious? So that's why you sent me on this trip... to help me clear my head?"

"You could say that. But I'm ashamed to admit, it wasn't me who noticed something was off—it was one of your students."

An image flashed in my mind of that field operative calling me "Instructor" at the door. How had I not noticed back then? Her face had been full of concern and worry.

"M200, there are many people around you that care about you, even if you're away from the front line you are still contributing what you can. So, you shouldn't feel bad about yourself, you're doing great. **That person...** I believe he will be proud of you"

At the mention of the commander, Kalina has a bit of hesitation. But I can't exactly understand the reason. The words of caring in the past that I had brushed away, this time, I will firmly remember them in my neuro Cloud.

"Alright! I'll arrange the field assignments. No more moping when you get back, okay?"

"Yeah... Yes! I'll adjust my mindset and work hard!"

"That's more like it." Kalina chuckled lightly on the other end. "There's always hope for the future. I don't know how far off that future is, but I believe that one day, everyone from Griffin will reunite... in a different way."

As long as I hold onto hope and keep moving forward... one day, we'll all meet again at a new crossroads, smiling, right?

I gazed out at the bright blue sky beyond the window, and the smiling faces of so many people flashed before my eyes.

"Yeah!" I answered with a smile of my own.