

新機動
戦記 **ガンダムW** (ウイング)

Endless Waltz (エンドレス・ワルツ) **上巻**

矢立肇・富野由悠季原作

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Prologue

—AC-195 XMAS EVE—

A blinding flash tore through outer space.

The melancholic twinkle of distant stars eluded their gaze.

Neither the serene, ashen face of the moon, nor the sapphire radiance of Earth, nor even the miraculous living spaces suspended between them registered in their field of vision.

These warriors, their eyes fixated solely on targeting systems and the silhouettes of encroaching foes, perceived only the stark reality of combat.

The void of space, this desolate arena of conflict, stretched endlessly before them, a silent expanse of unfathomable cold and unspoken sorrow.

Yet even in this unforgiving vacuum, the flames of their convictions burned bright, compelling them to press on in their relentless struggle.



The fateful battle unfolded around MO-II, a colossal resource satellite drifting in the inky blackness of space. The mammoth battleship Libra stood impaled by the equally imposing Peacemillion, a testament to the ferocity of the clash.

On one side: the White Fang, revolutionary forces of the colonies, led by the enigmatic Milliardo Peacecraft. On the other: the World Nation Forces, championing Earth under the banner of Treize Khushrenada.

Their monumental confrontation ignited in the early hours of December 24th, reaching its crescendo before Earth had completed a single rotation. This cataclysmic engagement would later be etched

into history as the EVE WARS—a cruel irony, as peace was shattered on the very eve of a day meant to celebrate harmony.

The crux of this conflict, if one can ascribe meaning to the senseless brutality of war, centered on a pivotal question: which path should humanity embrace to secure a future free from bloodshed?

Milliardo, his spirit tempered by witnessing countless atrocities, declared with grim resolve:

"As long as Earth remains humanity's cradle, war will never cease. While those who've ventured into the unstable realm of space can completely reject conflict, but those who dwell in Earth's relative comfort will always find justification for conflict under the guise of self-preservation. This cycle has repeated since time immemorial. By severing humanity's ties to Earth, we force our species to channel its inner fire solely towards survival amidst the unforgiving void of space. Only then will the foolish notion of war become obsolete."

Treize, in stark contrast, embraced both warfare and humanity's inherent nature.

"War, for all its tragedy, elevates the human spirit to loftier planes. The act of taking a life is undeniably foolish, yet in those moments, the brilliance of the human soul shines with unparalleled truth. Ceasing hostilities due to precarious living conditions is but a temporary reprieve. Once stability returns, so too will conflict. To truly end war, we must nurture that spiritual growth until peace becomes humanity's deepest desire. Until that day dawns, even a peace enforced through dominion should suffice."

As the final battle reached its zenith, each man sought to manifest his ideology.

Milliardo, in a desperate gambit, ordered Libra and Peacemillion, titanic masses of metal and weaponry, to plummet towards Earth. The ensuing catastrophic impact would shroud the planet in a suffocating veil of debris, ushering in a new ice age.

Treize, ever the romantic, chose to engage in a noble duel within his mobile suit, the Tallgeese II. In doing so, he aimed to bequeath his lofty ideals to future generations before vanishing into the star-studded abyss.

Yet, amidst this clash of titans, a third faction emerged, one that rejected both extremes. They were the pilots of the Gundams, ultimate mobile suits serving as the voice of the downtrodden. These

young warriors refused to justify their actions with grandiose notions of "historical necessity" or "greater good."

Chang WuFei, pilot of the Altron Gundam, proclaimed: "The weak have no place on the battlefield."

Quatre Raberba Winner, at the helm of Gundam Sandrock, affirmed: "Humanity possesses an innate kindness. We must never deny that truth."

The youth known as "Trowa Barton," manning Gundam Heavyarms, stated simply: "All people truly need is a place to call home. Desire nothing more, and war becomes obsolete."

Duo Maxwell, piloting Gundam Deathscythe Hell, declared with a roguish grin: "Let us gutter rats shoulder the burden of fighting. Those living in peace should never be dragged into our sordid affairs."

And finally, the boy codenamed "Heero Yuy," master of Wing Gundam Zero, uttered a profound truth: "If all of humanity could recognize its own fragility... that alone would suffice."

Through their actions in this war, these pilots sought to prove a simple yet powerful idea: the future is not a gift bestowed by others, but a prize to be seized with one's own hands.

With Treize Khushrenada's death, the World Nation Forces conceded defeat. The age-old paradigm of opposition should have crumbled, and yet... the fighting raged on.

Wing Gundam Zero and Gundam Epyon, hailed as the mightiest among the mighty, continued their earth-shattering duel. Their clash embodied a pivotal choice for humanity: would the future be forged through individual will, or handed down by an omnipotent leader?

Lady Une, Treize's successor, addressed all of humanity:

"Can you feel it? The profound sorrow of this battle... Can you see it? The glimmer of peace beyond this veil of destruction... This conflict serves as a challenge, compelling each of you to contemplate the true nature of harmony."

In response, the colonial representatives issued a resounding declaration.

"We implore White Fang to withdraw their demands and seek peaceful coexistence with the World Nation of Earth. Furthermore, we solemnly vow to renounce all acts of aggression henceforth, and fervently hope the World Nation will join us in this commitment."

Humanity, of its own volition, took its first tentative steps on the path to lasting peace.

True peace, a world devoid of weapons, where the primal instinct for conflict is cast aside, replaced by hearts brimming with compassion for one's fellow beings.

Yet, in cruel defiance of this noble aspiration, a massive section of Libra plummeted towards Earth's atmosphere. Had this behemoth struck the planet's surface, claiming even a handful of lives, the dream of ending humanity's bloody history would have been shattered.

It was for this very reason that the pilot of Wing Zero, with unwavering resolve, positioned himself before the falling colossus. Amidst the inferno of re-entry, he unleashed a barrage of unparalleled fury, obliterating the threat.

This young man, who had waltzed with death countless times, recognized the value of his own life for the first time. Driven by an overwhelming desire to bear witness to the dawn of a new era, he achieved the impossible, escaping the jaws of certain doom against insurmountable odds.

The war had ended.

The colonies and Earth chose the path of coexistence, giving birth to the Earth Sphere Unified Nation with the promise of enduring peace.

—AC-196—

Today, no weapons of war exist within the Earth Sphere.
And yet...

1

Near the lunar orbit.

Yet the moon itself remained hidden, its pallid face obscured on the far side of Earth. This expanse of the cosmos was known in the After Colony era as the "L-3 Colony Cluster Zone."

Unlike the other Lagrange points from L-1 to L-5, this region bore a distinct character. Massive resource satellites, wrenched from the asteroid belt to maintain gravitational equilibrium with the moon, dominated the landscape. These celestial behemoths cast long shadows across the inky void, creating a celestial obstacle course of epic proportions.

Threading its way through this stellar debris field, a compact reconnaissance vessel charted a meticulous course. At its helm sat Sally Po, her keen eyes scanning the vast emptiness before her. Once

a military physician in the now-defunct United Earth Sphere Alliance forces, Sally had reinvented herself as a resistance fighter after OZ's devastating assault. Her unwavering commitment to peace had led her to fight alongside the Gundam pilots aboard Peacemillion during that fateful battle near the MO-II resource satellite. It was her bold strategy that had orchestrated the titanic collision between Peacemillion and Libra, averting catastrophe for Earth.

Now, Sally served as an agent for Preventer, the clandestine intelligence arm of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation. Colloquially known as the "Firefighters," this organization shouldered the weighty responsibility of snuffing out potential conflicts before they could ignite into full-blown conflagrations.

While echoes of Cold War-era espionage lingered in their methods, Preventer's objectives and the mindset of its operatives stood in stark contrast to their historical counterparts. These agents pursued twin goals: maintaining peace and eradicating combat weaponry. In their worldview, the very concept of an "enemy" had been rendered obsolete.

Thanks to Preventer's tireless efforts, the once-abundant stockpiles of military hardware (which agents referred to as "sparks") had dwindled to near nonexistence. Large-scale rebellions and terrorist activities (dubbed "fires" in Preventer parlance) had become relics of a turbulent past.

Perhaps most remarkably, Preventer achieved its peace-keeping mandate without resorting to displays of force or intimidation. The vast majority of Earth Sphere citizens remained blissfully unaware of the organization's existence. Only the President of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation and a select inner circle were privy to Preventer's operations.

This shroud of secrecy was no accident. The public emergence of a "Peacekeeping Force" would fly in the face of the foundational principle of complete disarmament. It would also contradict the colonies' solemn pledge to renounce all forms of combat. Moreover, by avoiding the trappings of a conventional military, Preventer sidestepped the pitfalls that had plagued the UESA, the temptation to wage unnecessary wars to justify its continued existence. This covert approach also precluded the rise of privileged elites, like the once-powerful Romefeller Foundation, who might seek to exploit such an organization for personal gain.

Regrettably, humanity still required this secret safeguard, a hidden bulwark against the erosion of hard-won peace.

Sally's current mission had brought her to this remote sector, chasing a lead that defied belief, an object that, by all rights, should not exist within the Earth Sphere. As her eyes scanned the void, a glint of light caught her attention.

"This is Water. I've confirmed our target," she reported, invoking her codename, "Water," a firefighter's essential tool.

"I've locked on."

A slender manipulator arm extended from the reconnaissance craft, delicately grasping a fragment barely tens of centimeters across.

As Sally guided the mysterious object into the ship's analysis chamber, a flurry of data cascaded across her monitor. Her eyes widened as the material's composition came into focus.

"Neo-titanium?"

This revolutionary alloy had been the brainchild of the Romefeller Foundation's weapons division in late AC-195. Developed to rival the legendary Gundanium alloy, neo-titanium boasted unparalleled hardness and lightness.

Pound for pound, neo-titanium weighed half as much as its conventional counterpart while offering more than double the strength. Its sole drawback lay in the exorbitant cost of production. Even the resource-rich Romefeller Foundation had balked at the prospect of mass-producing this wonder material, as the process demanded ten times the effort and expense of standard titanium refinement.

So why, Sally pondered, would such a precious substance be adrift in this desolate corner of space?

Conventional shuttles and space stations had no need for such extreme strength-to-weight ratios. Only one application justified such extravagance, the armor plating of mobile suits, those embodiments of military might where cost was no object.

"How did this get here..." Sally's voice trailed off, her questions hanging unanswered in the cramped cockpit.

A sense of foreboding settled over her like a heavy shroud.

"This... this could be the spark of a massive fire," she murmured, unable to shake the ominous premonition that clouded her thoughts.

2

L-4 Colony Cluster Zone.

This stretch of space, like its L-3 counterpart, was dotted with resource satellites plucked from the asteroid belt. Yet two key

distinctions set it apart: the satellites here were somewhat smaller (though still spanning hundreds of meters in diameter), and nearly all bore the mark of ownership. More precisely, they were the domain of a select few, chief among them, Quatre Raberba Winner, the youthful head of the Winner family.

At sixteen, this unlikely patriarch now stood within a depleted satellite block. Through the blue visor of his astro-suit, Quatre gazed upon a sight both awe-inspiring and melancholic: four massive capsules, more akin to colossal coffins, each housing one of the legendary mobile suits known as Gundams.

Silence reigned as Quatre's eyes remained fixed on the face of a Gundam, visible through a capsule window. While the satellite block retained some semblance of atmosphere—not enough to breathe unaided, but sufficient to activate the astro-suit's purification systems, Quatre felt an irrational urge to test its limits. Not out of curiosity for the suit's capabilities, but from a desperate desire to postpone, even briefly, the moment he'd have to leave his slumbering friends behind.

"As long as peace continues, there's no need for Gundams," A voice laced with resignation crackled through the comm channel.

Turning, Quatre found Duo Maxwell floating in the zero-gravity environment, clad in an identical astro-suit. Despite the cheerful grin visible behind Duo's visor, his eyes betrayed a profound melancholy.

Mere months ago, remnants of White Fang had attempted to seize the hidden Gundams. The very legend of these invincible machines had spawned a dangerous illusion among terrorists, that possessing a Gundam was the key to assured victory. This delusion had drawn Quatre, and subsequently the other Gundam pilots, into a vortex of conflict.

While disaster had been averted, the incident laid bare an uncomfortable truth: as long as the Gundams existed within the Earth Sphere, the threat of similar events loomed. These five extraordinary mobile suits, by virtue of their unparalleled capabilities, remained potential catalysts for a new war.

Quatre's hard-won conclusion was clear: the Gundams must be disposed of. Spent resource satellites in this sector were typically jettisoned towards the sun, partly to prevent potential collisions with nearby colonies, and perhaps partly inspired by Middle Eastern religious notions of returning all things to the cosmic mother.

The two pilots locked eyes through their visors. Quatre mustered a smile to match Duo's, but his words betrayed his true feelings.

"It's tough parting with them."

Duo appreciated Quatre's candor, but recognized the futility of wallowing in nostalgia.

"No, it's okay. Let's hurry and send them into the sun with this disposal block."

"Right."

Quatre's reply came swiftly, no further words necessary.

They propelled themselves towards the ceiling's metal beam, then made their way to the exit where a small shuttle awaited. Neither looked back as they sealed the airlock behind them—a final act of resolve, a nod to the machines that had been more than mere tools. Or, as Duo might say, to maintain a bit of masculine pride.

Quatre activated the remote switch. The resource satellite's thrusters ignited, slowly propelling the structure towards the distant, brilliantly shining sun. From the shuttle window, they watched the satellite's receding form, a maelstrom of emotions churning within them.

Though the vacuum of space carried no sound, both strained to catch even the faintest hint of the thrusters' roar.

Their whispered farewells—"Goodbye, my Sandrock..." and "See ya later, old pal..."—would never reach the friends entombed within the satellite.

The four Gundams embarking on their final journey:

Wing Gundam Zero - Model XXXG-00W0

Gundam Deathscythe Hell - Model XXXG-01D2

Gundam Heavyarms Custom - Model XXXG-01H2

Gundam Sandrock Custom - Model XXXG-01SR2

A fifth Gundam, Altron, model XXXG-01S2, was conspicuously absent. Its pilot, Chang WuFei, had likely balked at discarding his beloved "Nataku" so casually.

"WuFei didn't bring his after all," Duo mused.

Quatre, still watching the diminishing speck of light, replied, "No, he didn't. Heero and Trowa sent their Gundams to me right away."

"I wonder how everyone's doing..." Duo's wistful smile spoke volumes.

Months had passed since they'd last gathered. Perhaps they'd never meet again, each forging their own path. The only circumstance that might reunite them all was, Duo hastily banished the thought, finding it distasteful.

"What am I thinking? We've finally achieved peace..."

For the Gundam pilots, instruments of destruction, to assemble once more would herald the rekindling of war's flames, threatening the hard-won freedom and peace of countless lives.

Yet, contrary to Duo's hopes, that day loomed closer than anyone suspected. The fragment of neo-titanium discovered by the Preventers was but a harbinger, a component of the "ominous thirteenth constellation" poised to plunge humanity's future into chaos and darkness.

3

Relena Darlian had assumed the role of Vice Foreign Minister, serving as a crucial bridge between Earth and the colonies. In the newly unified Earth Sphere, "diplomacy" might not have been the most accurate term for her position. Yet, the need for skilled mediators remained paramount. Despite the physical unification, invisible barriers persisted, differences in living environments that hindered mutual understanding, and subtle discrepancies in consensus even among the colonies themselves.

Initially, Relena's position had been largely ceremonial, a far cry from the executive authority her adoptive father, Mr. Darlian, had wielded when he was one. While she lacked his official power, Relena's innate talent for fostering trust and her deft touch in peace negotiations quickly proved invaluable, surpassing her father's. In the mere three months since the war's end, her achievements had already outstripped those of state-appointed diplomats.

It was on the eve of her sixteenth birthday that Relena received formal appointment as Vice Foreign Minister from the President of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation. The news reached her during a stay at one of the L-1 colony clusters, igniting a spark of excitement in her heart. This promotion, she realized, would finally allow her to officially propose the "Mars Terraforming Project," an ambitious dream shared by countless individuals yearning for further space exploration.

Driven by a surge of inspiration, Relena devoted the entire night to drafting a comprehensive proposal. Her plan was to return to Earth at

the earliest opportunity and present her vision directly to the President. For her, the notion of transforming Mars into a second Earth was a dream she cherished deep within her soul.

That day, as Relena boarded the shuttle bound for Earth at the colony's spaceport, she found a light brown teddy bear placed on her seat.

Opening the card beside it, she saw only the words "Happy Birthday" written, but she knew who it was from.

Just minutes earlier, a young spaceport maintenance worker who had brushed past her in the shuttle's narrow aisle had placed it there.

Relena called out the technician's name towards the window.

"Heero."

As if he had heard her words, he briefly glanced back as he was walking away from the shuttle.

Confirming this, Relena smiled a bit mischievously and tore up the card he had given her.

"Next time, give it to me in person."

Of course, the technician couldn't hear these words.

However, these two had a relationship where they could understand each other sufficiently through such actions.

The maintenance worker left silently.

Relena hugged the teddy bear on her seat and thought,

"Now we're even..."

A year ago on her birthday, Relena had received similar treatment from him.

When he transferred to her school, St. Gabriel Institute, Relena had her birthday party invitation torn up.

And the words that followed were "I'll kill you..."

Until then, Relena had been the typical privileged young lady from a wealthy family, simply enjoying her good fortune. But from that moment on, she was drawn into a whirlwind of fate.

In truth, she was Relena Peacecraft, princess of the Sanc Kingdom, a nation devoted to total pacifism.

In AC-182, when Relena was two years old, the Sanc Kingdom was attacked and destroyed by the United Earth Sphere Alliance forces.

She was taken in by Mr. Darlian, a member of the Sanc Kingdom's senate, and raised until she was fifteen, completely unaware of her true identity.

The circumstances of her birth were revealed to her just before Mr. Darlian's assassination in the L-1 colony.

The former Relena, or rather, if she had been an ordinary girl, would have lost sight of her true self and been unable to cope with the unfolding events when confronted with this reality and truth.

However, after meeting "him" at St. Gabriel Institute, Relena seemed to develop a stronger will and desire for peace than anyone else.

In fact, after learning of her origins, she traversed an incredibly tumultuous fate, but within her heart grew an indomitable spirit unswayed by the times.

She managed to restore the Sanc Kingdom with great effort, only to have it quickly destroyed again by the Romefeller Foundation with its immense military power. She was then elevated to the position of Queen as a symbol of the World Nation by Duke Dermail, the Foundation's acting representative, only to have that position stripped away by Treize just days later. Such turbulent times raced past before Relena's eyes.

Even so, she never gave up and continued to strive for complete peace.

"It's all thanks to Heero..."

Relena always thinks this when looking back on the past.

"I had never been told "I'll kill you" before..."

The fact that she could think this way was proof that she had lived her life up until then being treated with deference by those around her.

That's why these words were so shocking, and they were sufficient as a catalyst for her significant growth afterward.

And the fact that there existed a boy of the same age who could utter such words and look at others with cold eyes was more pitiful and sad to her than her own fate.

However, that same boy with cold eyes had now prepared a birthday gift for her.

To respond to this, the words "thank you" were far from enough.

She felt she needed to return his feelings here.

"Step out of the shadows," she thought. "You've given people hope."

With this sentiment, she tore up his card. Though he was no longer in sight, Relena firmly believed that one day, Heero would understand and reveal his true self.

Carrying these thoughts in her heart, Relena began her journey back to Earth.

However, a whirlwind of activity awaited her upon her return. Her schedule was packed to the minute with invitations to events across the colonies and attendance at peace conferences. At one colony, she

even found herself caught up in a terrorist act by those who still desired war.

As things were, it was impossible for her to spearhead new projects. Reluctantly, she had to entrust the Mars Terraforming Project to someone she could rely on and focus on her duties as Vice Minister.

Six months passed in this manner. By early December, Relena finally received the official proposal for the Mars Terraforming Project. While immediate implementation wasn't possible, humanity needed to maintain its forward momentum.

Relena theorized that complacency in peace and dwelling on the past would lead to a slow decline. This decline could weaken humanity as a whole, causing people to lose their desire for independence and freedom. History had shown that such peaceful declines often created fertile ground for the rise of absolute rulers, as weakened populations sought powerful leaders to break the status quo.

The cycle was clear: escape from boring peace through revolution, which would then ignite into war, repeating the history of conflict. Relena believed that people should direct their full efforts not against opposing enemies, but against the challenges that stood in their way.

It was this pioneering spirit, brimming with hope, that had driven humanity to leave Earth and develop space colonies two centuries ago. Relena was convinced that pushing forward with the Mars Terraforming Project would inevitably shift people's consciousness away from war.

This was Relena's theory in pursuit of complete peace.

However, she didn't have time to devote herself to this plan.

A new job as Vice Minister came in.

The newly constructed colony X18999 in the L-3 colony cluster requested a doubling of the reconstruction budget for war damage and wanted to invite Vice Minister Relena Darlian as a colony representative.

While other colonies had extended invitations before, Relena had always politely declined. The issue here was the request for increased reconstruction funds.

The main battlefields of the recent war had been Earth, the lunar orbit's mobile fortress Barge, and the L-1 and L-2 colony clusters. While the war's impact had been widespread, the L-3 cluster, being on the far side of the moon, should have suffered minimal damage. The reconstruction budget had already been carefully allocated to ensure fairness.

Upon investigation, Relena discovered that X-18999 had been caught in conflict in AC-188, a year before the colony's completion, when United Earth Sphere Alliance forces clashed with colonial revolutionary armies over the colony's militarization.

The damage from that incident should have been repaired by the Alliance, and compensation for disarmament should have been provided to ensure peaceful utilization. Relena couldn't understand what justification the Earth Sphere Unified Nation could use to provide additional funds now.

"Everyone's trying to overcome these hardships together," she thought, feeling the need to meet with the colony's representatives in person.

Relena obtained permission from the Foreign Minister and hurriedly set off for Colony X18999.

However, she had no way of knowing that this quick decision and action would once again lead her into a wandering fate.

It had been nearly a year since the war's end...

4

From the depths of an unfathomable darkness, a gentle waltz begins to play, its melody drifting softly through the void.

*

—AC-196 XMAS EVE—

In the years leading up to this moment, the custom of celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, known as "Christmas," had all but faded into obscurity. Though perhaps a symbolic view, this erosion had begun the moment humanity discarded the "A.D. calendar" -- Anno Domini, Latin for "in the year of our Lord" -- and embraced the "A.C. calendar" -- After Colony -- heralding a new era of space exploration.

Moreover, mankind had lost the luxury of spirit required to celebrate Christmas. While devout Christians cried out that such times were precisely why the holiday should be observed, their pleas fell on deaf ears. Such was the bleakness that had descended upon this age.

In the so-called new era of space, denoted by the "A.C. calendar," December 24th was merely December 24th, nothing more, nothing less.

Yet, one year ago on this very day, "Santa Claus," disguised as the zeitgeist itself, bestowed upon humanity the greatest and most precious "gift" imaginable: the end of war and the dawn of peace. This offering was so magnificent that no amount of gratitude could ever suffice.

Gradually, people began to express their thanks with religious undertones. The war's conclusion on December 24th -- a date that had previously held no significance -- suddenly rekindled its original meaning.

Humanity, shying away from the weight of "choosing their future," found solace in viewing these events as a "miracle bestowed by God." They began to settle into this mindset, embracing the supernatural explanation for their newfound peace.

In a sense, the war's end on this particular day could be seen as a tragedy. If history -- a mere accumulation of coincidences -- could possess "intent," how malicious it would be to deliberately imbue this day with such meaning.

Who truly brought about this "end of war and peace"?

Within the Earth Sphere, only a precious few remained aware of this reality.

Now, thanks to the devout majority, a fervor for grandiose Christmas celebrations had swept across the entire Earth Sphere. Illuminated trees adorned city streets, while sandwich board men dressed as Santa Claus proliferated everywhere.

The economy, seeking new sources of prosperity beyond war, latched onto such festivities, and people welcomed this shift with open arms. These two factors created a synergistic effect, further amplifying the Christmas spirit.

The spectacle bore an uncanny resemblance to the Christmases of the late 20th and early 21st centuries in the "A.D. calendar" era, as if that bygone age had somehow returned.

In the vast expanse of space, the resource satellite MO-II floated, its exterior unchanged from days past. Yet, within its confines, a profound transformation had taken place.

The chamber that once served as the World Nation Army's nerve center now bore witness to a different spectacle. A towering Christmas tree dominated the space, its glittering ornaments a stark contrast to the utilitarian surroundings. Gone were the throngs of

uniformed soldiers and the palpable tension that once permeated the air. In their place, gentlemen in crisp tuxedos and ladies adorned in vibrant party dresses mingled, their relaxed laughter and animated conversations creating an atmosphere of conviviality.

However, this gathering was not merely a Christmas celebration. Here, at the site of the final battle, a solemn ceremony marked the first anniversary of the war's end.

Lady Une and Lucrezia Noin stood apart from the crowd, their understated yet elegant formal suits a conscious choice that reflected their conflicted feelings about the event. Though the two women had little in common, they shared a reluctance to attend such gatherings. Yet, the significance of the occasion demanded their presence, a sentiment evident in their carefully chosen attire.

Lady Une found herself drawn to a window, her gaze dropping to the floor beneath her feet.

"A year ago, I stood in this very spot," she thought. Here, she witnessed Treize's final moments. Now, as if honoring his deepest wish, humanity had seized peace with their own hands.

She understood, with crystal clarity, that this "end of war and peace" was no divine gift, nor a whim of fate or history. It was the result of humanity's conscious choice, a hard-won prize claimed through sheer determination.

Had this peace been a mere "present" from above, a product of chance, or simply another example of the fragile "balance of power" seen throughout history, this ceremony would have taken on a vastly different tone. Instead of celebrating the anniversary of peace, it would have devolved into a somber memorial for fallen heroes like Treize Khushrenada, fraught with undercurrents of vengeance and deepening divides.

Lady Une's gaze shifted between the anniversary ceremony and the incongruous Christmas tree, her mind grappling with the implications. Were people embracing peace unconsciously, or did some part of them recognize the weighty responsibility that came with this hard-won tranquility?

Like toddlers taking their first steps, humanity faced this new era with a mixture of trepidation and joy. Had they truly learned to reject war, their steps faltering yet resolute?

She found herself wondering what Treize would say if he could witness this scene. Her eyes drifted to the window once more, taking in the literal sea of stars stretching infinitely beyond. Somewhere among those twinkling lights, Treize had scattered to stardust.

"Come to think of it, I haven't visited Treize's grave in a while," she mused. Her current role as director of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation's intelligence agency, "Preventer," kept her incredibly busy. She found herself thinking of Treize less frequently than she ever thought possible.

A wry smile played at the corners of her mouth. "How things change..." she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Noin, catching Lady Une's soft sigh, offered a slight nod. Though they might interpret the sentiment differently, it mattered little. Now, as a member of the Preventer organization, Noin served under Lady Une's command, much as she had during their days in OZ.

Despite their past conflicts, no lingering resentment clouded their current relationship. In this new era of unity, where all opposition was to be cast aside, there seemed little point in dredging up old grievances.

While friendship might be too strong a word to describe their bond, both women dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to their duties, united in their desire for lasting peace.

As the ceremony drew to a close, the inaugural President of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation took center stage. This man, chosen through democratic elections by representatives from Earth and the colonies, stood as the embodiment of their collective will. Though Earth-born, he was a rarity among politicians, untainted by connections to the infamous Romefeller Foundation. His background as a laborer before entering politics made him a palatable, if unremarkable, choice to shepherd humanity into its new future.

He was no towering figure of charisma, lacking the oratorical prowess to stir hearts or the bold vision to drive sweeping reforms. This middle-aged, average-built man was, in many ways, the quintessential everyman. His unremarkable presence in such an exalted position was a testament to the brilliant minds that surrounded him, advisors and staff who genuinely yearned for peace.

Fully aware of his limitations, he wisely delegated the intricacies of governance to his capable team. The creation of Preventer, the clandestine intelligence agency, was a prime example of their ingenuity. His role had been reduced to rubber-stamping documents and gracing events with his presence.

Now, as he began his speech, he was performing the modest task that justified his generous salary.

"We are here to remember the many lives lost as a result of a foolish war. However, those lives were not lost in vain. That's because

the many departed souls left us with valuable lessons and tools for reflection. So finally, we've been able to attain peace. Those many precious lives have become the foundation..."

To Noin's ears, this string of platitudes rang hollow, sounding like the naive jubilation of those who had stumbled into peace without truly understanding its cost.

"Surely we've fulfilled our duty by now," Lady Une murmured, discreetly distancing herself from the assembly. Noin followed suit, their backs turned as the President's vapid oration droned on.

"We, the people of the Earth Sphere, must celebrate this 'peace' of our 'new era'—built upon immeasurable sacrifice, with both wisdom and solemnity."

"The president doesn't get it," Noin's lips curled into a small, sardonic smile. "It's harder to maintain peace than it is to attain it."

Like many, the President seemed to have either forgotten or failed to recognize the gravity of actively choosing peace. His words betrayed a dangerous complacency. Dwelling solely on past reflections and regrets would not suffice to preserve their hard-won tranquility. Those who sought to reignite conflict would eagerly exploit such complacency.

Yet Lady Une's perspective differed. To her, it was enough that people recognized peace as inherently good, regardless of their depth of understanding. Let the burden of vigilance fall to Preventer and diplomats like Relena. Even this Christmas cheer, in its naivety, served a purpose.

As they reached the exit, Lady Une turned for a final glance at the still-pontificating President. Her initial judgment softened. "He must understand," she mused aloud, catching Noin by surprise. "Otherwise, the government wouldn't financially back us Preventers."

The organization's budget was a closely guarded secret, a necessary deviation from the transparent governance promised by democracy. Any leak of this information would surely cost the President his position, a weighty risk for an elected official to shoulder.

"He's pretty smart," Lady Une concluded, directing a gentle smile towards the Earth Sphere's chosen leader. "for a person elected democratically."

Noin, grasping the nuance in Lady Une's words, mirrored her smile and nodded in agreement.

Perhaps bolstered by their unspoken support, though of course, he couldn't have known, the president's speech showed no signs of abating.

*

"Sure you can miss the rest of the ceremony?"

Sally's face on the communication monitor betrayed a hint of exasperation as she addressed Noin. Her expression seemed to say, "Couldn't this have waited until after?"

"Preventers only put out fires," Noin replied, her tone devoid of any self-deprecation. "These ceremonies don't suit us."

Shifting to her characteristically diligent demeanor, she pressed on, "So?"

"There's a possibility that the Neo-titanium is from the thirteenth constellation," Sally reported, her words laden with implication.

Their exchanges always cut straight to the chase, stripped of unnecessary pleasantries. Though Sally made a conscious effort to soften her delivery, Noin seemed entirely unperturbed by the directness.

Preferring blunt communication, Noin exhaled heavily.

"You mean it's a new mobile suit model?"

In the days of OZ, mobile suits were often christened with names from the zodiac, separate from their model numbers. Leo for the lion, Taurus for the bull, Aries for the ram. Initially tied to their "birth" signs upon completion, this practice had become diluted over time, with later models like Mercurius and Vayeate breaking the pattern.

Preventer, particularly Sally, had taken to calling any discovered mobile suit parts the "Thirteenth Constellation." A grim reminder of the threat they posed.

Now, that threat loomed before them, all too real.

"I'm using various sources to determine where it's from," Sally continued. Her team of skilled operatives was working tirelessly to trace the Neo-Titanium's source. A breakthrough seemed imminent.

Attempting once more to soften her words, Sally added, "We've gotta put out this fire while it's still small."

Noin struggled to nod in agreement, though Sally hadn't expected an easy acquiescence. They shared the same unshakable dread.

Was it already too late?

The discovery of armor components suggested the new mobile suit was nearing completion. Both women sensed that this situation far outstripped the "minor fires" they'd dealt with before, terrorist plots and localized conflicts paled in comparison.

Noin, her face taut with tension, made a rare attempt to temper her words.



"This isn't going to be quite as simple as our last few missions."

"I agree," Sally murmured, the gravity of the situation robbing her of any desire to soften the blow.

A massive conflagration, revolution, or perhaps war. Was their era of peace about to plummet back into the abyss of chaos?

The curtain was rising on a new, tragic waltz of conflict.

5

Inside Colony X18999, the landscape was dominated by abandoned high-rise buildings, their construction frozen in time. Exposed rebar rusted silently, while loose tarps fluttered in the artificial breeze. Idle cranes dotted the skyline, standing as mute sentinels over a cityscape seemingly forsaken.

Wild vegetation had claimed the construction sites, a testament to the prolonged absence of human activity. Even accounting for the colony's recent establishment and the Christmas holiday, such desolation seemed implausible.

The implications of this scene eluded Relena as she gazed out the window, her mind grappling with doubt.

"Could the ESUN's reconstruction budget truly have been insufficient?" she mused, though her instincts suggested otherwise.

Relena found herself in the uppermost floor of the colony representatives' building, purportedly the most impressive structure in X18999. In a spacious conference room, she sat with a handful of delegates around a grand circular table.

Their meeting had paused to observe the President's address, broadcast live from the MO-II resource satellite. Relena, finding little value in the tedious speech, had turned her attention to the colony's stark cityscape beyond the window.

A delegate's voice drew her back to the present.

"As you're aware, it's been only seven years since Colony L3-X18999 was completed."

Relena turned to find that none of the representatives were paying attention to the broadcast. Their eyes were fixed on her, eager to resume their discussion.

With a slight nod, Relena indicated her readiness to listen.

The delegate continued, his tone beseeching, "We've invited people from Earth to come live here, but our unstable economy is preventing the population from growing."

The implication was clear, without a growing population, economic vitality remained elusive, creating a vicious cycle that the Unified Nation's budget couldn't adequately address.

"The problem is whether the citizens understand that they're members of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation," Relena offered, her voice uncharacteristically gentle. She hoped to convey that economic prosperity was a universal desire, and that aid had been allocated as generously as possible.

"One can't expect a stable lifestyle if one's own colony alone is prospering," she added.

A younger delegate rose, interjecting, "But we've been told that many citizens here hope for a strong leader to rise up and guide them."

Relena was taken aback. Whether this sentiment stemmed from the burden of representation or dissatisfaction with the egalitarian ideals of the Unified Nation, it ran counter to the progress they'd made.

"Someone like yourself, Vice Foreign Minister Darlian..." the young man continued.

Relena found herself at a loss for words. She had already declined such notions before the meeting began, and the delegation had seemed to understand. Repeating her refusal would only invite more persistence.

"Why do they seek a figurehead so readily?" she wondered silently.

Reaching for her teacup, Relena noted the liquid had cooled. Still, she took a sip, buying time to formulate her response. Even in this small gesture, her innate grace was evident.

With a hint of sadness in her voice, she murmured, "That's a shame. Finally, true peace and freedom has been attained..."

As she moved to set down her cup, a sudden wave of dizziness washed over her.

"What...?" she thought, feeling strength drain from her fingers.

The cup clattered to the floor, its contents seeping into the plush carpet. Through increasingly clouded vision, Relena caught sight of the delegates' faces. Their lips curled into subtle smirks.

"They're... smiling..." The realization of her predicament came too late as consciousness slipped away. Relena slumped in her chair, succumbing to an unnatural slumber.

"Finally, she drank it," an older delegate remarked, eyeing the fallen cup. They had gone to great lengths to administer the drugged tea.

The charade of requesting additional reconstruction funds and inviting a representative had been elaborate. In the end, they had even revealed the true desires of the colony's inhabitants.

Indeed, X18999 awaited the arrival of a powerful leader, but not the sleeping beauty now slumped in the chair.

On the wall monitor, the President's speech droned on. As it reached its climax, the conference room door swung open. A group of soldiers in military uniforms entered with practiced precision, surrounding Relena's chair.

The elder delegate addressed them, "Please escort her with care."

"Understood," came the curt reply.

"Our hand is complete now," the delegate mused.

"Indeed," the soldier's leader affirmed, gently lifting Relena. His gaze shifted to the monitor, a wicked grin spreading across his face.

"Those lacking leadership should make way for those possessing it."

As one, the assembled group turned contemptuous eyes toward the President's image, their disdain palpable in the air.

*

In a dimly lit room, the television screen cast the sole illumination, its flickering light dancing across the walls. On the monitor, the President was concluding his lengthy address, his voice raised in triumphant tones, though the volume had been lowered to a murmur.

"It is our sincere wish that peace will last forever," his words barely audible as he bowed, descending from the podium amidst a swell of applause and cheers from the assembled dignitaries.

A childlike giggle echoed softly, swallowed by the room's shadowy confines.

Two figures occupied this space, their eyes fixed upon the screen. One, the source of the laughter, was a young girl. The other, a slender elderly man.

As the old man used a remote to switch off the monitor, he spoke, his words dripping with derision towards the President's closing remarks.

"Nothing wrong with wishing for peace. The real question is whether mankind is ready for it."

His statement carried an air of arrogance, as though addressing not just the girl beside him, but all of humanity, the President included. The young girl, clearly, understood this implication.

"We'll just have to teach them how to deal with it. Won't we, Dekim?" she mused, her voice carrying a wisdom beyond her years.

"That would be correct, Miss Mariemaia," Dekim responded, bowing low to the girl.

This Mariemeia, barely more than a child, was the figure the soldiers had reverently referred to as those possessing leadership.

"My father entrusted me with these Christmas presents. I must deliver them to the people," Mariemeia said, a smile playing across her youthful features.

The "Christmas present" she spoke of was, in fact, hundreds of new model mobile suits, stored in a secret location. There was no doubt that the reconstruction budget provided by the Earth Sphere Unified Nation had been funneled into their creation, explaining the unfinished state of X18999's high-rises.

This "Thirteenth Constellation" had been christened Serpent. Its neo-titanium armor gleamed a brilliant silver, its form both beautiful and ominous. The design exuded an aura of power, as though it could alter the very course of history.

6

Trowa Barton. He still used that name, not so much by choice but because those around him knew him by no other. Catherine Bloom, the star performer of their circus troupe, was among those who addressed him thus.

"What are you talking about? Trowa is Trowa," Catherine would likely retort if the subject ever arose. "It's not like you have another name, right? So just stay as Trowa."

Her sisterly demeanor and penchant for fussing over others made it seem as though she truly believed herself to be his older sibling. Trowa, too, found himself occasionally lulled into a sense of familial comfort when in Catherine's presence.

It was a peculiar sensation, this nostalgic warmth of family, especially given that he had never known such bonds.

"I've never had a family, not since birth," Trowa would remind himself. "This feeling of nostalgia must be nothing more than an illusion."

He rationalized this "illusion" as a lingering after-effect of his bout with amnesia, now fully recovered. It was easier to accept it as such than to delve deeper into its meaning.

Unbeknownst to Trowa, Catherine harbored similar feelings of *déjà vu*. "Why is it that being with Trowa feels like being with him?" she often wondered. The "him" she referred to was her younger brother, lost to her when she was merely four years old.

The memory took her back to a time when the Bloom family was touring Eastern Europe...

—AC-182—

The gentle clop of hooves echoed through the tranquil countryside as the Bloom family's wagon trundled along a winding dirt road. From within its canvas confines, the plaintive wails of an infant pierced the air.

"There, there, little one. Hush now, Triton..."

Four-year-old Cathrine cooed, attempting to soothe her inconsolable baby brother.

From the driver's seat, their father's curious voice drifted back. "Cathrine, sweetheart, whatever possessed you to name the boy Triton?"

"You do realize he's your second-born, not your third?" he added with a chuckle, alluding to the Greek meaning of the name.

"Oh, Papa!" Cathrine protested, her voice brimming with childish indignation. "Triton is the handsome god from mythology!"

"Ah, I see..." their father mused, clearly still perplexed but unwilling to dampen his daughter's enthusiasm.

Beside him, Cathrine's mother leaned in, whispering an explanation. "It's from that picture book she loves so much."

"Ah, got it," he replied, a hint of wistfulness creeping into his tone. "Perhaps I shouldn't have promised to let her name him. It feels as though I've been robbed of a father's cherished privilege..."

The Blooms were no ordinary family, they were the star trapeze artists of a traveling circus, their gravity-defying acts drawing gasps and applause from audiences in even the most remote corners of Europe. They had briefly parted ways with their troupe for the birth of their son, but now the family of four was en route to reunite with their circus family in a quaint town nestled in Eastern Europe.

Fate, however, had other plans for the Bloom family's journey.

As they neared the border, their tiny wagon found itself caught in the crossfire between the UESA forces and the insurgents who opposed them. The skies above erupted in chaos, Alliance bombers raining destruction from above while anti-aircraft fire from the rebels lit up the heavens in defiance.

The Alliance's superior firepower transformed the once-peaceful borderlands into a nightmarish inferno. Trapped in this unexpected maelstrom, the Bloom family's wagon had nowhere to flee.

"My love," Mrs. Bloom's voice quavered with fear.

"It's alright," her husband assured her, his calm belying the gravity of their situation. "Take the children and find shelter in one of the buildings. Quickly now!"

As flames licked ever closer, Mrs. Bloom lifted a terrified Cathrine from the wagon. In that fateful moment, a stray shell, its trajectory wickedly askew, struck the canvas cover with devastating precision.

Before Cathrine's disbelieving eyes, the wagon exploded in a violent conflagration, taking with it her father, mother, and newborn brother. The horrific scene seared itself into her young mind, defying comprehension.

"Papa... Mama... Triton..." she whimpered, rooted to the spot as the wagon's remnants crackled and burned around her.

Time seemed to lose all meaning as Cathrine stood there, shell-shocked and alone. It wasn't until a member of the local militia stumbled upon her that she was finally led to safety, a small park that had been hastily converted into a refuge for those displaced by the fighting.

Though miraculously unscathed by the flames, Cathrine remained mute, the trauma of what she had witnessed rendering her temporarily unable to speak. In the days that followed, the young girl made countless pilgrimages between the park and the site of the explosion, desperately searching for any sign that her family might have survived. But not even bones remained to mark their passing.

As the sounds of battle faded and the region fell under Alliance control, Cathrine found herself aboard a truck bound for the town where her circus family awaited. It was a fragile thread of hope to which she clung.

"Surely, they've gone ahead without us," she told herself, the words a feeble attempt at comfort.

But it was a hope destined to be dashed. While the familiar faces of her circus family greeted her upon arrival, the absence of her parents and brother was a void that could not be filled.

"Listen, Cathrine," the troupe's leader, a man who had always been like an older brother to her, said gently, "You still have us. We're all family here, every last one of us in this circus."

The words were meant to console, but in that moment, all Cathrine could manage was a weak nod of acknowledgment. From that day forward, the circus became her home.

*

It was thirteen years later when Cathrine first encountered Trowa. For reasons she couldn't quite fathom, Cathrine found herself viewing Trowa as though he were a younger brother, despite their mere three-year age gap. This wasn't the first time she had met a boy younger than herself, yet Trowa alone stirred these peculiar feelings within her.

Now, as the year AC-196 drew to a close, Cathrine and Trowa's circus was on tour through the L-3 colony cluster. Their performances had been met with enthusiasm everywhere they went, everywhere except colony X18999. Here, the audience numbers were a mere shadow of what they were accustomed to, barely a tenth of their usual turnout.

"I can't believe how small the crowd is today," Cathrine murmured, peering out from behind the stage curtain at the sparse crowd.

"Trowa?"

Trowa stood with his back to her, resplendent in his beast tamer's costume, if one could call his near-bare torso a costume at all. His sculpted physique bore testament to years of rigorous training, marred here and there by small, old scars, silent witnesses to battlefields past.

Cathrine's gaze was drawn to an extensive burn scar that covered Trowa's entire back. It was so faint, so well-healed that it nearly blended with his skin tone, visible only upon close inspection. She noticed that all the smaller scars lay atop this underlying burn.

"That burn on your back... where did you get it?" she asked, curiosity piqued.

Trowa turned, his face partially obscured by the half-mask of a clown, part of his signature act as the comedic beast tamer.

"I don't know," he replied, his voice as impassive as his masked visage. "I've never been burned."

Cathrine's brow furrowed in disbelief as Trowa continued, "It's been there for as long as I can remember. Probably just an odd birthmark."

Cathrine knew better.

"That's definitely a burn. And an old one at that, like he got it as a newborn..."

A nagging feeling tugged at the corners of her mind, but she pushed it aside for now.

Trowa moved to stand beside her, surveying the near-empty seats.

"You're right, the turnout is abysmal," he mused.

It wasn't just poor attendance, it was abnormal.



Circus performances were a rarity in the colonies, typically drawing crowds eager for novel entertainment. The presence of live, exotic animals like lions, tigers, and bears was an especial draw, usually packing their tent to the rafters with hundreds of wide-eyed spectators.

Trowa's gaze settled on a group of men in suits lingering near the exit at the back of the upper tier. Despite the abundance of empty seats, they remained standing, as though anticipating the arrival of someone yet to appear. Trowa's keen eye didn't miss the dull glint of metal beneath one man's jacket, the unmistakable outline of a holstered pistol.

"I see," Trowa muttered, the pieces falling into place. "It looks like this colony has other forms of entertainment."

"Other forms of entertainment? What do you mean?" Cathrine asked, puzzled by his cryptic remark.

"I'm gonna check it out," Trowa declared, striding purposefully towards the tent's exit.

A cool breeze caressed Cathrine's cheek as she watched him go. "Trowa..." she called out softly, knowing it was futile to try and stop him.

Her eyes fell to the ground, where Trowa's discarded clown mask lay forgotten. A mantra from her past rose unbidden to her lips, a quiet reassurance.

"It's alright. Trowa will come back... after all, he's a child of this circus."

The words, once a source of comfort to her younger self, now felt hollow as she whispered them into the empty air.

Trowa burst into action the moment he stepped outside the tent, engaging the suited men in a swift, brutal confrontation. With lightning-fast precision, he incapacitated his opponents before they could even register what was happening. In a matter of minutes, Trowa stood alone among the unconscious forms.

Kneeling beside one of the fallen men, Trowa deftly searched the inner pocket of his suit jacket. His fingers closed around an ID card, and with practiced ease, he input an eight-digit passcode. Instantly, the blank card transformed into a detailed identification badge.

This passcode, a relic from his days in military intelligence, was a skeleton key of sorts, capable of bypassing even the most stringent security measures. The badge revealed its owner to be an ordinary company employee. However, the concealed firearm told a different story. This colony, it seemed, harbored dangerous secrets.

"The Barton Foundation," Trowa murmured, his eyes narrowing as he recognized the organization's name. It was a name that carried personal significance, the very surname he had adopted as his own.

A wave of self-recrimination washed over him.

"Careless," he chided himself. "I should have known better than to use that name here in L-3, especially in X18999." The Barton Foundation, after all, was one of the most influential powers in the L-3 colony cluster.

His mind raced, piecing together the implications.

"I guess he hasn't given up yet," Trowa mused. "Or maybe it's Leia's daughter."

A name surfaced from the recesses of his memory.

"I think her name was Mariemaia."

Unbidden, an image from a year ago flashed before his eyes, a photograph of a young girl who would now be seven years old. While it seemed implausible that a child could pose any real threat, Trowa had learned never to underestimate even the most unlikely possibilities.

His thoughts drifted back to the early days of AC-195, before he had assumed the name Trowa Barton. Back then, he was a nameless mechanic working on a secret mobile suit project in the L-3 colony. The machine, designated XXXG-01H Gundam Heavyarms, had captivated him with its formidable weaponry. He had poured himself into its assembly and calibration, finding a strange sense of purpose in the work.

It was during this time that the suit's pilot had taken an unusual interest in him.

"Hey, no-name," the man would call out, seemingly unbothered by Trowa's taciturn nature. The other workers had long since given up trying to engage the silent young mechanic in conversation.

One day, the pilot had pulled him aside.

"I'll show you something I've never shown anyone," he had said, producing a photograph from his flight suit. It depicted a carefree three-year-old girl alongside a striking woman in her twenties.

"Her name is Mariemaia," the pilot had explained, a note of pride in his voice. "She's my sister's daughter."

The woman holding the child, he learned, was named Leia.

"Thought they both died, but turns out the kid survived," the pilot had continued, drawing Trowa closer with his muscular arm. His next words had sent a chill down Trowa's spine.

"She'll be Earth's leader after we conquer it."

Trowa etched the name "Mariemaia" into his memory.

Now, as he carefully replaced the ID card in the unconscious man's jacket, those words echoed ominously in his mind.

"Perhaps his prediction is coming true after all," he thought, his face betraying none of the turmoil within.

Trowa's gaze swept across the colony's skyline, settling on the cluster of unfinished skyscrapers in the distance. The half-built towers stood like silent sentinels, a testament to abandoned ambitions. As he began to walk towards this desolate urban landscape, Trowa felt a sense of resolve solidify within him.

He had made his decision.

It was time to return to the stage.

*

—AC-190—

At just ten years old, Trowa had already found himself center stage in the theater of war. Even then, he was nameless, a child without family, without a home, without a past to call his own.

The earliest memories he could claim were of life as a mercenary, where scorched earth and the cacophony of battle were as familiar to him as lullabies to other children. Yet, in the war-torn borderlands of Eastern Europe, his story was far from unique. Countless children shared his fate, bereft of home, family, education, or ideology. Their only path forward was that of a hired soldier, a role thrust upon them by the unforgiving stage of conflict.

Despite the grim circumstances, the nameless boy clung to a fragile hope. Somewhere, he believed, there must be a place he could call home. This belief was his lifeline, the thin thread that kept him tethered to sanity amidst the chaos.

Standing in the midst of battle, playing the part of a mercenary, he longed to cry out, "Where is my place to return to?"

His gaze often drifted skyward, seeking solace in the distant stars that peeked through the haze of smoke and gunpowder. To him, those faint pinpricks of light seemed to mirror his own precarious existence.

"Space..." he would muse, "It must be better than here." The evening star, lonely and bright in the twilight sky, became a symbol of his own quest for belonging. "Perhaps that star, too, is searching for its home," he'd think, finding a strange kinship with the celestial wanderer.

During this time, the boy found himself part of a mercenary mobile suit squad aligned with rebel forces. The squad's leader, Roberto, known as "Doomed Roberto" for his consistent string of defeats, had taken the young boy under his wing, teaching him the brutal basics of survival.

Despite his reputation for failure, Roberto stubbornly refused to switch sides, even when defeat seemed certain. It wasn't out of loyalty to the rebel cause or any moral stance, he simply found the idea of betrayal too troublesome. The nameless boy admired this about Roberto, recognizing a certain integrity in the man's stubborn nature.

One day, as they regrouped in a makeshift camp after yet another retreat, a young mercenary approached Roberto.

"Captain, why don't we switch to the Alliance forces this time?" he suggested. "We can't keep losing battles and expect to eat."

Another chimed in, "I heard the Alliance pays well."

But Roberto just laughed his usual boisterous laugh and bellowed, "You idiots! The rebels are the reason this war keeps going. If we all joined the Alliance, the war would end, and then where would we be?"

His piercing glare made it clear, the end of war meant the end of their livelihood. The others grumbled, "That's why you'll always be 'Doomed Roberto.'"

"Damn right!" Roberto guffawed, slapping the nameless boy on the back. "No false advertising here!"

Turning to the quiet child beside him, Roberto said, "Hey, No-Name."

The boy rarely spoke, to the point where his comrades wondered if they'd forgotten the sound of his voice. But in that moment, after a long silence, he chose to speak.

The sudden speech from the usually silent boy caught everyone off guard. Not only were they surprised by his voice, now deepened by puberty, but also by the content of his words.

"Captain... I found a child," he said, his tone as impassive as ever.

Pressed for details, the boy, still known only as No-Name, offered only the barest facts. He had encountered a girl, roughly his age, emerging from the depths of the forest during a retreat. Upon meeting her, they discovered she was like so many others in this war-torn region, a orphan of conflict, alone in the world.

The girl called herself Middie. Though No-Name referred to her as a child, she was likely a few years his senior, with a mature demeanor and a height nearly matching his own. Middie expressed her desire to

work, even if it meant mere kitchen duties in the rebel camp. It was, after all, preferable to starvation.

One day, as No-Name tinkered with equipment, Middie approached him with a question.

"Why did you help me?"

In a rare moment of openness, No-Name answered, his gaze fixed on the evening star.

"Because we're the same," he said simply.

Confused, Middie pressed, "What do you mean?"

"You are me," came his cryptic reply.

No-Name fell silent once more, but Middie, seemingly understanding something unspoken, removed the rosary from her neck and offered it to him. A gesture of gratitude, she said, smiling as she explained that God would watch over him now.

Yet her eyes remained cold, and No-Name sensed the unspoken thought behind them: I don't like you.

Days passed, and No-Name found himself absently fingering the rosary. Though he held no belief in God, wearing it felt like an acknowledgment of Middie's unspoken feelings.

It was during this time that Roberto entrusted No-Name with a secret mission, a night raid on an Alliance base to capture supplies and mobile suits. The boy felt a surge of pride at being the only one trusted with this information.

As they set out in their outdated Leo mobile suits, Roberto was uncharacteristically optimistic about their chances of success. However, upon reaching the Alliance base, they found themselves ambushed. To their shock, the enemy Leos were piloted by their own comrades from just the day before, now clad in Alliance uniforms.

"Sorry, Captain. We can't stick with you any longer," one called out.

"War's meaningless if you don't win," added another.

Roberto's reaction was trademark, a boisterous laugh followed by his usual "You idiots!" But then he added, with a hint of pride, "Who apologizes to the enemy?"

This was the harsh reality of their world. Betrayal and switching sides were commonplace, not worth dwelling on.

The scene unfolded with a chilling casualness, the former comrades now facing each other as enemies without a hint of remorse.

"We're under contract to wipe out all rebels. Be prepared," one of the turncoats announced.

Roberto laughed heartily, "Now that's a sudden breach of contract!"

With that, he launched into attack, his former subordinates responding in kind. Despite the circumstances, there was an eerie

synchronicity to their battle, a testament to their shared experiences and professional detachment.

No-Name provided cover fire, listening to the almost jovial banter between Roberto and their former allies as they traded potentially lethal blows. It was a stark reminder of the mercenary mindset, where life and death were just part of the job.

Suddenly, Roberto's Leo stuttered to a halt. His antiquated heavy machine gun had jammed, an all-too-common occurrence with the rebels' outdated equipment. Roberto clicked his tongue in frustration, resignation settling over him.

"Looks like this losing streak ends here," he muttered. "Make it quick."

The Alliance Leos showed no sympathy, one pilot commenting dryly, "This is why we said rebel-issued weapons are all junk."

As they raised their new, Alliance-issued weapons, No-Name seized the moment. With lightning speed, he rammed into the enemy Leo, wresting away its advanced weaponry and unleashing a merciless barrage. In the aftermath, Roberto survived while their former comrades vanished in a cloud of smoke and debris.

"They weren't aiming for you," No-Name observed coldly.

"And that softness cost them their lives," Roberto replied.

No-Name's face remained impassive as he continued, "I don't regret it. Defeating the enemy before you is only natural."

"You're not human, are you?" Roberto mused.

"No. I've been a soldier since birth."

Later, as they returned to camp, Middie confronted No-Name with her usual icy demeanor.

"Can't you put on a sad face?" she asked as she handed him his meal. "You killed your former comrades. Couldn't you shed even a single tear?"

"I used up a lifetime's worth of tears as an infant," No-Name replied matter-of-factly.

Middie, seeing through to the core of his being, pressed on.

"So you'll just keep killing your own heart like this? How long do you plan to wear that tearless mask?"

No-Name pondered her words. As long as he stood on this stage called the battlefield, he knew he could never remove this jester's mask.

"As long as I live," he finally answered.

That night, the Alliance launched a massive operation to eliminate the rebel forces. As carpet bombing rained down on their camp, No-Name managed to escape, pulling Middie along with him.

"Just like before, I won't thank you," Middie stated coldly.

"I didn't expect you to," No-Name replied.

"I have no value in living anyway," she added.

In this, perhaps, lay the one thing No-Name and Middie truly had in common, an inability to find value or meaning in their own existence. Both were adrift in a world that had shown them nothing but cruelty, unable to grasp any purpose beyond mere survival.

As they fled the bombardment, No-Name spoke, his voice devoid of emotion.

"I'm the same," he said, echoing Middie's sentiment about the lack of value in their lives.

Back at the camp, Doomed Roberto fought valiantly to the bitter end, true to his moniker until his last breath. The rebel forces were obliterated, leaving only Middie and No-Name as survivors.

Standing before Roberto's lifeless body, No-Name turned to Middie, his voice cold.

"How much did the Alliance pay you?"

Middie's reply was equally chilling.

"Enough to keep my three brothers and sick father barely alive."

No-Name realized then that all their movements had been compromised. The night raid, the camp's location, Middie had revealed everything. She smiled enigmatically.

"But you alone survived, No-Name."

His hand went to the rosary around his neck. The transmitter. How careless he'd been. In a rare display of anger, No-Name tore off the rosary and aimed his gun at Middie.

"So, you can get angry after all, No-Name," Middie observed.

But No-Name's anger was directed inward, at his own failure to see the betrayal coming. Middie continued, her words laced with bitterness.

"You once said, 'You are me.' But that wasn't true at all. I wasn't as fortunate as you."

"Fortunate? Me?" No-Name's disbelief was palpable.

"You're free," Middie explained. "You have nothing tying you down. No name, no past, no family. Not even comrades anymore."

As Middie spoke of her own burdens, her name, her sick father, her brothers, No-Name realized that his inability to cry stemmed from having killed his heart too thoroughly.

"That's why I had to do this, to kill so many people just to survive," Middie continued, tears welling in her eyes. "Do you know why I can't tell the person I like that I like them?"

No-Name remained silent, uncomprehending.

"Because I'm not empty like you. I hate people as empty as you. I'm full, full of family, of life, of guilt."

Middie's tears flowed freely now, her eyes filled with a sadness that belied her words. No-Name sensed her unspoken truth: I love you.

"Is that all you have to say?" No-Name asked, his finger tightening on the trigger.

I admired you, came Middie's unvoiced thought.

"You're better off than me," No-Name said softly. The evening star had appeared, a faint glimmer through the smoke.

"You have a place to return to."

A gunshot rang out, but Middie remained unharmed.

No-Name had destroyed only the rosary transmitter.

As he turned to leave, Middie called out, "Wait, No-Name!"

Without turning back, he replied, "You've got the wrong person... I'm not No-name."

Looking up at the sky, he added, "I'm a traveler searching for a place to return to."

With those words, the boy once known as No-Name set out on a journey that would take him to the stars.

*

Trowa, now in the bustling streets of Colony X18999, was carefully approaching a young girl named Mariemaia. However, he had no intention of using the name "Trowa Barton" this time.

"Your name?" the interviewer asked.

"Ralph," Trowa replied, choosing a name at random. "Let's go with Ralph Kurt."

With this simple exchange, Trowa once again stepped onto center stage, donning the mask of a clown anew.

7

As Heero sat in the first-class cabin of the colony shuttle, his eyes fixed on the computer screen before him, he had already discarded the codename "Heero Yuy." Not out of dislike, but because with his "mission" complete, the name had lost its purpose. Yet, he found himself ready to reclaim it once more, driven by the alarming data scrolling across his screen.

The shuttle was preparing to depart from the lunar orbit relay station, bound for the L-3 colony cluster. As always, Heero had secured his luxurious accommodations through hacking, and had further infiltrated the station's network to access the latest intelligence.

"My bad feeling was right on the mark," he muttered, having detected the information that Preventer had uncovered. His keen instincts had led him to recognize the dangerous undercurrents at play, spurring his urgent journey to L-3.

"X18999..."

The name of the colony stirred something within him. To call it nostalgia would be inaccurate; rather, it was a place where bitter memories still lingered.

Heero's actions were almost unconscious, driven by something deeper than a sense of justice or a desire to maintain order and peace. Nor was it exactly about settling old scores. If asked, he would likely say.

"I'm just acting on my emotions..."

This would be Heero's second visit to Colony X18999. The first had been when he was just eight years old.

*

—AC-188—

The bustling immigration checkpoint at the L-3 Colony Cluster's central spaceport hummed with activity. Amidst the crowd, an unlikely pair drew curious glances, a world-weary middle-aged man and a solemn eight-year-old boy.

With practiced nonchalance, the man produced two passports crafted from ID cards and presented them to the stern-faced immigration officer. The officer's eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the documents.

"Odin Lowe and... Odin Lowe Jr.," he intoned, his voice tinged with suspicion.

The elder Odin nodded curtly, hefting a battered violin case onto the counter. The case had seen better days, its leather scuffed and worn from countless journeys.

"A musician, are you?" the officer inquired, his interest piqued.

Odin's lips quirked in a rueful smile. "Once upon a time. Now it's just a hobby, a memento of days gone by. My son and I, we're on a journey together."

The officer's gaze shifted to their destination, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"Colony X18999? But that's not even completed yet, surely?"

"If you'd care to read more closely," Odin replied, a hint of impatience coloring his tone, "you'd see we're not exactly tourists."

"An ex-artist signing up for the backbreaking labor of colony development?"

The disbelief was evident in the officer's voice.

Odin retrieved the passports with a thin-lipped smile.

"I've been called eccentric before. It won't be the last time."

This exchange, tense as it was, proved sufficient to clear their path through immigration. Ever since the tragic assassination of Heero Yuy, the colonies' visionary leader, inter-colony travel had become a labyrinth of red tape and suspicion. Only those involved in colony development were granted passage, and even that exception was dwindling as new colony construction slowed to a trickle. X18999 stood as the lone frontier in a stagnating era of expansion.

The fateful day that changed everything, April 7, AC-175. The day a single bullet, fired by an operative from the then-fledgling OZ organization, rewrote the course of human history. The assassin's name may have been lost to the annals of time, but the repercussions of his actions echoed through the decades that followed.

Now, as the shuttle bound for X18999 prepared for departure, Odin leaned close to his young companion, his "son," his voice barely above a whisper.

"Listen, kid. You need to act more like my son. We had a deal, remember?"

The boy's piercing blue eyes met Odin's, a cold intelligence lurking behind their depths.

"Fine... *Dad*," he replied, the word dripping with sarcasm.

The true nature of their relationship, how this unlikely duo came to be posing as father and son, remained shrouded in mystery. Yet the influence of this chapter would resonate far into the future. Years later, when this same boy would don the mantle of a Gundam pilot and adopt the codename "Heero Yuy," his penchant for infiltrating educational institutions as part of his missions would be a direct echo of the lessons learned during these formative years with Odin.

Colony X18999 loomed like a gleaming sentinel, its completion slated for AC-189. This wasn't just another habitat; it was a testament to the intertwining of civilian aspirations and military strategy. The United Earth Sphere Alliance Space Force had its fingers deep in the colony's design, backed by hefty investments from the colonial financial powerhouses.

The reasoning behind this unusual collaboration was clear. At the time, the mobile fortress Bulge orbiting the moon served as the primary military stronghold in space. However, the powers that be felt a pressing need for a similar presence in this L-3 colony cluster, positioned on the far side of the moon. A space colony not primarily intended for habitation was a rarity, even in this era.

Within the residential sector of X18999, a man named Odin and a young boy whiled away the hours in listless silence. Their forged passports and fabricated occupations were a gilded cage, limiting their movements lest they draw unwanted attention.

The boy's gaze was fixed on the star-speckled void beyond the window, or perhaps on his own reflection ghosting against the glass. His eyes held a universe of unspoken thoughts.

Odin's voice cut through the silence like a blade.

"What do you see, boy? The hateful cosmos that stripped you of everything? Or the hollow shell of a person you've become?"

The boy's face remained an impassive mask as he countered with his own query, his voice as cold as the space beyond.

"Why did we come to this colony?"

"To abandon you," Odin replied, his hands busy extracting a violin from its case. But this was no ordinary instrument – piece by piece, it transformed into a sniper rifle under his deft touch.

"A coup is brewing here," he continued, his voice matter-of-fact. "You'll use the chaos to embed yourself. You know how – I've taught you to survive."

The boy's next words dripped with bitter familiarity.

"So, who's the target this time?"

A ghost of a smile played on Odin's lips as he assembled the weapon. "Septum, a Brigadier General of the Space Force. This is my swan song. After this, you're free to chase that mirage called a normal life."

The boy entertained the notion, the alien concept of ordinariness tantalizing yet terrifying. But deep down, a voice whispered doubts. How could hands stained with blood ever hope to grasp at normalcy?

His response was predictable, a mantra born of a life thrust upon him: "I make my own choices."

True to Odin's prophecy, X18999 erupted into chaos mere days later. AC-188 was a year of widespread colonial unrest, a coordinated dance of rebellion that spoke of invisible strings being pulled by unseen hands. At the heart of this particular insurrection stood a man named Quinze, future founder of the White Fang.

Once an aide to the visionary colony leader Heero Yuy, Quinze had been driven underground by OZ and Alliance forces after Yuy's assassination. Now, he emerged as the maestro of this rebellion, conducting a symphony of destruction with eight stolen Alliance mobile suits known as Tragos.

As Quinze's forces advanced on the colony's nerve center, inside the central command post, Brigadier General Septum seethed at the lack of reinforcements.

"What in blazes is going on?" he bellowed.

"The emergency communication network upgrade was delayed, sir," an aide explained.

Septem's glare, however, was fixed on the man in the suit beside him – Dekim Barton, representative of the Barton Foundation that had bankrolled most of X18999's construction.

Barton's usual confidence wavered under the general's glare.

"We... we didn't anticipate such a premature uprising."

Septum's contempt was palpable.

"Tch. This is why we can't trust you damn colonists."

A communications officer interrupted the tense exchange.

"Sir, the OZ Specials cadets are requesting permission to engage."

Septum's eyes narrowed.

"The Specials? Wasn't some upstart named Treize their instructor?"

After a moment's contemplation, a cruel smile twisted his lips.

"Very well. Let's show these pampered nobles the difference between war and their childish games."

As four Leo mobile suits prepared for launch under the command of the young Treize Khushrenada, the future of the Earth Sphere hung in the balance. The OZ Specials were not yet the force they would become, and Treize himself was but a 17-year-old instructor. Yet, this battle would be the first glimpse of his legendary reputation.

Treize's voice rang out, steady and assured.

"Gentlemen, there is no training more effective than actual combat. Trust in your preparation, and you need fear nothing."

The nervous energy of his young charges was palpable, but they clung to his words like a lifeline.

"We may be outnumbered, but agility is our ally," Treize continued. At that moment, a transmission crackled through from the forward command post.

"Instructor Treize, communication networks remain severed," reported Cadet Noin.

"Understood. We'll engage in individual combat. Accurate intel will be crucial – I'm counting on you, Lucrezia."

"Yes, sir! You can rely on me," came the determined reply from the 12-year-old girl, her voice straining with the effort to sound more mature than her years. "And sir, please call me Noin. On the battlefield, there is no distinction between male and female soldiers."

A soft chuckle escaped Treize. "As you wish, Cadet Noin."

With that, Treize led his small force into the fray. The entry of the Specials' Leos turned the tide of battle. Quinze's rebels found themselves outmaneuvered and overwhelmed, their Tragos units falling one by one to the precise, coordinated assault of Treize's team.

It was a display of tactical brilliance.

From the rooftop of a towering edifice, Odin and the boy observed the unfolding chaos below. The cityscape, once pristine, now lay scarred by the violent dance of mobile suits.

"Well, well," Odin mused, a hint of admiration in his voice. "It seems the Alliance has some rather competent commanders in their ranks."

The boy, his face an impassive mask, dissected the battle with cold precision. "The coup forces are mere amateurs," he stated, his tone clinical. "Their first mistake was failing to neutralize the forward fortifications. Now they're vulnerable to isolated attacks." His eyes narrowed, a glint of something dangerous flickering in their depths. "If it were me, I'd have this command post toppled in no time."

"No doubt," Odin nodded, a sly smile playing on his lips. "Want to give it a shot?"

"I'm done being your errand boy," the boy retorted, his voice edged with finality.

"I see..." Odin's response hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken history.

In all their time together, Odin had never forced the boy's hand. He had always respected the child's autonomy, allowing him to chart his own course. His guidance had been limited to the art of survival, nothing more.

"Let me impart one final piece of wisdom," Odin said, his words measured, each syllable deliberate. "It's about the right way for a human to live."

The boy listened, curiosity piqued despite himself.

"Whatever happens, act on your emotions."

Confusion flashed across the boy's face, the meaning eluding him.

Odin's gaze drifted to the horizon, his voice taking on a contemplative tone.

"Long ago, a single bullet fired by some fool changed the course of history. Since then, I've distanced myself from organizations, living purely by my feelings."

Their philosophical moment was abruptly shattered as two Alliance artillery soldiers burst onto the roof, weapons raised.

"What are you doing here?" they demanded.

In a blur of motion, Odin's knife found its mark in one soldier's throat. Simultaneously, the boy sprang into action, executing a perfect sliding tackle that sent the second soldier crashing to the ground, rendered unconscious by the impact.

Their teamwork was flawless, a deadly dance honed by years of shared experience.

Odin, unfazed offered no praise and continued his discourse.

"No matter how meticulously you plan, you can never predict when some idiot might alter the future. Better to live by your emotions and have no regrets."

As he spoke, Odin methodically stripped one of the fallen soldiers, donning the uniform with practiced ease.

"That's the 'right way' for a human to live, giving your all to each moment."

Silently, the boy inspected the anti-MS cannon left behind by the soldiers, checking its functionality with expert hands.

The scene before them, a man preparing for his final mission, a child handling a weapon of war, seemed a fitting tableau for this pair.

Odin pulled the helmet low over his eyes.

"Well, this is goodbye," he said, his voice tinged with an emotion the boy couldn't quite place.

"Don't push yourself," the boy cautioned, a rare moment of concern slipping through his stoic facade. "You're not as young as you used to be."

A chuckle escaped Odin's lips.

"Heh, I don't need life advice from a brat like you."

Despite his words, a warm light shone in his eyes, visible even through the helmet's visor.

As Odin turned to leave, the boy's final words hung in the air between them.

"Don't die."

The main boulevard leading to the central command post had been transformed into a smoldering wasteland, wisps of acrid smoke rising from the scarred earth.

Through this desolate scene, the boy ran like the wind itself, his feet barely touching the ground as he raced towards the heart of the battle.

Meanwhile, in the central command post, Septum's frustration with the still-inoperative communication network reached a boiling point. His voice, sharp with irritation, cut through the tense atmosphere.

"I don't care how you do it, just get those damn lines working!"

Even the most fortified command center couldn't withstand a siege indefinitely without reinforcements. Driven by desperation, Septum decided to take matters into his own hands. He stormed to the site of the emergency line installation, his face a thundercloud as he berated the workers, driving them to work faster.

It was there that a lone soldier called out to him, bringing Septum to an abrupt halt. The distance between them, several dozen meters, was unusual, setting off alarm bells in Septum's mind.

"Who goes there?" Septum barked, his eyes narrowing. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Something was off. No proper soldier would address a superior officer from such a distance. Unless...

"You're..."

Septum's eyes widened in shock as recognition dawned. This was no ordinary soldier. This was a ghost from his past, one he knew all too well.

In a flash, memories cascaded through Septum's mind. He remembered this man as a former OZ special operative. More damningly, he recalled giving this very man the order to assassinate a colony representative, back in those shadowy days.

The false soldier, Odin, raised his sniper rifle with deliberate slowness, his movements fluid and practiced.

"Stop!" Septum's plea rang out, desperate and futile.

Without hesitation, Odin squeezed the trigger. In that fraction of a second, Septum's bodyguards sprang into action, throwing themselves before their commander. Their bodies became a living shield, absorbing the lethal shot meant for Septum.

It wasn't love or admiration that drove these men to sacrifice themselves. Rather, it was an unwavering dedication to duty, a stroke of fortune for a man like Septum.

Dropping to the ground, Septum barked an order to his remaining guards, his voice hoarse with rage and fear.

"Shoot! Don't let that bastard escape alive!"

A hail of bullets erupted from the guards' weapons, filling the air with deadly projectiles. Odin, his movements a blur, dodged and weaved through the barrage, making his escape.

But fate had one last card to play. As Odin fled, a stray bullet found its mark, tearing through his leg.

"Tch... sloppy of me," he muttered through gritted teeth, chiding himself even as pain lanced through his body.

With a final burst of effort, he disappeared into the shadowy depths of the underground.

In the plaza before the central command post, two Tragos units found themselves surrounded by four Leos. The once-mighty coup force had been reduced to this pitiful remnant in a matter of hours.

Far from the battle, inside the command vehicle, Quinze stared blankly into space, his mind reeling.

"Impossible... Our plan was flawless..."

Suddenly, Dekim's voice crackled over the comm.

"Withdraw. The operation has failed."

Quinze bristled at the order.

"You dare command me?"

"Communications are back online," Dekim replied, his voice low and unnervingly calm. "Allied reinforcements will arrive any moment. We needed more thorough preparations."

With that, the line went dead.

Frustration boiling over, Quinze barked into his mic, "Damn it all! Retreat!"

The command vehicle began to pull away.

A young OZ cadet, blood still hot from battle, cried out, "Instructor! The enemy command is escaping!"

Treize, ever the tactician, advised against pursuit. But the overzealous cadet, drunk on adrenaline, opened fire on the retreating vehicle with his Leo's machine gun.

In that moment of distraction, a gap opened in the encirclement. The remaining Tragos seized the opportunity, ramming into the cadet's Leo. As the young pilot's mobile suit crashed to the ground, the rebel forces made their escape.

Still, Treize held his forces back. To give chase now would leave them vulnerable to being picked off one by one.

The battle seemed over, but a lone figure appeared atop the fallen Leo. A boy, wielding an anti-MS cannon, his eyes blazing with defiance as he took aim at the forward command post.

Noin's blood ran cold as she realized their peril.



"He's targeting us!"

The boy fired. In that split second, Treize's Leo leapt into the line of fire. The shell struck home, and Treize's mobile suit crumpled to the ground.

By cruel coincidence, both Odin and the boy had failed in their missions under similar circumstances.

The boy vanished, leaving behind the discarded weapon. There was no protocol for pursuing a single person with mobile suits, and even the hot-blooded cadets knew better than to try.

Despite his injuries, Treize's first concern was for his comrades. "Noin... are you alright?"

"Y-yes, sir. I'm so sorry..."

It was this very compassion that inspired such fierce loyalty in the young Specials soldiers. Remarkably, this would be Treize's only injury until his dramatic demise years later, a scar he would wear not as a mark of shame, but of honor.

Meanwhile, in the shadowy depths of the command center's armory, Odin tended to his wounded leg. A voice, low and controlled, emerged from the darkness.

"Are you alright?"

Odin turned, recognizing the speaker.

"Well, if it isn't you..."

He produced a detonator from his pocket, showing it to the figure in the shadows.

"Don't worry. One press of this button, and this place goes up in flames."

"I see..."

Suddenly, a gun materialized from the darkness, aimed squarely at Odin.

Odin's lips curled into a wry smile.

"Silencing me? No need for that."

The shadowy figure spoke as they slowly squeezed the trigger.

"This isn't about silence. This is vengeance."

The bullet tore through Odin's chest, a single, fatal shot.

"So... this was your plan... from the start..."

Who had hired Odin Lowe for this job? Whose vengeance had sealed his fate? Those secrets died with him, buried in darkness.

As the mysterious presence faded away, the boy appeared. He found his former partner clinging to the last threads of life.

Odin mustered a final smile.

"Hey, kid. Should've listened to your advice... I'm too old for this game."

"Hold on. I'll secure an escape route."

"Too late for that... Get out of here... on your own..."

Odin's eyes began to close.

"These past few years with you... weren't so bad."

With those final words, Odin Lowe breathed his last.

The boy's expression remained coldly impassive. His gaze fell on the detonator in Odin's hand.

"Is this your unfinished business?"

Without hesitation, he took the device and pressed the button.

Explosions rocked the armory, flames erupting throughout the central command post. Panic gripped those inside as fire and smoke filled the corridors.

In the chaos of the command room, Septum barked orders.

"Extinguish those fires! Use the colony's environmental controls if you have to!"

The colony's rain simulation systems activated, drenching the burning building. Yet in his panic, Septum had triggered a localized downpour rather than a colony-wide storm, a display of the small-mindedness that would later make him vulnerable to OZ's machinations.

Years later, as the United Earth Sphere Alliance crumbled in AC-195, Septum would meet his end at the hands of Colonel Lady Une during his attempt to flee from the New Edwards Base.

In the rain-drenched ruins, a soaked boy stood motionless. The raindrops on his cheeks could have been mistaken for tears, but his eyes were devoid of emotion, untouched by sorrow.

The boy hesitated, unsure of his next move. Finally, with no clear destination in mind, he began to walk.

As he trudged through the downpour, a voice called out from the shadows between two crumbling buildings.

"Hey, you..."

The boy halted, his gaze falling on a disheveled old man lurking in the darkness.

"Those are good eyes you've got," the old man remarked, his voice rough with age.

The boy remained silent, his face an unreadable mask.

"What do you say, boy? Want to pilot a Gundam?"

It was the first time the boy had ever heard the word 'Gundam'. Later, he would come to know this weathered figure as Doctor J, a brilliant but enigmatic scientist.

Without hesitation, the boy replied, "Very well."

In that moment, standing amidst the ruins of his old life, drenched by artificial rain, the boy made a decision. He chose to live by his emotions, just as Odin had advised in his final lesson.

*

Bestowed with the codename "Heero Yuy" by Doctor J, the boy's journey had led him to this moment. True to his nature, acting on pure instinct, he now found himself investigating the rising tensions within Colony X18999. The computer screen before him flickered with recently hacked data on Mariemaia, fruits of his relentless digital infiltration.

Heero's eyes scanned the information, his voice a monotone as he read aloud: "Mariemaia Barton. Born AC-189. Mother, Leia Barton, deceased two years later. Father, unknown."

Unbeknownst to Heero, Leia Barton had been a nurse at a Barton Foundation hospital during the X18999 conflict seven years prior. There, she had encountered a young, injured OZ Specials instructor. The data before him couldn't reveal that this chance meeting had resulted in Mariemaia's birth.

It's Christmas. But someone always gets stuck working."

The sudden voice from behind didn't startle Heero. He turned to find Duo, a fellow Gundam pilot, leaning against the doorframe. Heero wasn't surprised by Duo's appearance; he could guess how the braided pilot had tracked him down. Like Heero, Duo possessed keen instincts, likely sensing the brewing crisis on X18999.

Duo's eyes flicked to the screen.

"Didn't know Trowa had a niece."

"So the records say," Heero replied flatly. "But the Trowa we know isn't the real 'Trowa Barton!'"

"Right, I almost forgot."

Heero pulled up another set of data before abruptly standing.

'This shuttle is too slow,' he thought, his mind already racing ahead.

"Heading out?" Duo asked, reading Heero's intentions.

"Yeah," Heero confirmed, grabbing his jacket as he moved towards the door. He paused only to share a crucial piece of information: "Relena's been kidnapped."

As Heero's footsteps faded, Duo found himself both surprised and oddly reassured by his comrade's unchanging nature. With a shrug

and a smirk, he couldn't resist a parting quip, even if Heero was already out of earshot.

"Anything at all for the one you love," he chuckled.

Realizing Heero was long gone, Duo set off in pursuit. He knew their destination: Colony X18999. And to get there as quickly as possible, they'd need to 'borrow' a high-speed shuttle.

Minutes later, Heero and Duo had effortlessly commandeered a shuttle, their exceptional skills making short work of any security measures. The craft roared to life, launching from the relay station and setting a course for X18999.

8

On December 24th, at 16:00 colony standard time, an eerie stillness enveloped the cityscape of X18999. Trowa Barton stood in a spartan room, his keen eyes taking in the austere furnishings, a single window, bed, and desk, with an attached bathroom. For a low-ranking soldier, it was surprisingly comfortable. Even in OZ's heyday, junior specialists had to share quarters.

Trowa had infiltrated X18999's military under the alias "Ralph Kurt," borrowing the identity of a former comrade who had once served alongside him before he became the pilot of the Gundam Heavyarms. The real Ralph, Trowa recalled, had resurfaced months ago, joining the White Fang remnants in a misguided attempt to seize a Gundam and dominate Earth. That plan had crumbled, along with what remained of White Fang.

'He's probably living a mundane life now,' Trowa mused, confident his borrowed identity wouldn't raise suspicions.

As he donned the issued uniform, Trowa couldn't help but be impressed by its quality.

"The Barton Foundation... such extravagant resources," he thought. "No wonder they've lined their pockets so well, lurking in the shadows."

The foundation's opportunistic allegiances, supporting the Alliance, then OZ, then White Fang, stood in stark contrast to the pacifist stance consistently maintained by the wealthy Winner family.

Trowa's investigation had revealed that the Barton Foundation was no longer led by a Barton, but by the chairman of an investing company. Records claimed that Dekim Barton, the representative

during the AC-188 X18999 conflict, had perished, with only partial remains and personal effects recovered.

"On paper, that is," Trowa smirked, knowing that Dekim had been alive at least until a year ago. April 7, AC-195, twenty years to the day after Heero Yuy's assassination, saw the launch of Operation Meteor, Dekim's brainchild, though its execution differed greatly from his original vision.

Dekim had likely faked his death, pulling strings from the shadows through countless conflicts.

"But it seems he's ready to step into the light..."

Trowa's self-imposed mission was simple: kill Dekim Barton.

"It's not murder if the man's already dead," he reasoned ironically, aware of the paradox in his own officially deceased status.

"Specialist Ralph, assembly time," a guard's voice cut through Trowa's musings. The term "specialist" sent an uneasy chill down his spine, reminding him of only one organization in history that used such nomenclature.

"Assembly's in the underground mobile suit hangar. Hurry up."

"Understood."

Trowa's calm facade belied his growing apprehension. Dekim's intentions were becoming increasingly inscrutable.

"What is that man planning?" he continued to muse, "Well, I'll find out soon enough."

As Trowa made his way to the mobile suit hangar, he steeled himself for whatever revelations awaited.

The underground sector of X18999 was a marvel of modern engineering, a stark contrast to the half-finished skyscrapers above ground. Its robust structure and thick bulkheads suggested it could withstand even mobile suit combat.

As Trowa ventured deeper, he realized everything, from the entrance to the elevators, was scaled for mobile suits. Then he saw them: five Serpent mobile suits lined up against the hangar wall.

"So this is their trump card," Trowa mused, unimpressed. While advanced, they didn't seem to match a Gundam's capabilities. Little did he know, these five were just the tip of the iceberg, over 500 Serpents waited in the wings, a force dwarfing even the 200 mobile suits once used to crush the Sanc Kingdom.

Trowa fell in line with the other soldiers, thinking, "If this is all they have, it might be manageable." Five mobile suits alone couldn't spark a revolution or war. Only Gundams had ever managed that feat, and even they had fallen short in the end.

The assembled soldiers, Trowa included, stood before one Serpent, with the other four forming a perimeter. Tension hung in the air as they awaited their leader's arrival.

Finally, a slender, black-cloaked elderly man stepped forward. Trowa's suspicions were confirmed, it was Dekim Barton himself.

Dekim ascended a platform.

"Comrades... the time has come to rise up for His Excellency, the late Treize."

Trowa stiffened, glancing at his fellow soldiers. Were they all OZ remnants or Treize loyalists?

Dekim bowed deeply.

"We thank you all for your efforts to tolerate the intolerable and bear the unbearable over this past year."

While no one wept, several soldiers were visibly moved.

Raising his cunning face, Dekim continued, his voice gaining strength. "Today you are starting on the road to glory alongside Miss Mariemaia, carrying on His Excellency Treize's legacy! The awakening of a new humanity will be triggered by the soldiers of Mariemaia, and we shall be the symbol of hope for the people."

Trowa was baffled.

Why would Mariemaia inherit Treize's will? How could these once-brilliant OZ soldiers follow a seven-year-old girl?

"But, before we start..." Dekim's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the ranks. "we must eliminate all threatening elements."

Trowa tensed.

"They've known all along."

The soldiers parted, leaving Trowa exposed. He stepped back, but escape was impossible.

Dekim raised a pistol.

"Trowa Barton, proceed to the front."

"Tch..." Trowa hadn't expected to be called by that name. They'd seen through everything.

Dekim took aim and fired, but Trowa leapt, gracefully evading the bullet. With acrobatic finesse honed in the circus, he landed on the platform beside Dekim.

Even Dekim was momentarily stunned by Trowa's speed. Seizing the opening, Trowa drew his own gun, aiming at Dekim in a blur of motion.

But faster still, a gleaming blade appeared at Trowa's nose.

"Impossible..."

Trowa couldn't believe someone had outpaced him.



The weapon was a familiar dragon fang sword. Trowa's disbelief deepened as reality set in.

"Hold it," the sword-wielder commanded, his voice as cold and familiar as his piercing gaze.

The name escaped Trowa's lips before he could stop himself.

"WuFei."

Chang WuFei, his fellow Gundam pilot, looked down at Trowa with eyes as frigid as his voice.

9

Lucrezia Noin's large shuttle streaked through space near Earth's surveillance satellite orbit, a precarious path where the slightest miscalculation could pull her into Earth's gravity well. The urgency of her mission demanded such risks.

Amidst the intense piloting, an encrypted communication came through. With practiced ease, Noin opened the channel while maintaining speed, a feat only possible for someone of her caliber, a former high-ranking OZ officer and exceptional mobile suit pilot.

Sally's voice crackled through the static-filled monitor: "This is Water. Respond on secret lines D to R."

"So, they've pinpointed the location," Noin thought, switching to the specified channel.

"This is Fire. Line secure; go ahead."

The static cleared, revealing Sally's face.

"I found out where the fire started."

"L-3, as we suspected?" Noin asked, her voice steady despite the shuttle's breakneck speed.

Sally smiled thinly.

"Your instincts still amaze me."

"It wasn't hard to figure out, considering the areas searched."

Sally's team had focused almost exclusively on L-3 recently. It's why Noin's shuttle raced towards the far side of the moon.

"Did you determine which colony it is?"

"It's the newly constructed colony, X18999," Sally confirmed.

Memories flashed through Noin's mind, her days as a cadet alongside Treize, her first mission as an operator at just twelve years old. But nostalgia had no place in this crisis.

"Who's the leader?" Noin pressed.

"Mariemaia Barton. Sending you the file now."

"Barton..." The name stirred recognition. Noin knew three Bartons: Trowa, the Gundam pilot; Dekim, the former Barton Foundation representative; and Leia, a nurse who had tended to an injured Treize eight years ago. Somehow, Noin sensed all three were connected to this Mariemaia.

As the data scrolled across her screen, Noin fought to maintain her composure.

Sally, oblivious to Noin's inner turmoil, continued, "As I feared, we're too late. I expect they'll declare independence or war against Earth within a few hours."

"Or both," Noin thought grimly. This was beyond a mere setback, it was a full-blown crisis.

Sally's expression tightened as she read a new message.

"And the bad news doesn't end there."

"What else?"

"Vice Foreign Minister Darlian has been missing since her last official visit to X18999."

"Miss Relena..." Noin's grip on the controls tightened, the shuttle's speed unconsciously increasing.

"How meticulously have they planned this?"

The accelerating shuttle quickly crossed Earth's orbit, heading towards MO-III, the large resource satellite positioned midway between Earth and the L-3 sector. The spaceport on that satellite was to be their rendezvous point with Sally's shuttle.

Noticing Noin's uncharacteristic behavior, Sally spoke in an unusually calm tone, "I think we'd better hurry."

Noin finally regained her composure.

"Roger. We'll change our rendezvous point."

She decided it would be more advantageous to rendezvous at a midpoint between their current positions rather than waiting at the resource satellite MO-III.

However, strictly speaking, when considering history, one shouldn't use "what ifs" or "if onlys." But if we were to indulge in such speculation...

If Noin and Sally hadn't changed their meeting point, Mariemaia and Dekim's ambitions might have been thwarted midway. Why? Because at that very moment, Dekim's elite forces were departing from Colony X18999, headed for the resource satellite MO-III.

Dekim's elite force was small to avoid attention, and their shuttle carried nearly 500 pilots meant to board the Serpents. If that shuttle

had been intercepted, the worst of what was to come might have been prevented.

Of course, such speculation is futile. Noin and Sallty weren't at fault; they had no way of knowing. History sometimes presents such scenarios, moments where the slightest divergence, which could be interpreted as malicious twists of fate, can alter everything.

10

Relena drifted in a deep slumber.

In this chaotic darkness, she cannot dream.

She is conscious, yet only aware of her own lack of consciousness.

There is no pain or suffering, but a growing sense of frustration at her powerlessness slowly emerges.

Beyond this, she can think of nothing else.

She doesn't even know why she's in this state.

In her fading consciousness, Relena can only desperately wish:

"Help me..."

"Help me, Little Prince..."

Suddenly, she slips back into the darkness of unconsciousness.

The Little Prince.

The Little Prince Relena called out to in her near-unconscious state wasn't something concrete, nor did it refer to any specific person, it was closer to what one might call a "primal image experience."

She has a tendency to voice her immediate thoughts without filter.

There was only one other time this phrase had escaped Relena's lips and it was during her fifteenth birthday party at the Darlian mansion.

She saw a photograph of a falling star that had slipped from Mr. Darlian's grasp.

Recognizing it as part of Operation Meteor, when the Gundams descended to Earth, she said, "If that's the case, then Heero is the Little Prince from the stars."

She made this statement because it reminded her of a similar experience.

It was when Relena had just turned eleven years old.

—AC-191—

From birth, Relena had been a child of few words. Her adoptive mother, Mrs. Darlian, often speculated that "the trauma of her

kingdom's collapse during her infancy might have left a subconscious mark."

At Saint Gabriel Institute's junior division, classmates would greet Relena warmly, but she never reciprocated. She abstained from greetings and self-introductions entirely. Such formalities seemed unnecessary; the Darlian family's reputation as the "wealthiest patrons of the school" preceded her. Moreover, Relena's unique "air of nobility" created an invisible barrier, keeping others at a respectful distance. This unintentional aloofness only deepened her isolation.

One autumn day, Relena sat alone in a corner of the classroom, her gaze fixed on the window where leaves danced in the breeze. She noticed an unfamiliar figure standing at the school gates.

It was a boy in tattered clothes, his face and hands bearing the grime of days without washing. His eyes were cold, filled with a palpable hatred for the world around him. He was, unmistakably, a war orphan.

Relena had never seen a war orphan before. She had naively assumed everyone lived as she did. Naturally, the sight of this boy piqued her curiosity.

Her classmates, however, reacted differently.

"What's he doing here?"

"Is the school taking him in?"

"How troublesome."

They voiced their displeasure openly. At that time, a law mandated educational institutions to temporarily house war orphans until suitable facilities or guardians could be found, typically for a few weeks. The Alliance military saw this as a preventive measure against orphans potentially joining anti-Alliance resistance movements.

Saint Gabriel Institute, located in a region that had been spared from recent conflicts, rarely encountered such war orphans. This boy must have drifted here from some distant battleground.

By day's end, the boy was outfitted in a school uniform and assigned to the dormitory.

Relena had a closer encounter with the boy the following day. Lost in thought, she accidentally collided with him in the hallway, scattering his books and notebooks. Unable to muster even an apology, Relena watched silently as the boy gathered his belongings.

Her inability to interact might have stemmed from a form of social anxiety. Noticing the boy heading to the rooftop, Relena decided to follow, hoping to apologize in a more secluded setting.

The rooftop was rarely visited. There, she thought, she might find the courage to speak.

The boy leaned against the railing, gazing at the distant sea. Relena observed from the shadows of the stairwell.

"I must apologize..."

Before she could step forward, the boy's behavior took an unexpected turn. He produced a pair of binoculars, scanning the hills beyond the sea. Relena retreated further into hiding.

"What could he be doing?"

The boy, still peering through the binoculars, pulled out a radio from his chest.

"This is Black Alpha. Darlian mansion confirmed. It appears more suitable than Saint Gabriel as an evacuation point in case the operation fails."

"Such an adult way of speaking..." Relena thought initially. "But what business does he have with my home?"

Unbeknownst to her, Relena was developing a unique emotional attachment to this boy. She found herself constantly seeking him out, feeling an inexplicable sense of relief upon finding him. Perhaps her subconscious connection to her own origins as a war orphan drew her to him.

Like Relena, the boy often sat alone, gazing out windows or leaning against trees in the schoolyard, never engaging with others.

Some speculate that this boy might have been the same person Relena would later know as "Heero Yuy." However, there are no records of Heero visiting Earth prior to Operation Meteor.

That evening, as twilight settled over the empty rooftop, the boy stared intently at the sea. Relena watched from her hiding place in the stairwell.

Both noticed an unnatural, flickering light beyond the horizon.

The boy murmured softly, "Tonight, then..."

Relena didn't immediately grasp the significance of his words. Yet she sensed that tonight, something pivotal involving her home was about to unfold.

That night, a terrorist organization opposed to the United Earth Sphere Alliance launched an assault on the Pacific JAP Point naval base. After intense firefights, the terrorists briefly seized control of the base, successfully commandeering an early model Aries mobile suit.

Alarmed by this development, Alliance military leaders requested the deployment of a mobile suit unit from General Catalonia, head of the Specials. Catalonia, at the time, was the supreme commander of OZ.



As a side note, his eleven-year-old daughter would later become known to the world as Dorothy Catalonia.

An OZ attack transport soared over the nighttime sea.

"Currently over JAP Point... We'll reach the combat zone in 300 seconds," the pilot reported.

In the rear seats of the cockpit sat two soldiers: the young 19-year-old Colonel Treize Khushrenada and 15-year-old Zechs Merquise, already a frontline warrior despite his age.

Zechs Merquise, born Milliardo Peacecraft, was the crown prince of the pacifist Sanc Kingdom and Relena's older brother. After his kingdom's fall, he had joined OZ's Specials, vowing revenge against the Alliance forces.

At this time, Zechs hadn't yet donned his trademark mask, but he wore dark sunglasses, refusing to let others see his eyes.

"Why deploy us Specials for mere rebel suppression?" the pilot questioned.

Treize answered with a gentle smile, "General Catalonia wants to test the mobile suits' capabilities." He glanced at the sunglasses-wearing man beside him. "And your abilities as well."

"I hope I can live up to such high expectations," Zechs replied, his confident gaze hidden behind the dark lenses.

This marked the first recorded instance of Treize and Zechs, two men destined to clash over humanity's future, deploying to the same battlefield.

Since his injury at Colony X18999 in AC-188, Treize had been recalled to Earth, serving as General Catalonia's aide and spearheading the Specials' development. He particularly focused on mobile suit pilot training and distinguished himself in frontline operations.

While some in the Alliance recognized his achievements, others viewed him with envy. Some mockingly referred to the Specials as "Treize's pets."

Zechs, having graduated top of his class from Lake Victoria Base's officer academy two years prior, had already made a name for himself as an exceptional mobile suit pilot in various combat zones.

Having never directly trained under Treize, Zechs found the "Treize's pet" label distasteful. Deep down, he yearned to be Treize's equal, perhaps influenced by memories of being called a "friend" by Treize when he still went by Milliardo in his youth.

The OZ transport arrived above the embattled naval base. Treize and Zechs, each in a new model Aries, awaited deployment.

As the bay doors slowly opened, Treize spoke, "Lieutenant Zechs, let's wrap this up in three minutes."

"One minute will suffice, Colonel," Zechs replied confidently.

Zechs' unit launched first.

"The battle will end the moment I touch down."

True to his word, Zechs' Aries descended rapidly, guns blazing, seizing air superiority in mere moments. Though the terrorists fought back desperately, they were overwhelmed by Zechs' demon-like prowess, forced into silence within minutes.

One terrorist managed to ignite the thrusters of an early model Aries, attempting escape. Zechs hadn't overlooked this, but the distance prevented immediate intervention.

"You won't get away," Zechs muttered, igniting his own thrusters in pursuit.

Uncharacteristically, Treize didn't halt Zechs' chase, a testament to his trust in the young pilot's abilities. The naval base was already under Treize's control.

As Treize watched, the trails of light left by the two Aries units painted a beautiful arc across the night sky.

Meanwhile, at the Darlian mansion, Mrs. Darlian answered a phone call from General Venti, the Alliance's Earth Forces commander. He was calling to inform Vice Foreign Minister Darlian about the nearby conflict.

Mrs. Darlian relayed the information to Pagan, the butler.

"It seems a terrorist has fled in a mobile suit to a nearby area."

Relena, unnoticed on the staircase, overheard this conversation.

"I must inform my husband about this..." Mrs. Darlian said, asking Pagan to look after Relena.

When Pagan entered Relena's room, he found only an open window with curtains billowing in the wind. Relena had already slipped away into the night.

Relena sat on the vast mansion lawn, gazing up at the starry sky.

"Terrorists... Mobile suits... So much I don't understand. Why are people always fighting?"

She stood up, abandoning her faint hope.

"I guess it had nothing to do with that boy after all. It's such a quiet night..."

Suddenly, a thunderous roar shattered the silence. Relena turned towards the sound. Something had crashed on a nearby hill, just beyond the Darlian estate.

Heart pounding with irrepressible excitement, she ran towards the site.

Halfway up the hill, she found a damaged Aries mobile suit and its pilot.

"I was so close..." the pilot muttered.

Relena watched from behind a tree, but a snapping twig betrayed her presence.

The pilot whirled, brandishing his gun.

"Who's there?"

Relena slowly emerged. The pilot, recognizing her as the Vice Foreign Ministers daughter, grinned wickedly. This could be his ticket to freedom.

Relena screamed and struggled as the pilot roughly grabbed her.

"Keep quiet," he hissed, pressing the cold barrel of his gun against her temple.

The icy metal made death feel terrifyingly real to Relena.

"I'm going to die... This is how it ends..."

Tears blurred her vision. Relena had never before been overwhelmed by such intense emotion. These weren't tears of self-pity, but of raw, primal fear in the face of death.

She looked up at the night sky, desperate for escape. People often associate death with stars, or more broadly, with the cosmos. Perhaps it's the chaotic arrangement that we entrust our fate to, or the cold, transparent mathematics we perceive in them.

Relena tried to steel herself, believing that acceptance might ease her terror.

In that moment, her tear-filled eyes caught a shooting star streaking across the sky.

"A falling star..."

To her amazement, the "star" seemed to arc through the night, heading in their direction.

The pilot cursed.

"Damn, they've caught up already..."

He dragged Relena down the hill. As they reached a wide road, a uniformed man stood before them, a menacing shadow looming behind him.

It was Zechs, with the Aries mobile suit at his back.

"Why don't you give up?"

Zechs said calmly, drawing his gun and aiming at the pilot. He seemed utterly unfazed by Relena's presence as a hostage.

The pilot, growing desperate, pressed his gun harder against Relena. "Don't move! This is Darlian's daughter!"

Zechs couldn't hide his surprise, not from the threat, but from realizing the terrified girl before him was his sister.

"Relena...?"

The girl had no idea the sunglasses-wearing soldier was her brother. At this point, she didn't even know she had a long-lost sibling.

Now, the looming mobile suit behind Zechs only heightened Relena's fear. To her, it looked like a demon or a dragon.

The pilot made his demand.

"Hand over that machine behind you."

Even now, he believed the performance difference between their mobile suits was the reason for his defeat.

"That's the latest Aries model... It'll make a nice gift for my superiors."

Zechs remained silent, Relena's face reflected in his dark lenses. In his mind, he saw flashes of her as a toddler, their last day together in the Sanc Kingdom, just before the attack. Little Relena had determinedly followed her brother around the garden, stumbling repeatedly.

He vividly remembered a courtier rushing over each time.

"Are you alright, Princess?"

That was the last time he had seen her.

That night, the Sanc Kingdom's castle burned, separating the siblings. Zechs only learned of Relena's adoption by the Darlians after joining OZ.

A faint smile crossed his lips.

"You've grown so much..."

"What are you smiling about?" the pilot demanded, unnerved.

In that split second of distraction, Zechs acted. He drew and fired in one fluid motion, knocking the gun from the pilot's hand.

"I'd rather not take a life in front of her," Zechs said softly, keeping his aim steady. "Run."

The pilot, clutching his wounded hand, vanished into the darkness.

Zechs turned to find Relena standing just a step away, her eyes fixed on his still-smoking gun.

Her gaze was filled with fear and loathing.

Following her line of sight, Zechs understood.

"That's right, Milliardo. You've become a man who can no longer even touch this child."



He had abandoned the Peacecraft name, taken up arms, and chosen the blood-soaked path of revenge.

"I won't reveal my identity..."

Zechs holstered his weapon. Then, mimicking the courtiers from a decade ago, he asked, "Are you alright, Princess?"

He meant nothing by it, but it caught Relena's attention.

"Princess?"

Zechs nodded silently.

"Then, are you supposed to be a knight riding a scary dragon?"

Relena asked.

Zechs chuckled, looking up at the star-filled sky.

"No... I'm the Little Prince."

He said it self-mockingly, alluding to his current situation.

Relena, too, gazed up at the twinkling expanse above.

"The Little... Prince..."

She repeated those words to herself, staring at the starry sky for a while longer. When she finally looked around, Zechs had vanished.

Relena had pushed the events of that night to the far reaches of her memory, as if it were merely a dream. She didn't recall it until her fateful encounter with Heero Yuy, the Gundam pilot.

Yet, there was another reason why such a shocking experience had been forgotten. For the young Relena, what transpired the following day held even greater significance.

The next day at Saint Gabriel Institute, Relena overheard her classmates gossiping from her usual corner of the classroom.

"Did you hear? That boy has disappeared..."

"Did someone take him in?"

"No, I heard he ran away."

Realizing they were talking about the mysterious boy, Relena stood up abruptly.

"No... It can't be..."

She rushed to the rooftop, but he wasn't there. Nearby, older female students continued the gossip by a flowerbed.

"You know about the terrorist attack on the military base last night? Apparently, that boy was one of them."

"How frightening!"

"I overheard the teachers saying he infiltrated our school to help his comrades..."

"This is why we shouldn't admit people of unknown origins..."

Relena gazed through the fence towards the school gates. For a moment, she thought she saw the boy standing there.

She raced down the stairs and, for the first time in her life, ran through the hallways. Breathless, she burst out of the school building.

But no one was at the gates.

As she caught her breath, Relena thought to herself:

"I had something I needed to do for you..."

Beyond the gates stretched an endless row of trees shedding their autumn leaves.

"...I... I wanted to at least know your name..." she thought to herself.

"I am Relena Darlian..." she said, reaching out towards the path the boy might have taken. "And you are...?"

This was Relena's first greeting, her first self-introduction.

She would repeat this form of introduction only once more in her life, when she first met Heero.

Heero had crash-landed on Earth with Wing Gundam, barely escaping from the sunken mobile suit. Relena, who happened to be there, had found him unconscious and tried to help. But upon regaining consciousness, Heero hijacked the ambulance Relena had called and vanished as swiftly as the wind.

Relena, facing the departing ambulance, made her introduction:

"I'm Relena Darlian... Who are you?"

It didn't matter if he heard her or not. It was her way of asserting herself, of avoiding regret in that moment. It was an act that staked the very meaning of her existence.

She didn't mind being ignored or disliked. She didn't even mind if he couldn't hear her. But she wanted to know him.

It was a manifestation of her earnest feelings.

By the time she met Heero, Relena had transformed into such a girl.

The current Relena had grown even more as a person. In AC-195, when she became the queen of the world nation, she gave a speech.

"To eliminate conflict among people, let us remove the barriers between nations and create a world nation..."

She firmly believed that by gradually removing barriers, people would eventually come to share the same feelings. Many supported her vision.

Relena herself might not yet realize what had caused her to develop such faith in humanity. That understanding would come a little later in her story.

11

The chaos of darkness gradually gave way to a world of light. Relena's eyelids fluttered open. The canopy of the bed came into focus first, followed by the ornate chandelier on the ceiling, its brilliance slowly sharpening in her hazy vision.

She recalled her situation.

"I was drugged..."

Startled, she sat up.

"Where am I?"

Glancing around, she found herself in a room exuding the elegant taste of a modern European royal chamber. No one else was in sight.

Suddenly, a sweet voice called out.

"Did you have a good sleep?"

Relena scanned the room again. The voice came from near the window, where a large desk stood. An imposing chair faced away from her, its high back concealing its occupant.

"Who are you?" Relena called out.

The chair slowly rotated, revealing Mariemaia with an innocent smile.

Relena, still unsteady, rose from the bed, pressing a hand to her throbbing head.

"Have you been caught as well?"

Mariemaia's response was unexpected.

"No... I'm the one that ordered them to bring you here."

Relena, her mind still foggy, struggled to comprehend.

"What are you talking about?"

Mariemaia proudly announced, "My name is Mariemaia Khushrenada... The daughter of Treize Khushrenada."

"You must be joking."

Relena couldn't believe her ears.

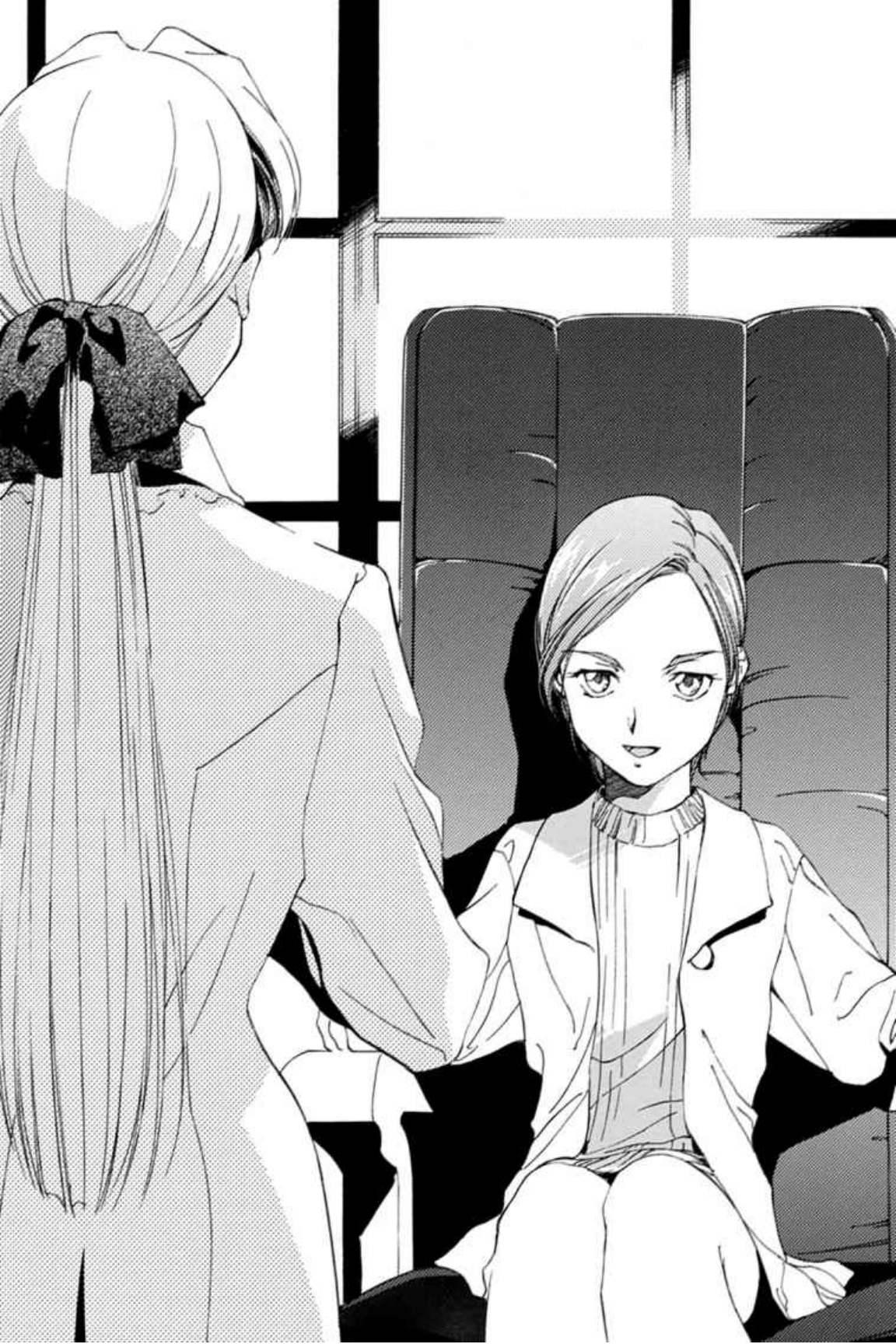
"This is no joke. It's already been proven through DNA testing," Mariemaia stated with unwavering confidence.

Relena, visibly confused, started to protest, "But that's..."

Mariemaia spun her chair, swinging her legs that didn't quite reach the floor, a gesture befitting a seven-year-old girl.

"I'm told that there's an adult world that children do not understand. So I can't begin to explain how I've come to live in this world."

For a moment, her face showed a flicker of realization, as if remembering she shouldn't act this way. Relena didn't miss this



brief change in expression.

Turning back, Mariemaia fixed Relena with a stern gaze.

"But accepting the facts as they are, I fully intend to carry out my father's wishes."

Her face no longer resembled that of a seven-year-old. Relena could guess the kind of upbringing Mariemaia had endured.

"She's been subjected to forceful education..."

This girl hadn't been raised as a child should be. Relena had vague memories of similar experiences from her own early childhood, constant instructions on proper etiquette and behavior.

But Mariemaia seemed to have been taught things like, "Always look down on others when interacting with them," "People will never kneel before you unless you maintain an air of superiority," and "You are a chosen one."

While such attitudes might be deemed necessary for those in power, was it right to instill them in a mere seven-year-old?

Relena spoke firmly, "I have no idea who's been telling you these stories..."

She expressed her honest opinion.

"But you are mistaken."

Mariemaia stood up abruptly, her expression cold. In stark contrast to her demeanor, she spoke harshly, "Watch yourself!"

Her eyes gleamed with an icy, pale blue flame. She couldn't tolerate Relena's attitude.

"Watch your language. I am the legitimate heir to the Earth Sphere Unified Nation. I won't allow rude comments!"

As she spoke, the room's door burst open. Several armed guards rushed in, their weapons trained on Relena.

Mariemaia commanded them haughtily, "It's nothing. You may leave now."

"Ma'am!" The squad leader saluted sharply and retreated.

Mariemaia, accustomed to giving orders, glanced at a corner of the ceiling.

"This room is being constantly monitored, Relena. So please don't try anything suspicious now."

She continued with an unnaturally mature expression, "I am meeting you like this out of respect for the fact that you were once the person known as Queen Relena."

In the latter half of AC-195, when Relena had inherited the Peacecraft name, she had been titled "Queen" as the first head of the world nation established by the Romefeller Foundation.

Regardless of the circumstances, there was no doubt that Relena Peacecraft had become the first person in human history to stand at the apex of the entire world.

Mariemaia flashed an innocent smile.

"Please be more careful in the future."

But her smile was superficial; her eyes remained stern, warning against any further defiance.

Relena decided to outwardly adapt her attitude to match Mariemaia's expectations. Lowering her posture slightly and looking up at the girl, she said, "Then let me ask you this."

Her voice, however, didn't quite match her submissive words.

"What do you plan to do with me now?"

Mariemaia turned her back on Relena, a satisfied smile playing on her lips.

"Don't worry, you'll find out soon enough..."

She giggled softly.

As Relena gazed at the small figure before her, she tried to fathom what this girl could be thinking. But Relena couldn't grasp the scale of the child's ambitions.

How could she?

Mariemaia was aspiring to a position even greater than Relena had once held.

12

As they approached the L-3 colony cluster, Duo suggested that Heero alter their high-speed shuttle's course.

"I know we're in a hurry, but we've got something that might come in handy," Duo said.

Their new destination was a small, nameless resource satellite. As mentioned before, this area of space was dotted with large resource satellites. Duo apparently had a missile-equipped spacecraft hidden on one of the smaller, asteroid-like satellites nestled between the larger ones.

"Don't worry, it'll only take an hour tops," Duo assured.

The colony standard time had just passed 20:00 on December 24, AC-196. At this rate, even with this detour, they should reach the vicinity of Colony X18999 within four hours.

"Besides, even if we arrive early, it's not like we can infiltrate right away," Duo continued, talking to himself as much as to Heero.

Heero neither agreed nor disagreed, allowing Duo to proceed as he wished. However, Duo didn't agree with Heero's "follow your emotions" philosophy.

"With that attitude, you'd need more than nine lives..." Duo thought.

"This guy needs someone like me around to think things through."

It was an opinion Duo had held since they first met. Indeed, Heero had been saved by Duo numerous times. Of course, Duo had been saved by Heero just as often, but his natural optimism had conveniently erased those memories.

The high-speed shuttle came to a stop in front of the small, pockmarked resource satellite. Duo quickly donned his astro-suit and ventured into space, entering the satellite.

Among the Gundam pilots, each exceptional in their own right, none moved through space as freely as Duo. His extensive experience in space had ingrained the laws of inertia into his very being, his body reacting instinctively to the environment.

To Heero's surprise, what Duo extracted from the hollowed-out satellite was a warship. Even the usually composed Heero couldn't hide his astonishment.

"Where did you get something like that?" he muttered, watching through the shuttle window.

Outside, Duo was grinning broadly, gesturing for help. His face clearly said, "Pretty impressive, huh?"

The "warship" was actually a small vessel called a "Taurus Cruiser," primarily designed to transport OZ's space-use Taurus mobile suits. Without its usual cargo, it resembled a mushroom, but it was still equipped with standard guns and missiles, capable of holding its own against a small mobile suit squad.

Duo planned to dock this with their high-speed shuttle, creating an impromptu battle cruiser. Heero worked on connecting the circuitry to enable missile launches from within the shuttle, while also adjusting thruster output and designing a detachment mechanism.

What would take a team of ten engineers over a day to accomplish, these two completed in less than an hour, even managing to improve overall performance. Their division of labor was seamless and unspoken: Heero handled the software side with computer inputs, while Duo took care of the hardware, assembling the actual machinery.

The only notable difference was in their work styles. Duo chattered constantly, punctuating each action with a quip or exclamation. Heero, on the other hand, worked in complete silence, the only

sounds from his side being the click of keyboard keys and the computer's responses.

Duo called Heero "gloomy," while Heero found Duo "noisy." This often led to minor squabbles (mostly Duo ranting until Heero settled things with a single, final word). This dynamic had persisted since they first met.

Heero Yuy and Duo Maxwell.

How could two Gundam pilots be so diametrically opposed in personality?

It would be easy to dismiss it as individual quirks. However, few realize that Heero and Duo's personalities are actually two sides of the same coin when their pasts are compared.

One bears the name of a legendary leader, while the other calls himself the "God of Death."

If there's one thing these two have in common, it's their seemingly tragic pasts. Just as Heero's origins are unknown, so too is Duo's birthplace a mystery. However, it seems certain that both were war orphans born in the colonies.

Despite starting from the same point, what caused them to diverge so dramatically?

To understand this, we must delve into Duo's past. The first clear record of him dates to when he was seven years old. Before that, he was neither "Duo," nor did he carry the family name "Maxwell."

—AC-187—

Among the L-2 colony cluster, Colony V08744 was the most poverty-stricken. This problem had plagued the colony since its construction in AC-87.

The suspected cause was the colony's unique diversity, unlike others, it housed immigrants from every race on Earth. Unifying the wills of residents with different languages and mindsets proved challenging, leading to the initial poverty.

Over time, this bred an "anti-Alliance" sentiment among the inhabitants. While Alliance exploitation occurred in other colonies, the resistance here was particularly fierce. This anti-Alliance consciousness escalated into revolution and conflict.

However, these very actions only exacerbated the poverty. The prolonged days of strife bred more poverty, which in turn spawned more revolution and conflict.

The Alliance's decision to station the mobile fortress Barge in the vicinity was partly due to this most rebellious of colonies. While it succeeded in quelling revolutions and conflicts, the astronomical costs of constructing and maintaining Barge were passed onto the colony.

A hopeless poverty engulfed the people. Although the stationed Alliance Space Forces prevented further conflicts, they did nothing to rebuild the war-torn cityscape, leaving ruins as they were.

The inhabitants, exhausted, lost the vigor to improve their lives.

Yet, after several years, signs of recovery began to appear. In AC-187, an event celebrating the colony's centennial brought a glimmer of hope back to the people's hearts.

While ruins were gradually diminishing, they still dotted the cityscape, and the number of war orphans remained significant. In this colony, these orphans and street children were paradoxically the most vibrant presence.

A group of scruffy-haired, ragged street children burst out of a garbage dump. Leading them was the especially energetic seven-year-old Duo.

The children swarmed the street stalls lining the area between the ruins and the Alliance military base, snatching fruits and meats before scattering. The stall owners yelled after the young thieves, "You damn brats!"

Yet Duo boldly continued pilfering apples right next to one of the shouting vendors.

"Hey, you...!" The vendor finally noticed the scruffy-haired boy.

Duo, meeting the man's gaze, thought, "This might be bad..."

Yet he flashed a carefree grin and said, "Just put it on their tab," jerking his thumb towards the Alliance base.

The half-pint thief had the words of a full-grown con artist.

"What did you say?!"

The vendor raised his club at Duo.

But Duo nimbly dodged and fled the scene.

"Why don't they get it?" Duo thought as he ran past the chain-link fence of the Alliance base. "It's because of them that we have to do this..."

Beyond the fence, he could see several Leo mobile suits.

"If they have money for those things, they should be able to pay for our food."

Lost in thought, Duo collided with what he thought was a black wall.

"Ouch..." He bounced off, his stolen apple rolling away.

"Oh my, I'm sorry..." The "wall" turned out to be a man in black, an elderly priest who was now bending to pick up the fallen apple.

"Hey, stop right there!"

The vendor was still in pursuit.

"Man, he's persistent..." Duo, leaving the apple behind, vaulted over the priest's back with a quick "Sorry!" and ran off.

The vendors watched him go, sighing.

"Are you alright, Father?"

"Yes, I'm fine..."

The vendors began to grumble.

"Got hit again..."

"War orphans are pitiful, but this happens too often..."

The old priest, however, watched Duo's retreating figure with a gentle smile.

Duo and his companions had made their home in the ruins of an old mansion. In its crumbling living room, they were eagerly devouring the day's spoils.

"Good haul, Duo..."

"Yeah, I guess..."

Duo hadn't always been close with these street kids. He wasn't even originally from this colony, just a drifter who had happened upon them.

Back then, he didn't even have the name "Duo."

When the long-haired drifter first appeared, the group's leader, an older boy named Solo, was dying from a new virus sweeping through the colony. A vaccine had been quickly developed, but it wasn't being distributed to street children.

Feeling sorry for them, the drifter snuck into a heavily guarded hospital and stole enough vaccine for all the kids.

"You're all probably infected anyway..." he had said casually, without a hint of self-importance.

But despite receiving the vaccine, Solo didn't recover. It was too late.

As he lay dying, Solo said, "You're the best guy I've ever met... Wish we could've hung out more."

The drifter had never heard such words before.

"Don't be stupid... don't get all soft on me."

"It's no use, I can see the God of Death..."

"There's no such thing."

"Even if I die, I'll stick with you... don't push me away."

"Fine by me. With you around, we'd be a duo."

"Yeah..." Solo managed a dry laugh at the joke before passing away. The drifter had forgotten his own vaccine, but thought lightly, "Oh well..."

"I'll join you in death... we're a duo after all."

At that time, he thought his own life had no value. No one would mourn him if he died, probably no one would even notice.

"That's just how it is..."

But he didn't die. Somehow, he hadn't been infected.

"Is it because you're with me, Solo?"

Since then, he had used the name "Duo" and taken over as leader of the street kids.

"Tomorrow, we're sneaking into the military warehouse," Duo suddenly announced in the dilapidated living room.

Today's mishap was the Alliance's fault, he thought childishly.

"What? Isn't that dangerous?"

"We'll be killed if we're caught!"

"Heh, we've been lucky to live this long anyway. Might as well go for it."

They decided to infiltrate the Alliance base the following night.

That night, Duo and his gang fled before even reaching the Alliance food storage. The guards had opened fire without hesitation.

Even Duo was shocked.

"They just start shooting, huh..."

A fleeing companion informed him, "The Alliance doesn't care if you're a woman or a child."

They barely escaped the intense gunfire, ending the night with nothing to show for it.

The next morning, Duo and the others were awakened by violent shaking. The colony's own government was demolishing their ruined mansion hideout.

Duo confronted one of the officials.

"Stop it! What did we do?"

"Don't act innocent. You even tried to steal from the Alliance military, you fools!"

A large bulldozer continued to demolish the mansion.

"That's no reason to destroy this! It's our home!"

"Maxwell Church has agreed to take you in. Be grateful."

"A church?"

Maxwell Church was a small wooden building in a field a bit removed from the slums.

The street children were brought there and made to wear black clerical robes. While the others were compliant, Duo rebelled fiercely.

The black robes were one thing, but he absolutely refused to have his hair cut.

A young nun named Sister Helen was currently trying to hold Duo down with scissors in hand.

"Stop it! I said stop!"

Attracted by the commotion, the old priest Duo had met near the base came over.

This priest, for some reason, had taken a liking to Duo and decided to take him in.

"What's going on?"

Sister Helen, still wrestling with Duo, replied, "This child absolutely refuses to let me cut his hair."

"Of course I do! It's bad enough you're making me wear this weird outfit, no way I'm letting you cut my hair too!"

That was Duo's stance.

"But it's all messy. It's unhygienic!"

"It's fine like this!"

"Sister, do as Duo says..."

"But..."

Helen had an idea. She combed Duo's hair and braided it neatly.

"There, that's better... No complaints now, right?"

Duo loved it so much that from then on, he might trim his hair, but he never stopped wearing the braid.

"Yeah, this works. Won't get in the way when I'm stealing stuff."

"You're still talking about that?" Helen was exasperated.

"Duo... as long as you're here, you don't need to steal anymore."

"Oh, right... I'm not a thief anymore, I'm a beggar now..."

"A beggar?"

"That's right. Churches run on donations from people in town, don't they?"

"Oh, this child..."

"He's right... you might have a point there."

"See? Don't try to act cool."

And so, Duo came to live at Maxwell Church.

At this point in Duo's life, freedom meant as little to him as his own life did.

"Begging or stealing, it's all the same."

"If I put up with a bit of discomfort, I can get food."

"Besides, I can always run away if I want to..."



That's how lightly he regarded his situation.

However, he found school utterly unbearable.

Come spring, Duo was made to attend a school within the Alliance military base. Originally intended for the children of Alliance soldiers, it had opened its doors to colony children due to extra capacity. This was partly in celebration of Colony V08744's centennial.

The colonists didn't realize that this seemingly charitable act by the Alliance was actually aimed at indoctrinating their children. Still, the disparity was clear: Alliance children in neat uniforms, colony children in rags.

Duo couldn't stand the Alliance kids. He always trudged to the white wooden schoolhouse with a scowl on his face.

Helen constantly fretted over him.

"Will he really be alright?"

"Oh, don't worry. With proper education, Duo could become the finest priest in the Earth Sphere," the old priest said, his eyes twinkling.

Helen was shocked.

"Duo? A priest?"

It seemed impossible. While the other street children had been successfully placed with colony families through the old priest's connections, Duo was always kept getting kicked out within a day.

The old priest laughed.

"Duo is the spitting image of me as a child."

The school records from this time are the earliest documentation of Duo's existence. Even then, he was only listed as "Duo from Maxwell Church." In the impoverished colony, many people lacked family names, so this wasn't particularly unusual.

Surprisingly, the records show Duo was top of his class. Given his aversion to effort, this was likely due to natural intuition and talent, early signs of the abilities that would later make him a Gundam pilot.

But just as Helen had feared, Duo was a troublemaker through and through. His academic excellence made him a target for the jealous Alliance kids, leading to constant fights. Duo, never one to back down, used these scraps to vent his frustrations on the Alliance brats. And the teachers, on the Alliance payroll, never took the side of a colony kid like Duo. He was always painted as the villain.

That day, the colony's environmental systems had scheduled snow. Perfect hexagonal crystals drifted past the church's stained glass windows.

Helen laid into Duo the moment he returned, her voice sharp with worry. Startled by her intensity, Duo tried to bolt, but Helen caught him by his braid.

"Hold it right there, Duo! What have you done this time?"

"It was them! They started it!"

"You put five kids in the hospital and you're saying it's not your fault?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

The injured parties were all sons of Alliance officers. There was talk of expulsion. The old priest had been summoned to the principal's office.

Helen knelt down to meet Duo's eyes.

"Honestly, what am I going to do with you?"

She gazed at him with gentle eyes.

"What did they say to you?"

Duo hesitated, his eyes downcast.

"They... they said I stink like a sewer rat.""

Life at the church was far from luxurious. Living off donations meant clothes often went unwashed for a month or more. Moreover, the colony's water recycling system was malfunctioning, with repairs focused only on wealthier areas. The slums barely received enough water for drinking, let alone washing. They collected rainwater for laundry, using it over and over until it was beyond foul.

Helen's heart ached. Duo stood there, absently rubbing his nose.

She pulled the small boy into a hug.

"What—" Duo's face reddened, feeling the warmth of the Sister's embrace.

Helen took a deep breath, holding him close.

"You're fine. You don't smell bad at all."

"Really?"

"Really. So don't let what anyone says get to you, okay?"

"...Okay."

"We've got snow for the first time in years. Let's collect it and do some laundry, shall we?"

Helen smiled brightly.

"Will you help me, Duo?"

"You bet!"

Duo threw himself into the task of shoveling snow off the church roof, his enthusiasm infectious.

The old priest returned through the snowy scene, brushing flakes from his shoulders.

"Phew, what a dressing down that was..."

"Sorry, Father," Duo mumbled.

"Don't worry, this old head can bow as low as needed... Now, you make sure to study hard at school tomorrow, you hear?"

"Got it..."

For Duo, his interactions with the old priest and Sister Helen at Maxwell Church were his first taste of family warmth. Perhaps it was their unconditional love that kept his innate wanderlust at bay for that entire year.

Christmas came. In those times, no one visited churches, so it was just the three of them. They had a modest party and sang hymns. Duo adored Helen's beautiful singing voice, wanting to stand beside her and listen forever.

That night, as the old priest was telling Duo about the mysteries of the universe and God's providence, Duo interrupted:

"There's no way God exists."

Even the old priest was taken aback.

"Why do you say that?"

"If God really existed, he'd get rid of all the wars, wouldn't he?"

The old priest and Helen exchanged troubled looks.

"Without wars, there wouldn't be orphans like me..."

"Duo... God didn't start the wars. People did. What people start, people must end," the priest explained, adding that it would be disrespectful to rely on God for problems humans created.

"Huh... so God existing or not existing doesn't make a difference then?"

"N-now that's not true at all!" Helen protested.

"Nah, the only god in this world is the God of Death..."

Duo's mind flashed to poor Solo's face.

"You don't believe in God, but you believe in the God of Death?"

"Well, yeah. Never seen a miracle, but I've seen plenty of corpses."

Duo's matter-of-fact delivery left the old priest and Helen torn between exasperation and amusement. They couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"Oh, Duo, what are we going to do with you?"

"You really are something else, aren't you?"

Their laughter echoed through the holy night. Ever since Duo had arrived, Maxwell Church had never been short on smiles and laughter.

But one day, not long after the new year, those smiles vanished without a trace.

That year, Colony V08744 experienced its first rebellion in years. While the colonists claimed they could no longer endure the Alliance's long-standing oppression, the exact trigger for this outburst remained unclear. However, considering the revolutionary struggles occurring in various colonies that year, including Colony X18999, it's possible that a single revolutionary intentionally instigated this unrest.

The streets once again became a battlefield. Dozens of Leo mobile suits deployed, crushing the resistance. Swept up in the tide of events, colonists followed self-proclaimed revolutionary leaders, taking up arms against the Alliance forces.

The revolutionaries cried out, "All this poverty is the Alliance's doing!"

"Bring down Barge!" became the colonists' rallying cry.

Once more, the ruined streets filled with the dead and wounded.

The church's chapel became an impromptu hospital, with Sister Helen and Father Maxwell desperately tending to the injured. Duo was glad to be free from the Alliance school but couldn't stand the misery around him. What angered him most were the revolutionaries using the church as their base and frontline post.

The rebels gathered before the statue of the Virgin Mary, plotting against the Alliance.

"We must take down the Alliance's G2 Point base. It's our only chance."

Duo's heart ached.

"Here we go again..." he thought bitterly. "Everyone was living happily just the other day..."

The revolutionary leader shouted, "Just one mobile suit. If we can get our hands on one, our freedom is assured."

Father Maxwell stood up.

"Hasn't there been enough?"

"What did you say?"

"As Heero Yuy once said, we colonists didn't come to space to fight. We must never resort to violence, no matter what."

This was the first time Duo heard the name "Heero Yuy."

The rebel leader glared at the priest.

"Say that again, old man, I dare you."

"I'll say it as many times as needed. We must not fight."

"Shut up!"

One of the rebels struck Father Maxwell with his rifle butt, knocking him unconscious.

As an enraged Duo tried to attack the man, Sister Helen intervened.

"Please stop! What have we done to deserve this?"

A female rebel slapped Helen hard across the face.

"Quiet, you!"

Helen was thrown back.

"We colonists must stand united. Why are you preaching useless pacifism in these dire times, confusing people?"

"Lies," Duo thought. "You're the ones messing with everyone's heads."

"They might be Alliance spies," another revolutionary suggested.

"Yeah, I've seen that church brat sneaking into the Alliance base."

"Interesting. Should we make them talk?" the deputy leader sneered.

Duo couldn't stay silent.

"Wait."

All eyes turned to him.

"You just need one mobile suit, right?"

"What?"

"I'll steal one for you. In exchange, you clear out of here."

Duo desperately wanted to protect the church.

"This is a place of peace."

"Hmph, childish nonsense..."

"I might run and hide, but I don't lie like you guys..."

"What did you say?!"

Helen tried to stop him.

"Duo, don't!"

But Duo wouldn't back down.

"One mobile suit, right? I'll bring it here now."

With that, he spun on his heel and dashed out of the church.

"Duo!"

Helen could only watch helplessly as his small figure disappeared into the distance.

Duo raced through the rubble-strewn streets, acrid smoke stinging his nostrils. He knew these roads like the back of his hand. As he ran, rage boiled inside him.

"Damn it!"

"Damn it all!"

"DAMN IT!"

"Everyone hated the war just a little while ago. Why the hell are they starting it up again?"

Reaching the Alliance base, he vaulted over the chain-link fence in one fluid motion. No rookie mistakes this time. He had the base's layout memorized.

"Sure, I hate the Alliance..."

"But if people want war so badly, why can't the warmongers just fight each other?"

Guards opened fire as Duo infiltrated deeper.

"Hold your fire! He's just a kid!"

"Doesn't matter! Kill all the colonists!"

"Keep making orphans like us, why don't you..."

In a blur of motion, Duo hijacked a massive truck loaded with a Leo mobile suit. The soldiers fired relentlessly as he smashed through the fence and sped away. It was over in seconds, a theft so masterful, "brilliant" was the only word that came to mind.

Gripping the wheel, Duo steeled himself for what was to come. "I've been living on borrowed time anyway. Might as well be me who takes on the dirty work..."

That painful resolve still drives Duo to this day. The dirty work. He cast himself in that role, fighting for the happiness of others.

When Duo returned to the church, only ruins remained.

"No way..."

He leapt from the truck, staring in horror at the scorched earth before him. The shattered remains of the Virgin Mary statue and stained glass windows lay scattered among the debris. The church building had completely burned down.

Then, a feeble voice called out from behind a charred pillar.

"...Duo..."

He turned towards the sound. There lay Helen, grievously wounded and on death's door. Duo had never seen her look so fragile.

"Duo... I'm glad... you're safe..."

"Sister..."

"Don't worry... about us... The Father, until the end, thought of you..."

Even now, at death's door, Helen only thought of others. It broke Duo's heart. Still, he forced a smile, fighting back tears.

"Hang on, I'll get a doctor right away."

"The Alliance... attacked... We couldn't... leave this place..."

Helen, perhaps no longer able to hear Duo, explained what had happened.

"Was it my fault? Because I stole the mobile suit from the Alliance..."

Helen's kind eyes, growing unfocused, searched for Duo.
"The Father was so brave... He kept preaching peace to everyone..."
"What's so brave about that? He was just being stupid. Dead people can't do anything."
Helen's trembling fingers reached for Duo's cheek.
"May... God's blessing... be with you..."
The moment her slender fingers brushed his face, they fell limp.
Helen passed away, a serene smile on her lips.
Tears streamed endlessly from Duo's eyes.
"Uuu..."
Her warmth would never return. He would never hear that beautiful singing voice again.
Until now, Duo had never cried when anyone died. But now he wept. He screamed to the heavens.
"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

245 dead... Maxwell Church, used as a resistance hideout, had fallen. Many civilians were caught in the crossfire.
People called it "The Maxwell Church Tragedy."
The colony's rebellion was swiftly crushed by the combined might of the Alliance and OZ's elite forces.
For several years after that, Duo's whereabouts and actions remained a mystery.

—AC-192—

The Sweeper Group's work ship had just departed from the Moon's north pole. On the surface, this group's business was that of "space janitors," collecting and selling anything floating in space, glorified junk dealers, really. However, they had just completed a covert operation: disposing of a newly completed super-large warship at the lunar north pole.

"There's no use for it in this era," said Howard, who had been in charge of the ship's construction.

The super-large ship, later to be named "Peacemillion," had no designation at this time. It wouldn't see the light of day until three years later, in AC-195.

"With that spaceship, we could have ventured beyond the solar system... What a shame," mused a scientist known as Professor G, Howard's colleague.

"What will you do now?" asked the professor.

"Return to Earth... float on the sea and live a relaxed life," Howard replied.

"I see..."

Professor G felt the work ship suddenly seemed much emptier after Howard's departure.

Just then, a commotion erupted near the food storage. When Professor G investigated, he found a boy with black clothes and a long braid being restrained by the crew.

"Let go of me! I said let go, dammit!"

"What's going on here?" the professor inquired.

"A stowaway, sir. This brat was raiding our food stores."

"Hey, even I want to eat something good once in a while... Let me go!"

"Release him," Professor G said calmly, then fixed the braided boy with a stern glare. "Boy, how did you manage to sneak onto this ship? The security system I designed should have been perfect. How did you do it?"

"Trade secret. But I'll tell you this much to spare your pride, it wasn't easy."

"Heh... An interesting lad."

"I'm not a lad... The name's Duo."

Duo introduced himself. "Duo Maxwell. I run, I hide, but I never tell a lie."

Duo didn't want to let go of Solo or Maxwell Church, even for a moment. That's why he used this name.

"Maxwell...? Heh, Maxwell's little demon, are you?"

Professor G recalled an ancient physics hypothesis.

Duo Maxwell shook his head, his long braid swaying.

"Not a demon..."

He flashed a daring grin.

"I'm the God of Death."

He claimed the "destiny" he had imposed upon himself.

*

Couldn't we consider it this way?

While Heero is the type to live in the present by constantly cutting away his past, Duo is the type to live while carrying the full weight of his various pasts.

And don't they both always harbor in their hearts the painful experiences of living on the battlefield and a deep-seated hatred for war?

Watching these two, one gets that impression.

Even now, as Duo and Heero worked on docking the high-speed shuttle with the Taurus Cruiser on this small resource satellite, their personalities might differ, but their feelings must have been the same.

Yet they never speak of it, and no one knows their pasts.

"Finally done..."

Duo said as he returned to the shuttle's cockpit.

But there wasn't even a "good job" from Heero.

"It's stupid to expect that..." Duo muttered inwardly.

However, unusually, Heero spoke up.

"Hey, the directional controls are extremely delicate. I'll have you pilot the spacecraft."

"Yeah, no sweat..." Duo accepted lightly.

"That's rare... Maybe he's starting to acknowledge me a bit."

Duo launched the high-speed shuttle. Soon, a small point of light appeared, their target.

It was Colony X18999.

14

Quatre Raberba Winner felt the weight of responsibility crushing down on him.

"It's all my fault..."

These thoughts consumed Quatre as he rushed to prepare an interplanetary transport ship on a resource satellite just beyond the L-4 colony cluster.

Barely an hour ago, Quatre had leaned towards the communication monitor displaying Duo's grinning face, having just received information about Mariemaia.

"What do you plan on doing?"

"I'm supposed to be going to X18999 with Heero. I'm pretty sure we're gonna have a blast of a party while we're there. "

"Without the Gundams? Have you forgotten we don't have our Gundams anymore?!"

"Heero says that really makes no difference."

"B-But still..."

This call hadn't been initiated by Duo. It was Quatre who had reached out, somehow having located them through what he'd call the "heart of outer space." He'd sensed the looming crisis on Colony X18999 like a premonition and felt compelled to contact his comrades.

"Don't worry... We don't even know the enemy is yet. And besides, there might not even be a need for our Gundams. Even if it does become a mobile suit battle, we could just steal a couple of their mobile suits and fight back."

Duo tried to reassure Quatre, knowing his strong sense of guilt. He knew Quatre's personality well.

"If we leave him alone, Quatre always takes the blame himself for everything." Duo had whispered to Heero earlier. "I wouldn't be surprised if one day he starts saying that his lack of effort is the reason there's no air in outer space."

That's why Duo had emphasized that Gundams weren't necessary during this call. But deep down, Quatre sensed they would absolutely need the Gundams. Among the Gundam pilots, Quatre's intuition was unmatched, bordering on the supernatural.

"We're faced with great danger and I've taken away the only means to counter this situation from everyone."

He regretted sending the Gundams into the sun.

"Now I understand why I hesitated so much back then..."

Weeks ago, in that disposal satellite block, Quatre had felt a nagging sense that they shouldn't part with the Gundams just yet. The old Quatre would have heeded that instinct immediately. But perhaps his time away from the battlefield, his reduced ventures into space, had dulled his warrior's edge. He'd made a rational decision instead of trusting his finely-honed intuition.

"Duo..." Quatre fixed the monitor with a determined gaze. "I'm going out to get our Gundams back."

"What?!" Duo's shock was evident. "But we've already disposed of them into the sun!"

"If I left now, we'd still be able to get them in time. Rashid and the others just returned with an interplanetary transport ship. I'll use that."

Duo knew that once Quatre set his mind to something, there was no stopping him.

"Okay. Well then, good luck."

"It's going to be impossible to communicate in real time, so let's contact each other regularly by mail."

"Scheduled emails" was a colloquial term for a method of sending encrypted one-way communications over a wide area at



predetermined times, forcing reception even on unrelated computers and communication devices.

Without the decryption code, these messages would be processed as mere noise.

Given that neither Duo nor Quatre knew where the other would be, this seemed like the best method.

"Roger. Have a safe trip."

"And that goes for you, too."

After confirming the decryption code, they wished each other safety.

An hour later, Quatre stood on the bridge of the nearly ready interplanetary transport ship. His face was dark and gloomy, unable to hide his sense of foreboding.

"It's all my fault..."

Rashid, Auda, Ahmad, and Abdul noisily entered the bridge.

"We're ready to depart anytime, Master Quatre..."

The large interplanetary transport ship was designed to bring resource asteroids from across the solar system back to the Earth Sphere. With engine output capable of reaching Mars, Venus, and even as far as Jupiter or Saturn, its propulsion thrusters were dozens of times more powerful than a standard shuttle.

Naturally, it couldn't be controlled by a single pilot. A minimum of five were required.

That's why the Maganac Corps, led by Rashid, were essential for this ship's journey towards the sun.

An hour ago, when they had returned to the L-4 colony cluster, the Maganacs didn't just agree to Quatre's sudden proposal, they were thrilled to do it. They began preparations with such intensity that they completed everything in just one hour.

The Maganac Corps were overjoyed to be working alongside Quatre again.

Quatre forced a smile and said, "I'm so grateful to have you people accompany me, Rashid."

"Don't mention it, Master Quatre..." Rashid replied as he took his place at the operator's seat.

His words conveyed the unspoken thought.

"We're happy to work with you again after so long..."

However, Quatre was still blaming himself.

"It's all my fault to begin with... If I hadn't suggested sending the Gundams into the sun, this wouldn't be happening..."

"You couldn't possibly have predicted this kind of thing would happen."

In fact, on the surface, nothing had happened yet. If Heero and the others managed things well and resolved the situation before it escalated, this expedition to the sun might prove completely unnecessary.

"Right now, let's just concentrate on the immediate problem," Rashid encouraged the young, troubled head of the Winner family.

Quatre smiled in response to his kindness.

"Yes, you're quite right..."

The immediate problem was voiced by Auda, seated at the co-pilot's position.

"Do you think we can still catch up to the Gundam disposal block?"

Quatre quickly read the orbital calculations on the monitor in front of him, input the data into the interstellar map, and displayed it on the main screen. His processing speed was second only to Heero's.

"The block is more than fifty days away from the orbit of Venus. With this interplanetary transport ship, should barely be able to catch up to it."

The disposal satellite block was slowly progressing inward along Earth's orbital path. Even launched straight at the sun, Earth's incredible orbital speed around the sun dictated this course. There was no need for powerful verniers to avoid Earth's gravity or that of nearby planets, so this was the natural trajectory.

However, this transport ship, capable of interplanetary travel, could head directly towards the sun thanks to its super-powerful thrusters.

It would probably take about 150 hours, roughly six days, to rendezvous with the block.

Quatre felt these six days were a gamble.

"It might be too late."

In another week, the quiet year of AC-196 would end. Whether AC-197 would become another year of upheaval depended on this round trip of less than two weeks.

"Don't worry," Ahmad said, turning around from the main pilot's seat.

He seemed to be addressing Quatre, whose expression he had noticed, rather than Auda in the co-pilot seat behind him.

"Everything'll work out just fine."

His mustache lifted with his cheerful smile.

Joining in, Abdul leaned on his chair's backrest and said, "Yeah, we wouldn't want to return just to find that there's no more Earth."

The man with dark glasses deliberately exaggerated to ease the tension Auda and Quatre felt.

Rashid said to Quatre, "Well then, shall we go?"

He made it sound as casual as going to fetch water from a well.

Quatre looked at the thruster ignition switch in front of him.

At the prediction stage, any calculation would still be a gamble. If so, victory would be determined by how quickly one could make the first move and secure a definitive position.

Quatre, who had always fought with a strategist's perspective on the battlefield, thought:

It doesn't matter if this expedition turns out to be unnecessary. What matters now is making the first move. This is no time to wait for the opponent's action.

"It all depends on us."

Quatre pressed the ignition switch.

"We must retrieve the Gundams at all costs."

The interplanetary transport ship ignited its incredibly powerful thrusters and shot forward at tremendous speed.

The sun awaited them ahead.

"Master Quatre..." Rashid, at his side, called out while looking at the Earth on the monitor.

"The top of the Earth looks like it's covered in snow... That area must be having a White Christmas."

The Earth they were leaving behind had thick white clouds covering a wide area of its northern hemisphere.

"But I'll pass on the cold... Let's call this our 'sunny vacation,' shall we?"

It was, quite literally, a vacation to the sun.

"You're right..."

Quatre found this genuinely amusing and, for the first time, managed to show a real smile.

15

Duo and Heero hurtled through the silence of space. Their high-speed shuttle, docked with the Taurus Cruiser, was making better time than expected thanks to the combined thrust. They were set to reach Colony X18999's vicinity ahead of schedule.

The colony's standard time read 23:30 on December 24th.

Gazing out the window at the unchanging pinpricks of starlight, Duo mused, "Santa must be having a hell of a time right now."

Once, Old Saint Nick only had to worry about Earth. Now, he had colonies to visit too.

"Especially this year, with all these newly pious folks," Duo thought.

His mind drifted to a Christmas nine years ago at Maxwell Church. Back then, no one cared about the holiday. He could almost hear Sister Helen's beautiful singing.

"What a voice she had..."

Then, last year's Christmas came to mind.

"Thought I was really gonna bite it that time..."

The window seemed to reflect those scenes from the EVE WARS a year ago. Duo had rescued Professor G and the other four scientists from Libra, sticking with them as they sought to atone for their past sins.

"Why am I such a sucker for lost causes?" he wondered.

He'd ferried the scientists to Peacemillion in Deathscythe Hell, cutting straight through the heart of the battle. Even for someone as at home in space as Duo, it had been a near-death experience.

Trowa wouldn't have attempted something so reckless. Heero, Quatre, and WuFei had their hands full elsewhere. Only Duo could have pulled it off. Without him, peace might never have come to Earth's sphere.

The five scientists had succeeded in overloading Peacemillion's power core, preventing two massive battleships from descending to Earth. Though a section remained, even Wing Zero's Twin Buster Rifle could handle something that size.

The scientists' sin, turning boys into soldiers and sending them to Earth, should be forgiven. Their final act had stopped the "true rampage," even as they claimed to be "starting a rampage to stop another."

The Gundam pilots acknowledged this.

Quinze had called it "our Operation Meteor."

He'd asked, "How many times will you interfere before you're satisfied?" To him, Peacemillion and Libra's descent was also Operation Meteor. He believed "humanity's awakening" would have come sooner if the pilots hadn't altered their original orders.

Few understood the full implications of this now, including the five Gundam pilots. But no one spoke of it.

Duo murmured to his reflection, "We worked hard for this peace... Guess someone's gotta step up and protect it."

The scientists were gone now. It fell to them to stop anyone connected to the legendary Heero Yuy from going off the rails.

Dekim Barton. He must have had ties to that colonial leader too.

Duo turned to share this thought with Heero, only to find him dozing quietly, arms crossed.

"Heero..."

No response.

"Tch, you could've said you were gonna sleep," Duo grumbled, then realized he'd never seen Heero's sleeping face before.

"Well, well. Guess you've changed a bit. Comfortable enough to show me that side of you..."

Heero drifted in a light sleep, dreaming of events from two years ago. It was a recurring dream, a nightmare, really. The exact date escaped him. He couldn't even recall if it had been winter or summer.

—AC-194—

At this point, he still didn't bear the codename "Heero Yuy." Since meeting Dr. J six years earlier in AC-188, they'd been inseparable.

He was brought to a secret research facility in one of the L-1 colony clusters. Wing Gundam wasn't complete yet, but after five years, it was nearing its final adjustments.

Meanwhile, he had already been molded into a warrior, though he was deemed imperfect.

"Do they want me to become a machine?" the 14-year-old wondered. "Fine by me..."

Human traits meant nothing to him. Life itself seemed fleeting, easily snuffed out.

"People die easily," he thought, having faced death countless times.

That day's mission: destroy an Alliance soldier training ground. A small base with a few training Leos. Likely a simple test of his skills.

Boldly, he infiltrated at high noon, planting explosives at key points. During the day, rookie soldiers would be absorbed in combat training, paying little attention to their surroundings. There would also be more non-military personnel coming and going, making surveillance less thorough. He'd detonate at night for maximum casualties and easy escape. Textbook strategy, similar to what WuFei would later use at Lake Victoria.

Scaling the fence, Heero leapt into the vast grassland beyond. Though not pursued, he sprinted at full speed, a warrior's instinct.

Cresting a steep hill, he tumbled forward, sprawling on the grass. His heavy breathing wasn't from exertion; he enjoyed the hill's scent.

Looking up, he saw the colony's curved cityscape through breaks in the clouds. He appreciated these unmistakably artificial vistas, feeling they suited the colonies better than Earth imitations.

Suddenly, a girl's face peered down at him, beaming beneath a large white hat.

"Are you lost, mister?"

Her puppy tried to lick his cheek. Heero sat up, studying the girl in her white dress. About seven years old, her cute smile fixed on him.

"I said, are you lost?"

"I've been lost ever since the day I was born..."

It was a rare moment of vulnerability for Heero. And the first time anyone had sympathized with his circumstances.

"Oh, that's so sad..."

The puppy, delighted, wagged its tail ceaselessly.

"Well, I'm not lost at all. I'm taking Mary out for a walk," the girl explained, squatting to play with her dog.

"Hahahaha!"

She'd likely been allowed to walk the dog alone for the first time, bursting with joy and eager to share it with anyone.

Heero decided to watch them play for a while. He might have even smiled slightly. He didn't dislike dogs.

The girl thrust a small flower at him.

"Here, I'll give you this flower."

Whether a thank-you for watching or encouragement for the "lost" boy, she wouldn't retract her hand until he took it.

Heero finally accepted the tiny blossom, gazing at it briefly.

"I've never been given a flower before..."

Suddenly, the puppy bolted downhill, dragging the girl along.

"Wait, Mary! Wait, I said!"

The flower spoke no words, but somehow soothed Heero's heart.

That night, he pressed the detonator. Explosions rocked the Alliance training ground. Buildings were quickly engulfed in flames. The Leos in the cramped area also exploded. His mission was perfect.

"Mission complete."

As he turned to leave, he saw a flaming Leo lose balance. His heart stopped. If it fell, it would destroy the adjacent civilian facility.

He smashed the detonator into the ground and sprinted towards the scene. The Leo crushed the fence and crashed into the civilian building. The impact triggered a massive explosion, spreading fire all around.

He remembered the girl had gone home somewhere nearby. For a split second, he imagined her room caught in the blast, a teddy bear on a shelf, her white hat on the wall, all vanishing in a flash of light.

He sensed it happening.

There was nothing he could do.

By the time he reached the civilian facility, black smoke billowed up to the colony's low ceiling above the red flames. All he could do was clench the small flower in his trembling hand.

He stayed until dawn, then walked through the ruins in the misty morning. No one was around. A merciless wind whistled through exposed rebar and rubble.

The night's smoke had apparently disrupted the colony's environmental systems, causing light snow to fall. Flakes landed on his shoulders, melting instantly. The continuous snowfall gradually blanketed the ruins in white.

He suddenly stopped. A scrap of white cloth was caught in the debris. Nearby lay a tattered hat and a charred teddy bear. Scanning the area, he spotted the puppy Mary's lifeless body a short distance away. He fell to his knees and cradled the poor creature.

In the thickening snow, he searched for a burial spot, still holding the puppy.

"The hilltop would be best..."

He slowly climbed the hill, his feet sinking into the snow. The ascent that had taken seconds yesterday now seemed to stretch on forever. No matter how long he climbed, the summit remained out of reach.

By chance, Dekim Barton witnessed this scene that day, en route to meet Doctor J. Later, upon learning this boy was a Gundam pilot candidate, Dekim exploded with rage.

"How can Operation M succeed with someone like that?"

"Dekim, are you still on about that?"

"I won't repeat AC-188. That's why I'm funding you... I'll take just the Gundam if I must."

"That ludicrous. You're suggesting the use of a Gundam as a tool for massacre?"

"This is war! It is no big deal sacrificing the general public. Got it? Now retrain him at once. The humane feeling of kindness is unnecessary for our weapon."

"You're right there..."



The boy, with his flicker of kindness, overheard this conversation from the next room. After Dekim left, he vaguely heard Dr. J mutter.

"But do you really believe Heero Yuy would be pleased if we buried his humanity?"

It was the first time he heard the name of the legendary leader he would later adopt as his own.

"Heero Yuy..."

*

A voice called that name from the depths of darkness.

"Heero... Hey, Heero!"

The dream dissolved into shadows as reality's call broke through.

"Come on, wake up!"

It was Duo's voice. He shook Heero's shoulder.

"What is it?" Heero's eyes snapped open, fully alert.

The digital clock read 23:59. He'd slept for about half an hour.

Duo flipped switches on the console monitor.

"That little girl is about to issue a statement."

Silence.

Colony Standard Time ticked over to a new day: December 25th, Christmas.

At that moment, a girl in military uniform appeared on screen.

Heero's immediate thought.

"I have to kill her."

He burned her face into his memory.

"That's my mission this time..."

The girl's lips began to move slowly.

16

—AC-196 XMAS—

The girl on the monitor declared with a dignified yet slightly lisping voice, "We, at Colony L3-X18999, on this day, December 25, AC-195, hereby wish to announce our independence from the Earth Sphere Unified Nation and at the same time declare war against the Nation!"

The high-speed shuttle had approached close enough to see the entire view of Colony X18999 through its window.

However, at that moment, suddenly, the radar erupted with contacts. Over fifty mobile suits, Tauruses, were deployed around the colony.

"Well, well... looks like they're ready to kick things off."

"Yeah..."

"This is getting interesting."

*

The girl's declaration was being broadcast throughout the entire Earth Sphere.

Addressing all people across this vast area, she introduced herself.

"I am the legitimate heir to the World Nation Sovereign. My name is Mariemaia Khushrenada... daughter of Treize Khushrenada."

In the large shuttle rushing towards Colony X18999, Sally and Noin couldn't hide their shock.

"What did she say?"

"Treize's daughter..."

Noin, aware of Leia and Treize's encounter, had a premonition. But she had hoped her intuition was wrong.

"So she's from back then..."

There was no room for doubt anymore.

"This will mobilize all the dormant Treize faction and OZ remnants at once."

*

Northern Hemisphere, Central Europe, Earth

Snow was gently falling.

The streets adorned with Christmas trees should have been more romantic than ever. But on the large monitors in the bustling streets, Mariemaia's face loomed large.

"I'm carrying out my father's will... It's in human nature to fight."

Mariemaia was presenting the nightmare of war.

The people listening to her words in the snow were simply dumbfounded.

In Brussels, the new capital of the Earth Sphere, snow continued to fall.

At its heart, in the President's House, the leader frantically contacted the Preventers. He was too shocked to care about his disheveled appearance.

"But how could you have let this happen?!"

He shouted at Lady Une, who appeared on the monitor.

Behind him, Mariemaia's speech continued on TV.

"Why couldn't you have prevented this ahead of time?!"

In the director's office of the Preventer headquarters, also in Brussels, Lady Une pretended to make a desperate excuse.

Showing her usual calm composure would only incur the President's wrath.

"I already reported on this matter the other day, sir."

"I know that! But your department receives sufficient funds to prevent this exact kind of situation!"

He was exposing his own incompetence with such statements.

"I understand that. We're doing everything to stop this from progressing."

There was no point in venting her real frustration here.

She had to come up with solutions herself.

If that was the case, she needed to absorb the President's petty anger and free herself from these mere complaints as quickly as possible.

"But it seems they'd prepared for this even before our department was ever formed."

The communication was cut off.

Perhaps it wasn't a satisfactory excuse.

But at least she was finally free.

Lady Une quietly put down the transceiver and asked herself, "I can stand here and make excuses all day. But the question still remains, whether or not we can stop their aggression without some help."

At that moment, she felt a breeze from the door.

"Who is it?"

"Excuse me."

A man stood in the shadows.

Lady Une knew him well.

"Why, you're..."

"I've come to ask for a code name."

The man was wearing sunglasses even in this darkness.

"If I may suggest, I'd like the name Wind, appropriate for one who puts out fires."

The man's lips curved into a daring smile.

He already had two names: Zechs Merquise and Milliardo Peacecraft.

17

Duo and Heero's high-speed craft accelerated relentlessly, seemingly oblivious to the Taurus squad ahead.

"So, how are we gonna sneak in?" Duo asked Heero as they faced the attacking line of the rapidly pursuing Taurus force.

To reach Colony X18999, they first had to deal with this large unit of fifty Taurus mobile suits.

"Hijacking a mobile suit could work, but..." Heero mentally simulated immobilizing a Taurus without destroying it, taking out the pilot, and initiating combat.

"There's a strong possibility we'd be targeted while boarding it."

An unfavorable conclusion.

Duo offered another option.

"So... we're forcing our way through?"

"It's the only way."

An even less favorable conclusion, but with a slim chance of success.

"Man, this time try to use your head a bit, will ya?" Duo quipped.

"Same to you," Heero retorted.

Duo fell silent. He was weak against Heero's comebacks.

"Oh yeah? Sorry, I'm just an idiot after all," he grumbled internally.

He didn't voice it aloud because he knew Heero would just one-up him again. Instead, he focused on increasing their speed further.

Meanwhile, the Preventer's large shuttle was approaching the same airspace. Sally watched the hemispherical radar from the operator's seat. She spotted a shadow plunging straight into the large Taurus formation.

"There's an unidentified shuttle ahead of us! It's flying straight into the troop of mobile suits!"

Noin quickly set up an all-direction communication and shouted:

"Calling to the shuttle ahead of us, come in! This is a danger zone, retreat now!"

"Who's the idiot?" she thought.

The communication monitor reacted instantly, surprisingly using a professional agent's method of combined encryption codes and secret channels.

It displayed the face of a fool ready to confront a force fifty times their size.

"Yo, long time no see..." Duo grinned.

"Duo..."

Heero was visible beside him.

"And Heero?!"

Duo maintained his carefree smile.

"Looks like they're gonna have quite a Christmas part there, so ya know we thought we'd just give 'em a little present."

Sally identified their ship type: A Taurus Cruiser without Taurus units.

"No way, not without your Gundams!" she warned. "How are you going to retaliate?"

"Oh, we'll think of something... That is, if we can get to the colony."

That was the big problem. Noin made them an offer.

"Duo, Heero... why don't you join forces with us one more time?"

Noin and Sally had a history of fighting alongside the five Gundam pilots aboard the massive battleship Peacemillion, an unusual alliance for the typically lone-wolf pilots.

"I'll think about it when the time comes... See ya, we don't wanna be the last ones at the part now do we?" Duo replied, abruptly cutting the communication.

The monitor turned to static. As Noin and Sally prepared to call again, they heard only Duo's voice:

"P.S. Don't blame us if they run out of treats..."

On the radar, the Taurus Cruiser plunged into the large formation.

Sally was exasperated by their nonchalance.

"They haven't changed."

"Sally, we'll have to contain the Taurus ourselves. We'll just direct their attention toward us," Noin decided.

They couldn't stop Duo and Heero, who weren't interested in a joint infiltration. All they could do was provide support.

"Okay. We're backing them up after all," Sally mused.

The anguish had faded from Noin and Sally's faces.

"Yes. But right now we're depending on them," Noin said.

"Yes, but that's what so reassuring," Sally replied.

Duo and Heero struck first, firing the high-speed craft's beam cannons to clear an entry path. The central Taurus units scattered, creating a narrow gap for their ship to dive through.

But the surrounding Taurus units quickly resumed their attack.

One, two, three shots...

Duo's piloting deftly avoided them, making minute course adjustments at the last second. He'd perform figure-eight maneuvers, suddenly decelerate to a tenth of their speed, then accelerate tenfold. These unpredictable movements left the Taurus squad unable to lock on.

Dozens, hundreds of energy blasts converged on the ship, but it always managed to slip away. In space combat, no one could match Duo's piloting skills. The difference was stark.

Amidst the flashes of light, Duo boasted, "How's this for some shuttle maneuvering?"

Knowing Heero, Duo expected another cutting remark. Instead, Heero replied, "Yeah... I've been counting on your skills from the beginning."

Duo was genuinely pleased.

"Wow, that's that's satisfying to hear."

But on second thought, he realized Heero was praising his skills, not Duo himself.

"Damn, still not straightforward..."

Duo pushed the ship even faster, but the Taurus squad was gradually tightening their encirclement. The high-speed ship was running out of room to maneuver. Even with its speed, acrobatic flying became difficult without space.

Duo finally made a mistake, missing the timing on a deceleration descent. A Taurus shot grazed the ship, allowing new forces to deploy in their planned entry route above.

"You messed up..." Heero noted.

"Shut up, I know!" Duo snapped.

He swung the ship left and right, waiting for a reaction, but the Taurus units moved sluggishly, showing no interest.

"Huh? Are these amateurs, or..."

Duo realized they must be Mobile Dolls – emotionless machines.

"No wonder their aim was so precise..."

Forced lower, Duo decided to use a technique he'd developed against Mobile Dolls: ignore standard tactics. Unpredictable actions worked best against them.

He suddenly decelerated and began retreating. As expected, the Taurus units didn't immediately attack. He stopped right in front of one Taurus. Instantly, the others opened fire. The high-speed ship launched away, leaving the Taurus to be riddled with friendly fire.

Emotionless Mobile Dolls didn't hesitate to shoot their allies. They didn't fear reducing their own forces. But that also meant intimidation tactics were useless.

They'd taken down several units, but still couldn't secure a path forward. With missiles and energy nearly depleted, Duo was running out of options.

That's when Heero, who had been operating silently, made his move. He fired their last missile at the Taurus units above. The explosion took out three units directly and damaged several more nearby. With a single shot, he'd cleared their view above.

Heero said nothing.

"Tch... he really is something else," Duo thought.

As Taurus units converged on them, Duo ascended vertically. But surprisingly, another large squad appeared ahead.

"There's still this many?!"

Just then, Noin and Sally's large shuttle approached, firing as it advanced.

"Oh, the volunteer ladies have come to help..." Duo quipped, earning their ire if they'd heard.

Noin's shuttle detached missile launch blocks from its rear. These blocks spread out and opened, revealing over fifty large missiles each. They fired simultaneously, arcing towards the Taurus squad. With advanced tracking, these missiles decimated Taurus units regardless of evasive maneuvers.

With at least ten such launchers deployed, the battlefield was soon filled with arcing missiles. The high-speed ship weaved through this barrage, noticing a gap in the central forces that led straight to Colony X18999.

"We can make it..."

Duo accelerated full throttle.

"Hold on tight. We're going straight through."

They boldly plunged into the heart of the Taurus formation. That narrow gap became a tunnel of crisscrossing laser fire, but the high-speed craft raced through at maximum speed.

Colony X18999 loomed before them, but the Taurus squad persisted in pursuit. The docking bay gates came into view.

"Just a little more..."

But five Taurus units with bazookas guarded the gate. The high-speed ship took several missile hits.

"Damn it..."

Duo hit the Taurus Cruiser's undocking button.

"Outta my way!"

He simultaneously pressed the launch switch. The detached Taurus Cruiser became a massive missile, ramming into the firing Taurus squad. A huge explosion engulfed the docking gates.

The high-speed shuttle plunged into the inferno. With thrusters half-destroyed, it was a miracle they'd made it this far. Wrapped in flames and smoke, the shuttle ignored all landing procedures and skidded in on its fuselage.

Heero and Duo had reached Colony X18999.

"Phew..." Duo exhaled.

"..."

"We've arrived... Make sure you don't forget anything," Duo quipped, true to form even after a near-death experience.

Heero's silence was equally characteristic.

Confirming Duo and Heero's successful infiltration, Noin and Sally withdrew their large shuttle from the combat zone.

"Good luck..." they silently wished.

The Mobile Doll Taurus squad had suffered heavy losses. This initial skirmish was a clear defeat for Mariemaia's forces.

But this was merely the opening act of a much larger conflict...

18

Inside Colony X18999, Heero and Duo were already wreaking havoc in the Leo mobile suits they'd hijacked. The frontline interceptor Leos were destroyed before they could mount much resistance.

The duo's impeccable teamwork shone here as well. Duo's Leo would engage with machine gun fire from a distance, and when the enemy flinched for a split second, Heero's Leo would swiftly cut in deep with a beam saber, slicing them in two. Duo would then press the attack to support Heero. They'd switch roles to conserve equipment.

Using this strategy, they quickly broke through the colony's front lines.

"I'm surprised they were able to keep this many mobile suits intact!" Duo lamented as enemy units seemed to keep appearing.

The numbers were indeed staggering. Heero shared the sentiment. There must have been over thirty Leos on the internal front line alone. In Gundams, this wouldn't be a problem, but in Leos of equal strength, facing more than ten times their number was nearly impossible.

"We can't keep this up much longer," Duo said, calling Heero on the monitor.

They were already out of ammunition, reduced to close-quarters combat.

Heero calmly replied, "Destroy all that you can, then escape. Proceed at your own discretion."

"Roger!"

Heero and Duo split up. Soon after, Duo's Leo encountered another guarding a large sectional door. He desperately defeated it and seized its machine gun.

"Heh heh... If we keep taking weapons from the enemy, we can keep this up indefinitely," Duo joked, trying to encourage himself despite his exhaustion.

When he saw a massive elevator rising nearby, he casually remarked, "Oh, fresh prey... I'd love a bazooka this time."

The elevator doors opened, revealing a gleaming silver mobile suit: the Serpent.

Duo tensed.

"It's a new model!"

The Serpent wielded a new type of weapon too: a double-barreled heavy machine gun reminiscent of Gundam Heavyarms'.

"Wonder if that option's compatible with this Leo..." Duo thought, still underestimating the situation.

The Serpent raised its weapon and opened fire on his Leo. Duo returned fire while dodging with his hover system.

The Serpent's aim was terrifyingly accurate, anticipating Duo's movements. This wasn't a Mobile Doll. It had to be an extremely skilled pilot.

"Man, this guy's pretty good."

The Serpent fired relentlessly, seemingly unconcerned about ammunition.

"Damn it!"

Duo tried desperately to advance, but a rain of gunfire destroyed his hover system. Dodging became nearly impossible. He hurriedly took cover behind a bulkhead.

This fighting style seemed familiar. Suddenly, images of blue and red mobile suits flashed in his mind: Mercurius and Vayeate.

"Hey. I know this... I know this style of combat! "

Inside the Serpent's cockpit, the specialist named Ralph piloted with an unwavering, cold expression.

As the Serpent intensified its barrage, Duo watched the bulkhead being torn apart and shouted:

"No question now. Trowa's in that suit!"

Enraged, he burst out from cover.

"Well, take this!"

Duo had never fought Trowa directly before, but he had battled the Vayeate Mobile Doll with Trowa's combat data. This was exactly the same fighting style. There was no room for doubt.

Ralph, or rather Trowa, maintained his cold expression as he targeted Duo's Leo.

Trowa said nothing. He had discarded his clown mask, now wearing the mask of a soldier loyal to his mission.

With a heavy heart, Duo charged towards Trowa's Serpent, firing his last rounds.

At the same time, Heero's Leo had penetrated deeper into the colony's interior. He continued his unstoppable march, slicing through and defeating Leo after Leo.

Suddenly, a familiar silhouette appeared on his monitor. Through the smoke, he saw a black shadow with a long dragon's neck.

"..."

A moment of hesitation crossed Heero's face.

"It can't be..."

The mobile suit with the dragon's neck didn't miss this split second of uncertainty.

"Hyaaah!"

It swung its unique long beam sword, the twin beam trident, emerging from the smoke to strike.

Heero's Leo barely managed to block with its beam saber. But the enemy possessed overwhelming power.

Model number XXXG-01S2. Altron Gundam. Now their enemy.

The Leo's arm holding the beam saber was reaching its limit. At this rate, it would be snapped off.

Realizing this, Heero fired the machine gun in his other arm. Firing at point-blank range against Gundanium alloy was dangerous – the bullets could ricochet and damage his own unit. But the flash from the explosion would temporarily blind the enemy pilot.

Heero's Leo used this brief opening to escape the beam sword's pressure. He fired his machine gun continuously, retreating to maintain distance.

Heero didn't think, "It worked." Rather, he believed the opposite.

"He's still holding back... He deliberately let me escape."

The enemy pilot didn't want to win through sheer difference in mobile suit performance. He would surely attack again without pause. Heero needed to regroup before then.

He quickly assessed his Leo's condition. Few areas displayed the blue "Normal" indicator.

"Damn it," Heero thought. "This is entirely my slip up."

He had pushed this Leo too far. The Heero of before would have abandoned a Leo after defeating over ten enemies, even if it still had some fight left. Heero viewed mobile suits as expendable, like ammunition. This applied even to his beloved Gundam.

Even if he lost to the Altron Gundam, it wouldn't be due to the difference in mobile suit performance. Ordinary soldiers might blame defeat on inferior equipment, but Heero, a professional soldier, was different. He was ashamed of his negligence in not switching to a fresh unit.

"A first-class soldier must be able to adapt instantly to any situation." That was a mindset Odin Lowe had taught him.

Without flexible adaptability, one couldn't truly live "by one's emotions." Perhaps the arrogance from his invincible march had created that tiny opening in Heero's heart, making him think "It can't be..."

As Heero predicted, the Altron moved after a brief interval. The Dragon Fang lunged forward.

Heero tried to jump back, but his left foot displayed "Inoperable."
"Tch..."

The Dragon Fang clamped onto the Leo's shoulder. Heero could barely maintain balance.

Altron attacked again with its beam sword. A perfectly efficient assault.

Heero's Leo could no longer move from this spot. He had no choice but to block with his beam saber once more.

Altron's beam sword came down. Heero managed to block, but they were in the same deadlock as before. He grew frustrated, unable to counterattack.

Their sabers and swords remained locked, showering sparks. Inside the Leo's cockpit, more and more systems flashed "Inoperable."

Altron's power far surpassed the Leo's. Yet the fact that they were deadlocked suggested the enemy was still holding back, considering the performance gap.

In a few minutes, Heero's Leo wouldn't even be able to stand. This clash couldn't last much longer.

Suddenly, the Altron's pilot appeared on the monitor. His eyes were serious.

"I've always wanted to have a chance to fight you like this."



Indeed, Heero had never fought this man in Mariemaia's military uniform. There had been no need. They had once descended to Earth with the same goal: to defeat OZ.

Heero addressed Altron's pilot.

"What's going on, WuFei?"

Yes, the man was undoubtedly Chang WuFei.

He coldly replied, "Are you guys doing the right thing?"

"What?"

Altron knocked away the Leo's beam saber. Heero's Leo was now completely defenseless.

Altron charged again. WuFei shouted, "I'm asking if you guys are doing the right thing!!"

He raised his sword high, about to strike Heero's Leo.

In that instant, the Leo rammed into Altron. As Altron lost its balance, Heero couldn't help but shout.

"WuFei, press the self-destruct switch!"

Altron regained its footing and attacked immediately. This time, there was no holding back.

"Hyaaaah!"

The sword came down, severing the Leo's left arm.

Altron followed with a diagonal slash. An average pilot couldn't have dodged this combo. But Heero read the attack and pulled his Leo back by a hair's breadth.

Silence fell.

A deep diagonal gash marked the Leo's body – the trace of that final strike.

Even WuFei thought it had been the decisive blow, but Heero's piloting skills surpassed expectations.

WuFei voiced his admiration, "Impressive..."

He felt satisfied to have fought Heero, yet also regretted not battling Gundam-to-Gundam. He was a warrior to his core.

WuFei silently mused, "As expected of the only man I've acknowledged..."

Heero possessed talent and skill that more than made up for the difference in mobile suit performance.

But Heero could do nothing more. His Leo had completely stopped moving. Almost every system in the cockpit flashed red "Abnormal" warnings.

Even for an exceptional pilot, this was the limit when faced with such a stark performance gap.

Heero pulled the emergency escape lever. The cockpit's front armor exploded, but the cockpit itself didn't eject as it should have. Even the escape function had malfunctioned.

Heero kicked the cockpit door open with all his might. Through the opening, he saw the Altron Gundam standing proudly.

"..."

Silently, Heero exited the cockpit to face Altron. His courage was almost abnormal.

"WuFei—" He looked up at the giant mobile suit towering over him. "I'll say it again. Press the button."

Every Gundam model had a self-destruct device built in. Among its various purposes was the idea that if a Gundam pilot ever lost themselves to their power, they should activate this device.

Heero had judged that WuFei had gone berserk.

But his only response was a derisive snort.

"Hmph..."

Duo's Leo was mercilessly riddled with holes. The Serpent had thoroughly demonstrated the power of its heavy weaponry.

As his Leo fell backward from the explosions, Duo shouted from the shaking cockpit, "Trowa, why have you betrayed us?!"

The Serpent slowly lowered its double-barreled machine gun. Its pilot coldly replied, "You've got the wrong guy... I'm not Trowa."

Indeed, he wasn't Trowa at that moment.

"I... am not Trowa," he repeated.

As he finished speaking, the Serpent's shoulders opened, revealing medium-sized missile launchers.

Duo, still on his back, was stunned.

"Hey, come on, you're not serious..."

A hit from those would destroy not just his Leo, but the surrounding bulkheads too. No rational pilot would use such weapons in a narrow colony corridor.

But Trowa, or rather, the pilot who refused that name, took aim with an expression suggesting he'd long since abandoned rational thought. His cold eyes locked onto the target.

He pressed the launch button without hesitation. Several missiles fired from the Serpent.

Even Duo resigned himself to his fate. Watching the approaching missiles, he thought, "Heh, so this'll end everything, will it?"

A defiant grin was all he could manage.

But the missiles arced just before reaching the Leo, instead plowing into the surrounding walls. They exploded in a brilliant flash.

The blast reached even Altron's location.

WuFei looked around, startled.

"What was that explosion?"

He remained calm, doubting it was a hidden enemy.

"Some fool used the Serpent's missiles... Hmph, probably got cold feet. To think Mariemaia's forces had such cowards..."

WuFei never imagined Trowa had fired those missiles.

He waited for the smoke to clear. It took only seconds, but in that time, Heero had vanished from before him. The half-destroyed Leo still stood, but its cockpit was empty.

WuFei accepted this, not begrudging Heero's escape. He considered it the natural course of action. The thought of fighting Heero again brought a quiet satisfaction to his heart.

"Very well... I'll be waiting."

Altron deactivated its beam sword and stored it on its back.

Duo still couldn't believe what he'd witnessed. The Serpent was gone, and the surrounding walls were riddled with holes from the missiles. Yet his Leo stood completely unscathed, though pushed far beyond its limits.

Deciding to abandon the Leo, Duo exited the cockpit. He scanned the area, confirming the Serpent was nowhere to be seen.

"Trowa..."

He realized Trowa hadn't actually betrayed them. Looking through the holes in the bulkhead, Duo began to grasp Trowa's intentions. Beyond lay a path to the residential area.

"So this is how we infiltrate successfully... He gave us directions, albeit in a rough way."

Heading towards one of the holes, Duo muttered, "Not very straightforward... same as always."

The corridor showed signs of a fierce blast. The remaining Mariemaia forces, the second defense line of Leos, had all been rendered inoperable by the explosion.

Surveying the scene, Duo repeated, "Really not straightforward at all..."

It was a brilliantly executed maneuver. Trowa's missile timing had been perfect. If the Leo squad's deployment had been too early or too late, the effect wouldn't have been nearly as devastating.

Thanks to Trowa eliminating the remaining forces, Duo could now easily enter X18999's urban area. Heero had likely used the same opportunity to head into the city.

Trowa had lessened their combat burden significantly. Moreover, his actions wouldn't arouse suspicion within enemy ranks, allowing him to maintain his cover.

Duo had also gained valuable intel on the new mobile suit's capabilities, giving him an advantage if he faced the Serpent again.

Realizing the perfection of Trowa's foresight, Duo found the idea of thanking him almost ridiculous.

"He's always like this... Moving with perfect calculation, down to the last detail."

Duo lacked such tactical acumen. Heero likely did too. Trowa was a "tactical genius," capable of producing secondary and tertiary effects. He was a completely different type from Duo and Heero.

"That's why I can't bring myself to like him..."

With these thoughts, Duo concealed himself in an abandoned building in the city.

He checked the time. Colony Standard Time showed 1:30 AM.

"Couldn't make the scheduled contact with Quatre..."

He'd missed the promised time by nearly an hour. But he figured Quatre would understand given the emergency.

"You were right... We really do need the Gundams."

Duo murmured this, imagining the sun Quatre had headed towards in his mind.

19

For the past few hours, Quatre had been intently staring at the computer monitor. It displayed the trajectories of their interplanetary transport ship and the derelict resource satellite.

He was simulating the earliest possible rendezvous point.

"We've gotta hurry..."

He realized that the initially planned 150 hours wouldn't be nearly enough.

"We've been outmaneuvered..."

They hadn't anticipated Mariemaia's declaration of war coming so soon.

To make up for this delay, Quatre was forced to consider an even riskier gamble than the 150-hour plan. The simulation showed that they could potentially shave off 80 hours.

This was their only option now.

Quatre, resolute, explained to Rashid and the others.

"Everyone, please listen..."

He displayed Earth's and Venus' orbits on the main monitor, along with their ship's planned course pursuing the disposal satellite.

"At this rate, it'll take six days to catch up to the satellite. Even at maximum thruster output, we'd need five days..."

The planned course involved a wide detour just before rendezvous to match speeds with the satellite. Without matching speeds, they couldn't transfer from the ship to the satellite.

"We could reduce the time by up to three days on this route."

He displayed the newly simulated course, a direct line towards the satellite.

"Pursuing" wasn't the right word; they would be hurtling straight at it.

Ahmad cheerfully said, "That's great! Let's take that course!"

"But we don't have enough fuel for this course..." Auda calmly calculated.

"But considering the fuel needed to accelerate now and decelerate at the rendezvous point, we'd have no propulsion by the time we got there."

"But then there's no way to get back, is there?"

"No, there is a way to get back..." Quatre explained matter-of-factly.

"We just need to detonate the satellite's fusion reactor engine for propulsion."

Using a fusion reactor explosion for propulsion was highly risky. Even if it worked, it would be meaningless if those inside died from the blast or the intense heat.

Quatre continued, undeterred.

"Then, this ship will continue on inertial motion to Venus, using a gravity catapult to return to Earth."

A gravity catapult was the most energy-efficient method, using Venus' gravity. However, it was time-consuming.

"Our main problem is—" Auda pointed out the most dangerous part of Quatre's plan, not out of cowardice, but concern for Quatre's safety.

"The time we have at the rendezvous point. By rough calculation, we'll only have about a five-second window to make contact with the satellite..."

"How many can transfer in those five seconds..." Rashid, who had been silent until now, spoke up.

Quatre remained resolute. "Some danger can't be avoided."

Glancing at the communicator, he added, "Since Duo's periodic message hasn't come, it's likely that things are becoming more serious back there."

"Then it's decided," Rashid smiled slightly. "The satellite team will consist of Abdul, myself and Auda--"

Quatre cut him off.

"No, I'll be going alone."

"Master Quatre..."

"Please, take us with you!" Abdul protested.

"Rashid, start the booster one last time. The course is already set."

The Maganacs didn't move. A five-second space dive, dancing with death. Quatre intended to do this alone.

No one would accept such an order.

Ahmad, unable to contain himself, spoke up.

"Each one of us is ready to give up his life for you, anytime!"

Abdul and Auda nodded in unison.

Quatre shook his head. He didn't want to trouble them further, but he didn't express this directly.

"In this universe, nothing is more precious than life," he said, implying he had no intention of dying either. "Sandrock made that clear to me."

Quatre's resolve was unshakeable. The Maganacs understood his temperament well.

Rashid signaled Auda with his eyes to set the fuel allocation. Auda reluctantly complied.

The interplanetary transport ship's thrusters ignited once more, burning with an intensity that rivaled the distant sun.

20

Snow continued to fall across the European continent, blanketing the world in a pristine white shroud. Here, on the hill of fallen soldiers in Luxembourg, where the graves of Treize and Milliardo lay side by side, the landscape had been transformed into a winter wonderland.

Two figures stood out against the stark white backdrop, a man and a woman, both clad in trench coats that billowed gently in the frigid air. Zechs Merquise and Lady Une, their silhouettes etched against the snowy horizon.

Lady Une brushed away the accumulating snow from Treize's gravestone, her gloved fingers lingering for a moment on the cold stone.

"That mobile suit," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, "Mr. Treize had prepared it for you..."



Her gaze drifted to the distance, where an elegant castle, once the headquarters of OZ, stood proudly against the twilight sky, its spires piercing the clouds.

Zechs remained silent, his attention fixed on Milliardo's grave, or rather, his own. The irony of the situation was not lost on him.

"What's wrong?" Lady Une's voice cut through his reverie.

"It's not every day one gets to contemplate their own grave," Zechs replied, a hint of dark humor coloring his words.

Lady Une said nothing, allowing the weight of the moment to settle between them.

Zechs tilted his head back, his eyes searching the snow-filled night sky.

"The sooner we launch, the better," he said, his voice filled with quiet determination. "I'll make good use of Treize's parting gift."

"Please," Lady Une's response was barely audible, laden with unspoken emotion.

With a fluid motion, Zechs turned up his coat collar and strode away, his figure slowly disappearing into the white expanse.

Lady Une remained, her eyes drawn to the twinkling Christmas illuminations adorning the distant cityscape.

"The people have no idea the threat Mariemaia poses," she murmured to herself.

She, too, turned up her collar against the biting cold, her gaze fixed on the gently falling snow.

"But with the world's lack of strength to retaliate, she won't need five minutes to take political control."

The snow continued to fall, each flake catching the light and refracting it in a dance of melancholy beauty against the inky darkness of the night.

Minutes later, an HLV, a heavy lift vehicle designed for mobile suit transport, took off from the outskirts of Luxembourg. Its fiery trail blazed across the sky, a fleeting streak of light that would soon become a beacon of hope for humanity, though none yet realized its significance.

Preventer Wind had launched.

Meanwhile, Preventer Fire and Preventer Water were in hot pursuit of Mariemaia's Taurus unit.

Their massive shuttle maintained a careful distance, trailing the rear of the Taurus formation. Dozens of Taurus units, having launched from Colony X-18999, had just left the L-3 region and were following the lunar orbit.

Sally, codename Water, kept a vigilant eye on their movement via the hemispherical radar.

"As we suspected, the Taurus troops ahead are headed toward the relay station."

Ahead lay the L-5 colony cluster, but before that, the relay station stood as a strategic checkpoint. It was clear that the Taurus unit intended to seize control of it.

Noin, codename Fire, spoke up, her tone analytical.

"They're taking a roundabout. But their destination is still Earth."

If they managed to capture this relay station, it would open a direct path to Earth. Even with just a few dozen Taurus suits, overtaking a space station of this size would be child's play. It was tantamount to securing an invasion route.

"Still, their coordination is impeccable," Noin mused, her eyes fixed on the monitor displaying the Taurus formation. Something nagged at the back of her mind, an elusive doubt she couldn't quite pin down.

"What is this vague doubt I'm feeling?"

Was it because the Taurus units weren't attacking their shuttle? No, they had taken painstaking measures to ensure that wouldn't happen.

"It's not that. I feel like we're overlooking something crucial..."

Try as she might, she couldn't put her finger on it. Noin's expression remained clouded with concern.

Sally shared her unease.

"A Preventer cruiser will arrive from the Lunar Base shortly."

Even if Mariemaia's forces managed to seize the space station, the cruiser had enough firepower to prevent them from launching any further assaults.

"I'm sure we can buy some time when they arrive," Sally added, though her voice lacked conviction.

"Any word from Heero and Duo?" Noin asked.

Sally shook her head.

"Really..."

A battle report from Colony X18999... It was foolish to expect such formalities from those boys.

This marked the first time a Preventer cruiser had been deployed from the lunar base. Never before had an interception operation reached such a scale. Yet, based on their initial premonitions, this "fire" seemed far too large to be extinguished by a mere cruiser deployment.

"Ah!"

Noin's eyes widened as realization struck her like a thunderbolt.

"We've been played..."

She cursed her own incompetence, wondering how she could have missed something so glaringly obvious.

Noin accelerated the shuttle, closing the distance between them and the Taurus unit.

"What's wrong?" Sally asked, alarmed by her partner's sudden change in demeanor.

"Sally... did you confirm any new suit models during the battle three hours ago?"

"No, I didn't," Sally replied, the implications of Noin's question dawning on her. "Come to think of it, they were all Taurus and Space Leos."

Noin ran a thermal scan of the Taurus formation ahead. The results came back almost instantly, confirming her worst fears.

"We've underestimated them," she said, her voice tight with frustration.

The thermal readings from the Taurus units showed heat signatures concentrated only in the propulsion systems. There were no signs of human body heat in the cockpits.

They were unmanned.

Distinguishing between mobile dolls and manned mobile suits was no easy task. Even someone as skilled as Duo had only realized it after engaging in combat. Thermal scans were only effective at close range, and they were too far from the command center at Colony X18999.

This meant that the combat mode and safety protocols had been automatically disengaged.

In all likelihood, this Taurus formation was nothing more than a decoy, programmed only with the coordinates of the space station.

The reason for this deception was clear: to lure the Preventer cruiser towards the space station.

Which could only mean one thing...

"That means the main troops with the new mobile suit are deployed elsewhere," Noin concluded grimly.

"Quite an elaborate operation," Sally agreed. "Then where could the main troops be?"

"In any case, we'll leave this area," Noin said, executing a maneuver that bordered on reckless to turn the large shuttle around.

"Sally, send an emergency communication to the Preventer cruiser and Earth..."

"Roger!"

The large shuttle altered its course, setting its trajectory back towards Colony X18999, racing against time and their own oversight.

Resource Satellite MO-III hung in the void of space, a twisted monument to humanity's past ambitions. Like its counterpart MO-II on the opposite side of Earth, this celestial body had long since been stripped of its valuable resources.

Once a perfect sphere, the satellite now resembled a misshapen confeito candy, its form warped by the relentless passage of time. Within the confines of this kilometers-wide relic, five hundred Serpent mobile suits stood ready, poised for the moment of deployment.

The diversionary tactics had worked flawlessly, drawing Preventer's attention away from their true objective. From this vantage point, Earth seemed tantalizingly close, almost within arm's reach.

In the control room, Dekim Barton allowed himself a smirk of satisfaction.

"This operation is perfect," he declared, his laughter echoing off the metallic walls. "This time, we will succeed in executing 'Operation Meteor!'"

His laughter carried a sinister edge, filled with malevolent glee.

A communications officer, eyes fixed on the strategic map of Earth's sphere, reported, "The Preventer cruiser has altered its course."

On the monitor, the cruiser's icon veered sharply away from the relay station situated between the L-3 and L-5 regions.

"So they've finally caught on," Dekim mused. "But it's far too late."

He was certain that by the time the Preventer cruiser reached resource satellite MO-III, the balance of power on Earth would have already shifted irrevocably.

With an air of supreme confidence, Dekim issued his command.

"Send out the Serpent troops, at once!"

"Understood. Opening Earth-side gate," came the prompt response.

The massive gate facing Earth began to slide open, revealing a breathtaking vista of Earth's deep blue oceans. The proximity to their target was palpable, a journey of mere hours separating them from their goal.

The Serpent mobile suits, divided among fifty transport ships, prepared for descent. It was the largest deployment operation since Operation Nova in September of AC-195.

As the transport fleet began to launch in waves, a blinding flash of light erupted from Earth's direction. The object's speed was nothing short of phenomenal, befitting the moniker "The Lightning Count."

"Unidentified mobile suit approaching from ahead!" the communications officer shouted.

"What?" Dekim's composure cracked for the first time.

"A mobile suit? Impossible..."

The four Gundam pilots were supposed to be at Colony X18999. Dekim had been certain of their whereabouts. And Quatre, the fifth pilot, had no reason to appear in this sector.

While Preventer might still possess a few mobile suits, they should have fallen for the Taurus diversion tactic.

"Who could it be? Who's piloting that suit?"

The communications officer turned to Dekim, his face taut with tension. "Checking the model of the mobile suit... it's the Tallgeese!"

The name seemed to startle even the one who spoke it.

"Treize?" Dekim muttered, then shook his head. "No, it can't be... Zechs, then?"

"Tallgeese is charging straight for us!" the officer cried out.

The white mobile suit, the legendary Tallgeese, bore down on them. Its pilot was indeed Zechs Marquise.

"It seems my hunch was correct," Zechs said, a self-deprecating smile playing on his lips. "I guess there's still a place for a man who can't get used to peace."

With a flourish, Tallgeese drew its beam saber, its radiant blade slicing through the transport ships with devastating efficiency.

A high-speed helicopter sliced through the air above the deserted streets of Colony X18999. Within its sleek confines sat Mariemaia and Relena, facing each other in plush seats.

"Rule the Earth Sphere?" Relena's voice trembled with barely contained indignation. "Is this how you intend to honor Treize's, no, your father's, will?"

Mariemaia tilted her head slightly, her gaze fixed on Relena.

"You've got it wrong," she said, a sweet smile playing on her lips. "I just want to be victorious"

Once, Treize Khushrenada had expressed a desire to "become a loser." His wish had been granted. This young girl, it seemed, did not approve of her father's chosen path.

As the helicopter sped towards the spaceport on the outskirts of the city, Duo tracked its progress through binoculars.

"No way we're catching up to that..." he thought, exhaling a weary sigh from his perch atop a building.

He sensed a presence behind him and turned to find Heero standing there.

"Hey, glad to see you made it," Duo said.

Heero ignored the greeting, his eyes still following the rapidly shrinking silhouette of the helicopter.

"They're headed for the spaceport," he stated flatly.

"Yeah, looks like it," Duo agreed. "But don't you think they're in an awful hurry if they're just going to Earth?"

"They're probably planning to escape," Heero said.

"Escape?" Duo echoed, incredulous. "Then why bother taking control of this place?"

Heero remained silent, but his lack of response spoke volumes. Duo's mind raced, arriving at the only logical conclusion.

"Come on, man. She's Treize's daughter, isn't she?" Duo started, wanting to add that surely they wouldn't go that far.

"I'm more concerned about the man known as Dekim," Heero said, his voice low and serious.

Duo had to admit, that man concerned him too. If Dekim was involved, the possibilities were grim indeed.

"Are they... are Dekim and Mariemaia really serious?" Duo asked, his voice tight. "They're planning to go ahead with Operation Meteor?"

"Yeah," Heero replied, his resolve evident in his tone. "But I'll do everything I can to stop them."

Operation Meteor.

Few in the Earth Sphere truly understood the true extent of this ominous plan.

Afterword (1997 Edition)

There's something about a snowy night that sets my creative juices flowing. As I watch the snow fall thick and fast, melting into the nightscape of skyscrapers outside my window, it's like a gentle gust of wind beneath the tattered wings of my imagination. It's not much, but it's enough to keep me writing, one page at a time.

By morning, the snowfall will have ceased, leaving behind a pristine world of untouched white. The air is crisp and invigorating, each breath a reminder that I'm alive. On my desk: an ashtray with a smoldering cigarette, a cup of coffee gone cold and syrupy, and a half-finished manuscript.

Suddenly, I'm seized by a desire to stay in this world of words. To linger a little longer with the characters I've breathed life into. So I light another cigarette and turn back to the page. It's always like this on snowy days, my productivity soars. I find myself seriously contemplating a move to some snow-covered region, muttering the idea aloud to an empty room.

I'm still young enough that all-nighters don't faze me. But when I catch myself talking to my characters as if they're real, I wonder if I'm teetering on the edge of sanity. So I try not to pull too many late nights. And no, I won't use that as an excuse for missing deadlines.

But here's the rub, we barely saw any snow in Kanto this past year. My deadlines flew by faster than I could catch them. Not that I'm blaming it all on the weather, mind you. If I'm being honest, I got caught up in the minutiae of the Gundam Wing universe, obsessing over details and explanations. My schedule went to hell in a handbasket.

Maybe screenwriters like me shouldn't dabble in novelizations. We get all responsible and try to flesh out the parts that were glossed over on TV or video. We try to clarify the bits that viewers found confusing. Before I knew it, what was supposed to be one book covering three video volumes had ballooned into two.

But maybe that was overkill. Some fans argue that it's the complexity that makes Gundam Wing great.

(Damn, I'm making excuses again. Nataka, where are you when I need a good scolding?)

Anyway, I'm rambling. I just want to express my gratitude to everyone involved. To Tanaka and Miura at Kodansha, Tomioka, Takahashi, and Tomita at Sunrise, I'm truly sorry for missing the

deadlines. I solemnly swear the second volume won't suffer the same fate.

To Director Aoki, Murase, Hishinuma, Katoki, Yukawa, and all the video production staff, I respect your incredible work as creators. And to Sakura Asagi, Yoko Takanori, and Naka Morifumi, thank you for the beautiful illustrations.

To all the staff on my other projects who had to deal with the fallout from my schedule slipping, I couldn't have done this without your understanding and support. I'm truly grateful.

And last but certainly not least, a big 'Thank you!' to all the readers who bought this book. Let's meet again in the afterword of the next volume!

Afterword (2007 Edition)

You know, naming in fiction is crucial. It's like... it's the DNA of your characters and your world. Take Heero Yuy from Gundam Wing. If we'd called him Isamu Clark, I bet he'd have turned out completely different. Probably some mild-mannered accountant type, not our brooding hero.

And imagine if we'd gone full sci-fi gobbledygook during the TV broadcast. If we said the Alliance Forces and OZ: 'The Terracrusseiders are battling the Specials Treize Faction!' Viewers would've been left scratching their heads, wondering if we were talking about mechs, people, or some bizarre alien life forms.

But Gundam Wing actually nailed it with the naming. Everyone talks about how the female fans supported the show, how they were all about those five pretty boys. But I reckon the solid naming played a part too. It's a bit of an unsung hero, really. You'd think someone would've noticed by now.

So why am I banging on about naming? Well, I've recently been diagnosed with diabetes. And my doctor, Dr. Tokunaga, he said something that really stuck with me. He said, 'The name 'diabetes' itself is too sweet! It makes people complacent, and by the time they take it seriously, it's already severe!'

So, the good doctor came up with a new name: glucotoxicity angiopathy syndrome! Now that's a name that'll make you sit up and pay attention. Because let's face it, diabetes is every bit as scary as that name suggests.

These days, I'm living like a monk. No smokes, less booze, and I've even cut back on writing anime scripts. If only I could make a living just writing novels, I'd be the picture of health! Well, maybe.

Hey, Sakura Asagi, fancy teaming up for another project? I'll treat you to a nice meal to seal the deal.

Oh wait, I'm diabetic now.

Damn.