

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP

新機動戦記ガンダムW
フローズンティアドロップ

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4 REQUIEM FOR A PERPETUAL CHAIN (Part.2)



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Requiem for a Perpetual Chain

Mars File 3 (Part.01)

"This suit has the ability to show the pilot the image of the enemy he's fighting and the pilot's own future. Regretfully, there wasn't any future for me to choose from. After you've piloted this suit, if you end up just like myself, let us both part with our lives."

"Why did you decide to make this thing?"

"All my life, I've always though that humans sense their existence through continuous battle. However, I couldn't come to any conclusions. My battle's now over. But I still have yet to determine the reason for battle. To find that reason, I figured a Gundam would be the most appropriate mobile suit. In addition, I'd like to give my blessings to both winners and losers. This mobile suit allows me to do so."

"Do you think you've built a god or something?"

"Maybe I do. As long as the warrior has a genuine will to fight, the Epyon will eliminate all distractions. There's nothing more noble and beautiful than a warrior with no distractions. One could say that he's the closest thing to God."

—AC-195 Luxembourg—
Treize & Heero

"Certain conditions must be met for total peace. First, all weapons must be eliminated. And second, the desire to fight must be erased from people's minds!"

—AC-195 EVE WARS—
Milliardo

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

My name is Father Maxwell.

Yes, I might run and hide, but I'll never tell a lie, such is the creed of Father Maxwell.

Right now, at the Preventer base on the Martian North Pole, Sally Po's daughter Kathy is wearing a virtual visor, reliving the past of that man through something we call the "Zechs File."

"Hey..."

The man who speaks is the head of this base and Chief of the Mars branch of Preventer, Master Chang.

"Word just came in from your son. Seems Quaterine gave him the slip and made off with the Prometheus."

"Whoa. Gotta hand it to her... Figures she'd live up to being Quatre's kid sister."

"Useless fools," he mutters, clicking his tongue in annoyance.

In times like this, the best defense is a good wisecrack.

"Maybe us old bones should've gone out there ourselves, huh?"

"Perhaps we should have..."

"But as far as I know, your mobile suit is all that's stationed here, right?"

"Yes. I've never actually piloted it, but I'm confident I can handle it."

"Don't. We're past our prime, old friend."

Besides, now that the Perfect Peace Program has been activated, there isn't much we can do. Only Heero Yuy could hope to stop that.

"But still, Cyrene Wind is out there fighting," Master Chang says.

"That guy can't forgive himself for what he's done. Let him do as he pleases."

I recall the face of the man who called himself "Wind," like the wind blowing across Cyrene. Just how many years has it been since I last saw him?

MC-0017 FIRST SUMMER

At the time, I was roaming across Mars on my beloved 1500cc touring bike, drifting with no fixed destination. I never liked staying in one place for too long. Most folks on Mars use hover-bikes or three-wheeled trikes to handle the rough terrain, so riding a two-wheeler across these treacherous red deserts earned me a reputation for being an eccentric lunatic. So be it.

Under that glaring, shrunken sun, I tore across Mars's desolate landscapes. The dry, sand-laced wind ripping at me from the west felt just right against my own gritty soul. Sure, I called myself "Father" Maxwell, but I rarely did anything remotely priestly, and I sure as hell avoided musty old churches.

And beneath these black robes, I usually kept a shotgun handy. I couldn't even remember how many outlaws I'd put down for good.

Frankly, calling me a bounty hunter would be a more fitting description of my profession.

I'd swagger around in a cowboy hat pulled low, drop by some tiny desert-town saloon in the middle of nowhere, drink bourbon or tequila in broad daylight, cheat at cards to kill time, then get turned down by the local ladies of the night come evening.

Mars, to me, was a place where I could revel in freedom and ruin alike, an absolute paradise.

One day, I was passing through a small para-terraforming town called Cyrene, located in the great desert north of the Valles Marineris canyon. My bike's air-cleaner oil filter was on its last legs.

That's to be expected when you're constantly plowing through Martian dust, the intake clogs in about five hours flat. Since I rely on two-wheel drive, I had to fuss over every little part.

"Cyrene, huh..."

For a so-called "domed" settlement, the place was basically a lawless frontier choked with swirling dust.

I parked my partner out front of the saloon, strolled in, and settled onto a barstool.

"Bourbon... If you've got Wild Turkey, pour yourself one on my tab."

No sooner did I place my order than a shot glass of that "firewater" slid down the counter toward me.

I drained it in one gulp, then asked the bartender.

"I hear there's a Colonel in this town..."

At that, the bartender visibly paled and swallowed his Turkey hard. With trembling fingers, he motioned to a table in the back.

Four men sat around a round table playing poker, and it was obvious which one was "the Colonel," the one with his back to me.

I could tell from the moment I entered the saloon that the bastard had sensed my presence. He'd kept an eye on me in his peripheral vision the entire time, practically radiating bloodlust.

I knew of a certain gunman called Laphroaig Peat who prowled around here.

Tossing some money on the counter, I stood up. That ex-military man was nicknamed the "Colonel," though truthfully his rank had only been sergeant at best. I approached their four-person table, leaned over to the chubby doofus sitting farthest in the back, and calmly pressed my palm against his face—then shoved him off his chair.

"You bastard!"

The big oaf was about to run his mouth, but since that voice was as grating as I imagined, I leveled my shotgun at him.

My finger was on the trigger, though I had no real intention of killing him. But I hate annoying chatter, so if he'd pressed his luck one word further, I would've scattered his brains all over the bar.

With a face like a pig and the gall to screech that harshly, he must still have cherished his own life a little. By the time I lit a cigarette, he had slunk out the door in silence.

Now only "the Colonel," aka Laphroaig, remained in front of me. The other poker buddies had bolted.

"F-Father Maxwell, is that you...?"

Nice to see my reputation holds up this far out in the sticks. Looks like I'm finally becoming famous.

Laphroaig glowered at me with wild eyes.

But my style is always to answer a question with another question. Blowing out a thick cloud of smoke, I said:

"You ever heard of the Cyrenaics?"

The cards strewn on the table were all trash hands. I guess a measly pair of fours or fives would beat these pigs, but that's about it.

"It's a branch of ancient Greek philosophy that branched off from Socrates. A brand of hedonism, basically, akin to utilitarianism. Once upon a time, they called it 'the philosophy of swine.'"

"Wh-what the hell... You come here to lecture me or something?"

Another question. This time I decided to ignore him. Crushing my cigarette out in the ashtray, I kept talking.

"See, the Cyrenaics believed pleasure itself is the highest good and pain is the greatest evil. I'm no scholar, but apparently, one of their philosophers concluded the ultimate form of pleasure is--"

"I've no damn clue what you're on about."

At that moment, a figure appeared behind Laphroaig.

Short blond hair, sunglasses, a long coat draped over his shoulders, a scruffy beard, and that faintly self-mocking smirk I remembered all too well.

"...!"

Pressing the barrel of a rifle against Laphroaig's skull, the sunglasses-wearing man spoke:

"The absence of pain is pleasure."

I recognized his face immediately.

"Which means the ultimate pleasure—total freedom from suffering—is 'death.'"

"Wh-who the hell are you people...?"

Laphroaig raised both hands in the air.

"You with Father Maxwell?"

"No. I'm a friend of Eleve Onegell, whom you killed."

Laphroaig turned pale in an instant. Clearly, he had some skeletons rattling around.

I spoke to my old acquaintance.

"Hold up. This guy is my bounty."

"My motive isn't the reward; I just want back what he stole from Eleve."

Laphroaig's teeth chattered. Though the man was a pig, I felt the faintest hint of pity, so I offered him some advice.

"Listen, *Colonel*. You're wanted, dead or alive. Might be in your best interest to talk straight."

"I-it's... well..."

I explained just how lethal that man with the rifle could be.

"He's on a whole other level from me. Seriously dangerous. The body count on his ledger isn't just a hundred or two, try tens of thousands."

It was exaggerated, but not by much.

"All right... I'll talk!"

The man raised the barrel upward, waiting for Laphroaig to speak.

"...I sold it to the Neuenheim Konzern."

"To whom in Neuenheim?"

"Some top-level exec at headquarters, I never even got a name! They also hired me to take out Major Eleve!"

"..."

"I don't know where it is now, I swear! That's all I know!"

"I see..."

No sooner did the man behind him speak than he blew a hole straight through Laphroaig's skull. I watched the bullet spin out, slick with gore, from the man's forehead.

"Dammit!"

It nearly nailed me, but I dodged just in time. Anyone else would've been caught in the crossfire and died.

"You trying to kill me too?"

"There are things best done along the way."

I glanced at Laphroaig's corpse slumped over the table, blood pooling beneath him.

"You know, if you'd left him alive, I'd still get the same bounty," I said.

"Like I said before, I'm not in this for money."

Blood was spreading across the table.

"He murdered Eleve, there was nothing left for him but this."

"Still the same old maniac, I see..."

"Heh... rich coming from you, Gundam pilot."

"Yeah... Not since Brussels back on Earth, huh?"

Once known as the Zechs Merquise, the "Lightning Count," Miliardo Peacecraft, the "Heir of a Lost Nation," and even code-named "the Wind That Puts Out the Fire," here he was before me.

We returned to the bar and toasted our reunion. Then, for good measure, we raised another glass in honor of freeing that pig from his miserable life.

"Really though, you don't mind if I collect his bounty?"

"Absolutely. I've heard you're still sending donations to the Schbeiker orphanage."

"Word on the street says you're the one who led Mars to independence from Earth."

"That 'Miliardo Peacecraft' is not me, and you know it. Besides, politics isn't my thing."

"But the one they call the 'Little Prince,' that's the real Relena Darlian, correct?"

"She's a hostage. That's why Lucrezia... no, Noin is at the Presidential Palace as her bodyguard."

We killed off the rest of the Wild Turkey in no time.

"So tell me... who exactly is that Federation President then?"

"Dixneuf Neuenheim, CEO of the Neuenheim Konzern."

My body practically lit on fire. That name really rubs me the wrong way.

"You mean *that*... that guy?"

"Yes. He's Noin's brother, though there's a considerable age gap."

"..."

We switched to tequila.

"A corporate CEO playing politician at the same time, huh? Strictly speaking, that breaks constitutional law, doesn't it?"

"Hence why he uses the name Milliardo, trading on 'Peacecraft' to bolster his own."

"Heh... same old dirty tricks from Neuenheim."

I slugged back the scalding tequila, the burning in my throat echoing the anger in my gut. I decided to keep that detail to myself.

He seemed decently drunk. He was more talkative than I remembered.

"So then..."

I almost asked "what's your next move?" but let it slide.

He was a man who acted swiftly, decisively, and rationally, like a flash of lightning. When he resolved to fight, he'd sacrifice his very life to see it through, even if it meant turning on his own wife's family.

I had a hunch it weighed heavily on him.

"So... what should I call you now?" I asked, tossing back my fifth shot of tequila. "Just 'Wind' like before?"

"This place is called Cyrene, is it not?"

"Yup..."

"Then call me 'Cyrene Wind.'"

"Guess you're adopting a flavor of hedonism now?"

"If I recall, in Greek myth, 'Cyrene' was the name of a bold fairy who slew a lion."

"Dad, let's go already!"

We turned to see a precious little girl, maybe around seven, standing behind us in work clothes suitable for a farm, yet she had an undeniable air of nobility.

She had a refined face, golden hair plaited into twin braids, and freckles scattered across her cheeks, lending her a feisty air.

"Allow me to introduce my little fairy, Naina Neuenheim."

"Naina Peacecraft! I will carry on Mother's legacy as Relena's knight!"

"So, you and Noin...?"

"Our rather imperfect daughter," he said.

Naina offered a polite bow. Her features reminded me of how Relena looked when I first met her, spirited and stubborn.

"You a friend of my father?"

"The name's Father Maxwell," I replied.

"He looks older, but he's actually younger than I am," the man said.

"Blame it on Mars..."

Wandering the planet had aged me prematurely. The Martian calendar is still something I've never fully adapted to, but in the two-ish (or maybe four or five Earth) years since I arrived, my appearance caught up to scruffy old guys in no time. The cause of this accelerated aging remains an endemic mystery, Mars's "geriatric plague," they call it. It varies widely by individual, and even region, too. Technically, in After Colony years, I'm just stepping into my thirties, but drifting all across this dustbowl made me stop caring how old I was a long time ago.

"It seems fate has led us to meet here. I have a favor to ask."

The liquor was wearing off.

"I'm not in the mood for trouble."

That's cheap booze for you.

"I'll make it worth your while."

"Fine. If it's in bounty range."

"Could you take Naina to the Schbeiker Orphanage for me?"

"How could you, Father? That's so cruel!" Naina cried, stunned.

"Why are you sending me away?"



"My path is clear now. This journey will be different from before."
If the Neuenheim Konzern were truly his enemy, having Noin's daughter in tow was far too dangerous.

"Sure, no problem. It'll be a long trip, but I'll get her safely to Hilde."

"I refuse! I won't leave my father's side, ever!"

"I am Cyrene Wind. I swear I'll come for you."

"But..."

"Have I ever broken a promise to you?"

"No..."

"Then trust me. Go with him for now."

Tears welled in her blue eyes, a hallmark of the Peacecraft line.

"All right..."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll be strong, just like you taught me."

Father and daughter embraced tightly, parting ways with heavy hearts.

"Great..." I muttered, feeling I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

"But hey, guess I can't ride drunk."

I asked for another tequila, took the bottle, and chugged it straight from the neck. Then, as if my strings were cut, I slumped facedown on the counter and fell asleep.

That's about the only way I know how to be "kind" to people.

"We'll head out... tomorrow afternoon... Good...night..."

By midday the following day, I'd sobered up, and Naina had packed for the journey. When we stepped outside, the remains of those poker buddies and that chubby doofus were scattered across the ground, lifeless.

"This is a parting gift from my father," Naina said. "Use it for travel expenses."

Apparently, while I was conked out, her old man had dealt with the scumbags who'd shown up for revenge.

They all had small bounties on their heads, nothing major, so I'd left them alone, but combined, their bodies added up to a decent sum. More than enough for our travel expenses and a sizable donation to the orphanage.

A bloody sendoff, to be sure.

Even for outlaws, the price on their lives seemed too cheap. Still, this is Mars, after all.

I was impressed that Naina, for her part, wasn't bothered in the slightest. Maybe she was used to it or had just accepted it as fate. Either way, she was a tough, tragic little girl.

Such was everyday life here on Mars, a world of raw freedom and ruin.

MC-0017 NEXT SUMMER

With Naina on the passenger seat behind me, I steered my partner eastward, ever eastward, across the Mar continent.

Crossing the long river that runs through Valles Marineris, I switched to mud tires.

When we hit the vast desert, I used paddle tires. The fins wore out in no time, and I had to stop at every para-terraforming town along the way for repairs.

"Never seen an idiot trying to cross Mars on a motorcycle like that," folks would say wherever we went.

They didn't get it. The trouble you endure on a real road trip is the part that makes the journey worthwhile.

Once we passed the equator, we headed south.

We were maybe a few dozen kilometers away from the Lanagreene Republic, where Hilde runs the Schbeiker Orphanage, but all I could think about was the Neuenheim Konzern that held Naina's destiny in its hands, not my happy reunion with Hilde.

I may look like a vagrant now, but I once worked with the Sweeper Group, cleaning up space debris, so I know a thing or two about how these big corporate outfits work. Or so I'd like to think.

If memory serves, the Konzern got its start in the latter half of the A.D. era. The name "Neuenheim" is German for "new home."

It was a for-profit juggernaut that escaped Earth's chronic economic crises, born of overpopulation and ruthless exploitation, by forming a space-development consortium. They aggressively pursued new markets and supported off-world migration.

Early in the A.C. era, they completed a permanent-type space station that became the blueprint for modern colonies. Hauling resource satellites from the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, they laid the foundation of colony construction. In return, they patented the foundational tech, so every time a colony was completed, enormous sums fell into their laps. Naturally, this kind of profit monopoly slowed the pace of development. Sure enough, after Neuenheim's patents expired around AC-130, the second wave of colony construction exploded.

Prioritizing "profit above all else" is basically their modus operandi, called "market fundamentalism" or "utilitarianism," whichever suits them. When those patents ran out, they shifted away from the old

colony game. Instead, they launched the grand terraforming project for further expansion, using Mars as their first test bed.

They built sealed dome habitats, seeded the atmosphere with artificial fluorocarbons to spark greenhouse warming, and even completed a space elevator linking Mars's moon Phobos to streamline resource transport.

It was that speech by "President Milliardo," in reality Dixneuf Neuenheim, that backdated the Martian calendar to MC-0001, commemorating the completion of para-terraforming. The entire rebranding reeked of shameless corporate PR.

Trouble is, development of Mars wasn't the cash cow they'd hoped.

People used to Earth's environment had no desire to move someplace with thinner air and only a third of Earth's gravity. Same reason colonizing the Moon never took off.

Earth and its satellite colonies were comfortable enough already. And by then, the Earth Sphere was plagued by conflicts everywhere, so manufacturing mobile suits for war turned out to be a bigger cash cow.

Speaking of, resource satellite MO-VII crashed into the Argyre Planitia in Mars's southern hemisphere in AC-187. Does anyone really believe that was coincidence?

I'm betting Neuenheim arranged it. The fact that "Europian Algae" just happened to be onboard that resource satellite, exactly what Mars needed for terraforming, was more than a little suspect.

They're as crooked and rigged as any cheat I've ever known.

Back then, the head of Neuenheim Konzern was Nove Neuenheim (Noin's father). He probably would've shrugged off any large-scale environmental destruction, calling it "trivial" compared to, say, the Romefeller or Barton Foundations, who profited directly from bloodshed.

In his twisted logic, "At least our methods are more humane, because we're doing this for humanity's future, and that means the greatest happiness for the greatest number."

Market fundamentalism at its worst.

There's no official record, of course, but I'd bet my right arm that's precisely what happened.

So it went that Mars's early settlers were mainly free spirits who'd found the Earth Sphere's "total pacifism" too stifling, plus greedy opportunists who saw a market goldmine, plus drifters and thugs exiled from Earth. These people basically did whatever they pleased on the frontier, beyond the reach of the law. For anyone lacking power, money, or the stomach for brawls, especially women and kids, Mars

turned into a land of misfortune. Conflicts and terrorism never stopped, leaving behind an endless stream of war orphans and prostitutes.

Those not picked by society had no dreams or hopes left. Conversely, if you had guts and a strong arm, you could savor absolute freedom.

Suits me just fine, honestly.

Mars's the perfect playground for a scoundrel like me...

Up ahead, I saw a familiar set of hills, like twin camel humps.

Over those hills lay the Schbeiker Orphanage run by Hilde.

Usually, I'd do a double jump over them, but with Naina riding pillion, I had to take it easy.

So, I eased off the throttle, steadily climbed each slope, then descended just as slowly. Repeated that process over the next hill.

I wasn't used to going so cautious, which is probably why Hilde didn't notice us arriving on our bike.

"Huh? Father?"

Sister Hilde and the eight orphans had just started a late lunch.

"Hey, everyone! You hanging in there?"

Hilde had taken charge of this orphanage-cum-church in my stead long ago.

She was still young and pretty enough to marry into a decent middle-class family if she wanted. Instead, she kept drawing the short straw by clinging to her old ties with me.

Honestly, I've never seen someone with worse luck, though I guess I'm not one to talk.

On this planet, the government collects taxes from religious institutions, which is nothing unusual.

But social welfare might as well not exist.

We could've called it the Duo Orphanage or Maxwell Church, but I'm a wanted man, and the local tax office would've hit us with insane rates if we'd used my name. So we just reopened under Hilde's maiden name: the new-and-improved "Schbeiker Church."

In practice, though, we're not preaching squat, leading lambs down the holy path or what have you. It's all about caring for kids who've lost their homes to war, and trying to place them with foster families if possible.

I funnel my ill-gotten gains, bounties and gambling swindles, into this place. I know perfectly well it's dirty money, but the kids need to eat, and that's what matters.

I'm not looking for anyone's approval. It's enough that we're feeding them.

Hilde would laugh and say, "No point arguing with you, once you've made up your mind, that's that."

I introduced Naina to everyone.

She was older than all eight of them, so she instantly fell into a big-sister role, which she didn't seem to mind one bit. So that was that. I wasn't about to lose sleep over it.

Then Hilde tugged on my sleeve.

"Where'd you pick her up? Are you a closet creepo or something now?"

"Your language is getting filthier by the day, Hilde."

"Wonder who's to blame for that? So there's trouble involved, right? Fine... I'll help."

"Thanks. Sooner or later, some 'Wind' might show up for her."

Naina was already playing happily with the other kids, an immediate favorite. But there was one boy—maybe four years old—whose gaze was sharp and wary. He'd avoided us both from the get-go.

"How about that kid?" I asked.

"Some drifter kid who wandered in recently," Hilde whispered back. "Looked so much like you, I wondered if some woman out there had your baby. If that were true, I'd have wrung your neck."

For a split second, the faces of a few women I'd known flashed before my eyes, but none of them lined up.

Timing-wise, it would have been back when Hilde and I were... yeah, no.

The glowering little brat ignored me and Naina and stepped outside. Hilde lowered her voice conspiratorially.

"I ended up naming him Duo. Once his hair grows a bit, I'm going to braid it. Then you two will be a perfect match."

"Jeez, cut it out. I'm a priest, you know. I'll run and hide, but I'm not that kind of guy."

"Lies, lies. You just get rejected everywhere you go... you two-timer."

"Okay, can we please not dredge all this up again? I told you what I was like from the start."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"You only need to answer once."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah..."

"..."

She clearly had no intention of listening to anything I might say. Guess I'm on her bad side for good.

Hilde clapped her hands and rallied the children's attention.



"Okay, everyone! Father's heading out again, let's give him a big smile and send-off!"

"Safe travels!" the kids chorused.

Didn't even let me catch my breath or smoke a cigarette.

Well, maybe it's better this way, someone like me, a no-good outlaw, probably shouldn't linger around impressionable kids.

Time to scam.

The moment I stepped outside, about to mount my bike, that sharp-eyed boy who looked so much like me was poking around the engine.

"Hey, kid, what do you think you're doing?"

"Kinda classy, going with a two-wheel drive, huh."

"Hmph, what would you know?"

"That front wheel's hydraulics are taking a beating from the mudflap. If you ride it like this, the back wheel's torque'll outdo the front, and you'll wipe out for real."

"Wow... you actually know your stuff."

No wonder the ride had felt off lately.

"I cleaned it for you. Replaced the oil filter too."

He flung the dusty, blackened filter into the trash without a hint of pride.

"You had one stashed under the passenger seat. Figured it was okay to use."

"Y-yeah... Thanks."

He stared intently at my face.

"You my old man?"

"Hell no!"

"You sure? We've got the same face."

"It's just a coincidence, you little punk..."

I straddled the bike, flipped the ignition, and heard that sweet hum from the front wheel. Perfect.

"What about your mom? Know anything?"

My memory drew a blank, but I asked anyway.

"No clue! I've always been alone!"

"Well, from here on out, live a good life, got it?"

"Here? That lady won't let me cut my hair."

"Hahaha... Don't let her tie it in a braid, no matter what!"

"Like I'd let that happen, loser!"

"Don't make Sister Hilde cry, kid!"

"Don't you half-ass your life either!"

"Later, Duo!"

"Later, Crapswell!"

I revved the throttle and took off.

With a good run-up, I cleared the camel-hump hill in a double jump and never looked back.

A cheeky little brat, that was my first impression of him.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Kathy pulled off the virtual visor and turned to me.

"Father, is all that true?"

"Yeah... not a word of it's a lie."

I might cheat and run, but I do not lie, that's the brand of Father Maxwell.

"So if that's the case, who is the 'Major General Zechs Merquise' serving the Lanagreen Republic? What is he?"

"He's neither the real thing, nor a clone, nor a spare, so if you ask me, the most likely explanation—"

"A g-ghost?"

"The real one's alive, calling himself 'Cyrene Wind.'"

"So... a spirit that left his body?"

"Why do your thoughts always go straight to the impossible?"

"Could it be disguise? Plastic surgery?"

"All of those are off the table..."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because back when my wife snuck onboard Libra..."

Suddenly, emergency alarms blared from the underground mobile suit hangar.

"Master Chang!"

Kathy called the cocky fool up on the main monitor. The guy was already suited up, inside the mobile suit kept here at the base.

"This is Chang WuFei!"

His voice, young and brimming with intensity, appeared on-screen.

"The monitoring satellites picked up four mobile suits launching from the Lanagreen Republic!"

"Four of them?!"

"Could Zechs be...?!"

WuFei's eyes flared with battle-lust, but his tone remained icy:

"I scanned them thoroughly. Three are model OZ-03MDIV Virgo IV, and the other is OZ-13MS Gundam Epyon!"

"A Gundam...?"

"So they're finally making their move..."

"I'll arrange reinforcements immediately."

"I don't need them! I'll take them out myself!!"

WuFei's machine, its right arm equipped with a Dragon Fang, its left brandishing a beam trident, was a white mobile suit.

"Codename: Natakū. Preventer, scramble! Epyon Pi, moving out!!"

Requiem for a Perpetual Chain

Mars File 3 (Part.02)

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

"We've confirmed the four mobile suits that launched from the Lanagreene Republic. Just like Master Chang said, there're definitely the Gundam Epyon and three Virgo IV units."

Kathy relays this news to me while studying the operational data on the virtual monitor. The courtesy in her tone feels unnecessary, after all, I'm not actually a Preventer or anything official. I peer over her shoulder to confirm the Epyon for myself. Sure enough, there's no doubt. Its crimson and black paint scheme is unmistakable.

I remember that machine. A long time ago, I once challenged it in combat. It was before what people would eventually call the "EVE WARS." Back then, the Epyon usually had three Virgo II mobile dolls in tow. If memory serves, it was quite a handful.

"So," I say, "looks like they're aiming..."

"Yes, they're taking a broad southwest route," Kathy replies, working various simulation screens. "But their heading points straight toward Olympus Mons."

So it's not Chryse or Elysium Island they're after, but rather Snow White and Warlock. Not the young Winner girl, apparently.

"Shall we contact Heero Yuy and Duo Maxwell?"

"When's WuFei projected to engage them?"

"By Martian time, about thirty minutes from now."

"I see. We should at least give Captain Sakai of the Voyage a heads-up."

"Understood..."

Kathy keeps answering me so politely.

"When I'm done here, I'll go right back to verifying those files. In the meantime, Father, please feel free to rest on that sofa."

Do I really look that ancient? I'm younger than your mother, I almost blurt out, but swallow the words and pick another topic.

"We can leave the files for later, Kathy."

"But—"

"Instead, can we monitor WuFei's fight in real time?"

"If I manage to hack into the Mars Federation Forces surveillance satellites... maybe."

"Then give it a shot..."

Even for the Preventers, that won't be a walk in the park. Pulling it off without getting caught would be downright miraculous. An ordinary hacker would never manage it, and even Heero or I would

come up short. Maybe that taciturn kid Phobos or the young lass Quaterine could do it if they had enough time. That's how tight Federation satellite security is. If she manages it before WuFei and Zechs clash, I'll give Kathy the "reward" of another sermon.

Anyway, as for me...

I've lived a damn dull life, but I'm determined to stay alive until the very end.

Heero would probably say, "Your life's not even worth using as a bullet shield."

Yet I want to see how that massive burden on his back plays out. That's what friends are for, though he might not feel the same. My history with Heero didn't start yesterday, and at this point, I'm all in for the long haul.

Sure, I might look like a geezer, but deep down, I'm no different from when I was a kid, and with a little doping, I can still take on a punk or two. I'm confident I could pilot a Gundam as easily as that hotheaded fool who just launched, and obviously I think I'm better than he is.

Not once did I plan on letting those kids sit in my partner's cockpit seat.

Though, to be honest, my old partner is gone for good now...

We've got a thirty-minute interval. Let me spin you a story from the past.

In Martian Calendar terms, it's been nine or maybe ten years since then. I'll switch to using MC notation for convenience, but back then, we were still using AC time.

Of course, the seasons here on Mars get all jumbled, its rotation cycle doesn't match a neat 24 hours, leaving a daily "gap" of thirty-seven minutes, so-called "Midnight Plus 37."

It was a messy system.

We tried adjusting each hour by one minute and thirty-five seconds, AC Martian Time, but that fizzled out quick. While you fiddle with leap seconds, time moves on regardless.

Most of us who came to this "new frontier" wanted nothing to do with Earth's day or Earth's old history anyway. Earth folks treasure their traditions, so they cling to their own "yardsticks" and "timelines."

I get it, but forcing that on us Martians is their problem, not ours.

Our economy, our history, and our interactions with Earth are practically severed at this point. We're better off left alone.

Anyway, let's go back roughly twenty Earth years. It's been gathering dust in my memory, but that's where the tale begins...

MC-0012 FIRST SPRING

I was bored. I had no interest in tomorrow. I discovered the taste of booze and cigarettes, drowning every night in them. "Colonies, Earth Sphere," I couldn't care less. And everything that happened up to yesterday felt suffocating.

Still, I called myself Duo back then, wearing my long braided hair down to my waist.

"Names are things other people give you."

If there was a place I could return to, that was all I needed, or so I thought.

Yet even though the war was supposed to be over, nothing had really ended. Seasons raced by while I stood frozen. There were times I envied the idea of sleeping in a cryocapsule, like a certain someone I knew.

I could practically hear him warning me.

"One piece of advice... It'll be freezing cold."

Hah. Give me a break.

I guess it was around then I considered breaking up with Hilde Schbeiker, the woman I was on again off again with in a wishy-washy relationship, and running off to Mars. I'd been scheming up some dramatic parting lines, but Hilde beat me to the punch.

"Goodbye, Duo. I'm bored with you already."

What the hell? Why didn't I get to say it first?

"You wear your heart on your sleeve, you know," she snapped.

"Huh?"

"You're a joke, always hung up on the past."

She yanked my braided hair hard, insulting me nonstop.

"What's with this stupid braid, anyway? Mister Helen or Sister Millen or whoever, are you seriously enjoying dragging around your own history? You think it's cool? It's pathetic!!"

"Ow ow... that hurts!"

"See ya! Go say hi to that partner 'Solo' or whatever!"

She slammed the door. By the time I realized, Hilde was gone.

Even I felt a sting. I hated myself for not getting in a single comeback. In my drunken frustration.

"Wait! Hey, wait!"

I went after her.

"Stop—hey!"

She ran, and when I closed in to grab her shoulder, she smoothly pivoted and seized my arm instead.

Before I knew it, she flipped me onto the ground. Hard.

"I was once part of OZ's Space Forces! Don't underestimate me!"

She assumed that classic soldier's stance, eyes fierce.

"Keep at least 9.46 petameters away from me!"

"9.46... peta...?"

Later, I'd learn that's about one light-year.

"If you get any closer, be prepared to face stalking charges!"

Converting peta to kilo makes it 9.46 trillion kilometers... just how astronomically much do you hate me? What, am I supposed to warp or something?

"I've got a lawyer here on this colony who'll make it happen!"

I was kneading my bruised back and yelling at her:

"All right! All right! I'm done chasing you, so go wherever the hell you want!"

"Then I'll let it slide. Be grateful for my mercy!"

She turned on her heel and marched off. For a moment, I thought I saw sadness in her retreating figure, maybe just me projecting, or maybe she still cared. Either way, it felt like the worst possible breakup. I felt like total crap. My idiot braid felt laughable. I was slow, sloppy, not even half-cool.

But then again, maybe a pathetic life suited me just fine.

MC-0012 NEXT AUTUMN

I wound up on Mars, near the foothills of Olympus Mons in the planet's northern hemisphere. Couldn't do a light-year, but I had to go far. Not because I was afraid Hilde would sue me, I could break out of any jail. But if someone hates you, the decent thing is to leave. It also helped me cut back on my binge drinking. Honestly, I've always had a wandering streak: staying in one place too long makes me itch.

So the desolate Mars suited me better than the cramped colonies.

So I headed to a junk dealer to pick up a lightweight engine and parts for an off-road bike. While wiping sweat off my forehead with an oily arm, I realized:

"Huh? Isn't Mars supposed to be colder?"

I thought maybe the para-terraforming dome's life-support was broken. But stepping outside, I was amazed. Small insects flitted about. An ocean shimmered in the distance. Clouds drifted overhead. The air was breathable, dusty, but not lethal. I even coughed a bit.

"Wow... Humans really went all-in on terraforming Mars, huh?"

I was genuinely impressed. The sun was smaller here, and Phobos moved in the opposite direction.

"This is... kinda incredible."

I wondered, What's humanity's greatest legacy? It's not these colonies, nor the planet's new environment, those are simply byproducts of scientific progress. It's not the Pyramids or the Roman Colosseum, either; old relics don't truly change humankind.

Maybe it's something more fundamental, like the capacity for endless possibility, the pioneering spirit. I wasn't sure, but it's probably something complicated and not entirely noble. Humanity can accomplish grand things, yet we're petty at heart.

Does this scenery signal a bright new hope or an ever-spreading darkness? Not my call.

"What the hell," I murmured as a tear fell. I definitely wasn't crying from childlike wonder. So what the hell were they anyway? Sadness? Frustration? Happiness?

Solitude.

The carefree, free solitude that should suit me best somehow felt miserable and lonely.

I swear I wasn't thinking about Hilde. I let out a huge yawn, stretched my back, and went back to work. I had to re-adjust that engine from scratch. At first, I assumed I'd need an astro-suit to ride across Mars, but it looked like I might crank out even more horsepower now. In hindsight, maybe that was the last moment I could have turned back...

MC-0014 NEXT WINTER

Time rolled on. I spent it touring Mars on my off-road partner: an 800cc, two-wheel-drive bike. Over the past few months, immigration from the Earth Sphere had skyrocketed. Guess folks got sick of "peaceful living" over there. Here, you just needed a simple vaccine against Martian degenerative disease and a quick background check, or you could just sneak in, like I did.

A third of Earth's gravity wasn't so bad once you got used to it, and the chance to roam outside without a helmet was liberating. I guess everyone else was chasing that same kind of "freedom." Sometimes thousands of immigrants arrived in a single season.

In response, they formed this shady "Mars Federation Government." More people meant more friction, from petty fights to full-blown terrorism. And there's no end to idiots who confuse "freedom" with "debauchery." The local cops and sheriffs weren't enough to handle the bigger stuff.

Before long, I figured they'd draft a real army, necessary for maintaining public order, since peace laws in Earth's sphere forbid

militaries, so obviously Mars would "declare independence." It was all a predictable script.

For some dumb reason, I felt like speeding through a Martian winter night. Probably around that "Midnight Plus 37" hour.

I crashed.

On an ice-coated road, a 2WD bike is trouble. 4WD might just skid, but a two-wheeler flips. I messed up in classic cartoon style, spikes on my tires doing squat. I'd downed a little alcohol beforehand, too, trying to ward off the cold. It was lethal synergy. The handlebars jerked left and right, headlight bouncing wildly across rocky walls. I don't even remember what I slipped on. Maybe I swerved to avoid something.

At least it wasn't a banana peel.

Next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground in a flaming wreck. My bike was burning against a cliff face, blazing. Thanks to my helmet and body armor, my head, spine, and organs were intact, but my left arm and both legs got wrecked. Broken bones, plus the sting of old age creeping in. And my partner in flames refused to die out. Seeing it keep burning so long just made me sad.

"Goddamn it, this HURTS—!!"

I cried out, but no one came.

"SON OF A—!!"

I cursed the Martian winter, the degenerative plague, everything. Then snow started falling, the wind chilled further, and I realized my recklessness had finally caught up to me. Sobbing and howling into the empty night made me feel even stupider. A fat glob of snotty snow drifted into my open mouth, so I shut up. My teeth ground together in pain. Enough with pride—I howled:

"HELLO?! SOMEBODY HELP ME—!!"

Snow fell harder. The wind cut deeper. My comeuppance, I guess. And that's how I passed out, thoroughly pathetic.

In a blurry half-dream, I thought I saw a circus's big hover-truck stop beside me, some do-gooder must have noticed me. I recall a woman's voice and a man's voice I'd heard somewhere before.

"Same old story with him..."

"Hmph, a self-destruct. At least he didn't take anyone else with him." Their words drifted through my delirium.

"He still breathing?"

"Barely."

I felt a palm check the air from my nose, then sniff the booze on me.

"Seems he was riding drunk along this route."

"Reap what you sow, huh? What a moron."

I wanted to retort, but I was already fading.

"We leaving him?"

"He's too tough to go dying that easily."

"Lucky him, the big idiot..."

"Even if he died, I doubt that foolish streak would fade."

So they were on Mars too. Guess Earth bored them as well. The pair didn't personally take me anywhere; they just called a hospital with an emergency unit. Still not the type to show direct kindness. And thank god they didn't try transporting me in that Heavyarms Gundam of theirs, that method's never gentle.

When I came to, I was in a hospital room with both legs in casts, hanging from slings. The flames of my wrecked bike had kept me from freezing to death and served as a beacon for rescue. The doctor said that, with cutting-edge medicine, my old bones would need two months to heal. That put me right on the edge of the new year, about two Earth years total, in a sense. If I'd been Heero, I'd have reset my own bones on the spot.

As for me... yeah, not so much.

I prayed to a God I don't believe in: never again would I drive drunk. Not for my sake, but for my dear, charred partner's memory.

MC-0015 FIRST SPRING

"I'm just utterly amazed at your stupidity."

Early in the year, while I was still immobile, who should appear before me but Hilde. She wore black-rimmed glasses, a fancy-looking business suit, with killer high heels and a miniskirt that made my heart skip. At first, I barely recognized her, she'd transformed into a chic professional. Meanwhile, I was more of a wreck than ever.

I couldn't pay my hospital bills, so in the end, I'd basically pleaded with her for help. A friendly older nurse I'd sweet-talked tried searching the internet for a traveling circus with a pair of siblings, but they were nowhere to be found.

I had no other acquaintances, so I was at a loss.

I told the director I'd work off my debt by scrubbing floors, but he wasn't having it. They'd even forced me to take some vaccine for the degenerative plague, probably a fake, given how my aging was still going. And if I left the hospital now, I'd get tossed in prison for driving under the influence.

Mars prisons are nasty: rumored you never get out, especially if you're an older man with broken legs. Not a chance.

Apparently, a band of gypsy circus folk clued Hilde in on my whereabouts, and she showed up with an exasperated scowl.



She'd become a librarian at the Lanagreene Republic's national library down in the southern hemisphere. I stiffened, remembering that dreaded 9.46-petameter rule. She must've noticed.

"Relax, I won't charge alimony. After all, what you need is all-the-money for your doctor bills, right?"

Her sense of humor hadn't changed one bit, even if her appearance had.

"Thanks..."

I muttered the bare minimum, unwilling to apologize sincerely. I planned to use her and then vanish once I could.

After leaving the hospital, I had nowhere else to go. My old partner was toast. So, I snuck onto a regional airline bound for the southern hemisphere. I'd never seen that part of Mars before, and the massive "Mars Continent" blew my mind, an entire landmass fused together, perfect for off-road touring. I felt awkward, but I wound up crashing at Hilde's place in Lanagreene: a tidy high-rise apartment. Being a national librarian must pay well.

"Fine, but you'd better earn enough to cover your meals!"

At least she didn't make some dumb pun about "earning on Mars." Lanagreene's center was the Lanagreene Sea, full of gleaming skyscrapers, a bustling ocean city. Surrounding it were quieter port towns, not a bad place to live, I suppose. Not that it mattered to me.

I took a bartending job in a portside tavern, working as a bouncer on the side, cheating at cards behind the scenes, anything to stash away coin for building another bike. This time I'd wrap wire rope around my muddy tires to handle ice.

On my way home, I found a gem at the local junk shop: a used 1500cc engine from a Mars off-roader called an Ares Hornet Mk-III β . It would've been easy to steal, but I have some pride left. I wanted to buy it fair and square, with legitimate earnings. That's how you honor a future partner, right?

Wait for me Areho!

I was actually hopeful. Working hard for once, not flirting with other women, diligently throwing out riffraff, hustling at cards. After a few big nights, I almost had the money for that Hornet engine.

"You're still an idiot, you know that?"

Hilde suddenly snatched away the piggy bank I'd been fattening with my coin.

"Aren't you old enough to know better?"

"Give it back! I've finally saved enough to buy my pig's precious engine!"

"I'm keeping it to offset the trouble you've caused me!"

She smashed the piggy bank, swiped everything, and that was that.
"..."

So there was no love. I never truly loved her, and I never really understood "love" in the first place. All I wanted was that Ares Hornet Mk-III β engine. I needed it more than anything.

"Marry me!"

"Huh?"

She turned, surprised.

"I love you. Let's get married!"

I'd give up booze, cigarettes, women. I'd cut off my braid. Ditch the name Duo. I'd do anything, marriage, suicide run, whatever it took. I absolutely refused to lose that 1500cc engine. I wanted to fly across the vast Mars Continent.

"Hilde, marry me! I never realized it, but I've always loved you!"

Once we filed the paperwork, we'd share assets. That engine would be mine, too. Honestly, I half-expected her to refuse. But I guess the "I'll cut my braid" part swayed her.

"All right, if you insist..."

I dragged Hilde to the local church in that port town. The old priest there owed me big, I'd cleaned him out playing poker. He'd tried preaching "the Way of God," but I wasn't listening. So he wound up performing our wedding almost for free. I even held a "braid-cutting" ceremony.

Sorry, Sister Helen. Farewell, Solo. This is all for my new partner. No blessings needed, no bright future expected. I wasn't a pacifist or a bachelor by conviction, and I sure wasn't a believer in "ultimate consequences." I was just leaving my past behind, and staying myself in the process.

For two or three months, I behaved. I worked harder than ever. I even tried manual labor with MTFs (Mars Terraformers). Bounty hunting, smuggling forbidden goods, you name it, I did it all in secret to stash away more money. The local law called it "oppression by the Federation government," so hey, we outlaws had to do what we had to do.

Soon, my "Piggy Bank Jr." had grown fat enough to buy every last part I needed. My partner's first generation was the old Gundam Deathscythe, I "borrowed" it once, had it upgraded to Deathscythe Hell, used it 'til I hammered it beyond repair, especially in that final Brussels scrap. The second generation was the bike that burned up. So this new ride was going to be my third.

At long last, I "self-destructed" Piggy Bank Jr., purchased the parts, and spent my days in the church's back warehouse, covered in grease

as I assembled my new friend. The first time I revved the engine, it roared like music to my ears.

"Hey, Maxwell."

The old priest called over to me. I was on top of the world.

"What's up, Gramps?"

"Seems I won't be able to repay my debt to you."

"Don't worry about it. My partner's finished, so I'll call us even."

"But still—"

"When I was a kid, I once lived at a church. I owe a debt I can never repay, so I don't need anything."

"Well..."

"I might be shady and dishonest, but I never take money from the poor. You can call me Du—no, Pig Maxwell."

I mounted my new ride and gunned the throttle.

"Later, old man!"

I flew off at throttle into the wastelands.

"Yeehaw—!!"

I felt like there was something I was forgetting, but I sure as hell wasn't looking back. My annoying braid was gone, after all. I might've heard a faint "You asshole—!" echo from some woman far behind me, but the roar of my partner's engine drowned it out.

I didn't care.

I'm just a big, dumb pigheaded fool, always have been.

MC-0016 FIRST SPRING

A Martian year had gone by, and I found myself returning to Lanagreene for the first time in a while. I'd rather not admit I was getting older, but those winter nights were brutal. Even with my improvised snow tires, mud tires wrapped in wire rope, I almost wiped out more times than I'd care to count. Every time it happened, I couldn't help thinking, "Man, I really am an idiot."

After that, I quit riding my partner at night in the winter and started spending evenings in bars. Which meant booze and smokes made a comeback in my life. I kept my hair short, trimming it whenever it got too long.

I had no business with Hilde, so I didn't bother heading to the coastal city. Instead, I rode over to the port town by the foot of the "camel" hill and made a quick stop at the old man's church. What I saw there was a shock: Hilde in a nun's habit, tending to a bunch of kids.

"Hey... What're you doing here?"

I asked casually. The instant she saw me, Hilde's face twisted with fury.

"Screw you, asshole!"

She grabbed my right arm, twisted it behind my back, and pinned me to the ground.

"This is all your fault!!"

She slammed me flat, straddling me. My protective gear's impact cushions burst open with a bang. They'd saved my spine in that old crash, too.

"Ow, ow, ow! What the hell's your problem?!"

"That old man died and left you this church! Something about clearing his debt! Then it turns out this church is drowning in debt with nowhere to turn! It's swarming with orphans, and my library pension couldn't cover it. Now I'm drowning in debt, you bastard!"

There she was: Hilde Schbeiker, ex-OZ officer, my ex-girlfriend, ex-national librarian, and now a nun, raging at me with terrifying strength. One more wrench of my right arm, and it would have snapped clean off.

"Maybe you've got the god of death on one shoulder and the god of poverty on the other! Huh? That it, scumbag?!"

"W-what do you want me to do about it?!"

"Divorce me! Right now!"

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me! We're sharing assets, so I'm stuck in this godforsaken mess!"

Uh oh. I'd almost forgotten she was technically my ex-wife.

"Couldn't you just file for divorce yourself?"

At that moment, I heard a crunch I never wanted to hear.

"OWWWW—!!"

Long ago, some holy figure said: "If they break your right arm, offer them your left arm as well."

Not me, though. Besides, I'd busted my left arm just a year ago.

"These kids have no one else! How can you walk away and leave them?!"

"Not my problem!"

"You heartless bastard!"

A grown man pinned to the ground with a broken arm isn't exactly in a position to argue, so I bit back the rest of my complaints. She seized my jaw and arched my head back, my spine was about to snap.

"I-I give! I surrender!"

I admitted defeat. Utter loss. With my limp right arm, I signed the divorce papers. I wrote "Pig Maxwell," and she snapped at me for

mocking her. Then I wrote "Duo," and she smacked me upside the head for "still clinging to the past."

"Then what name am I supposed to use?!"

Hilde suggested some weird name I'd never heard: James Clerk Maxwell, supposedly an old Scottish physicist. Apparently, that was my legal name ever since she stuck it on our marriage certificate. With her spelling it out letter by letter, I scribbled my signature in agony.

Her method of teaching me each character was... strange. A warmth I'd never experienced before. Not like Sister Helen's care from my childhood, something else. The sudden gentleness felt round, somehow. A softness.

"You've changed a bit."

"Think so?"

Maybe it was the absence of her black-rimmed glasses or the fact that nearly two Earth years had passed. Whatever it was, she was different. "Angel" or "goddess" didn't suit her at all, so I scratched that notion. "Mother" flickered through my mind, but I dismissed it instantly. I'd never known a mother; I grew up alone from birth.

Next, I was forced to sign a massive pile of IOUs and promise I'd repay the "Schbeiker Church" through donations. Her tone wasn't threatening, but there was a weird spell in her words that left me no choice. Then she handed me a black priest's robe and a new nickname: Father Maxwell. We'd just divorced, so I had no clue why I was letting her boss me around. But I went along anyway. As a biker, I at least wanted to protect my spine and spinal cord from further harm.

Until my broken right arm healed, I stayed at that church—or orphanage, whatever you want to call it—and endured the rowdy kids pestering me nonstop. By the time my cast came off and the bone finally healed, Hilde smacked me on the back so hard I bet it left a bright red handprint.

"All right, off you go!"

She told me to hit the road with a bright smile that rang true.

"Even if your arm's better, there's no cure for that thick skull of yours! You never listen anyway!"

"Bye, Father! Good luck out there!"

All the kids chimed in. So I turned the ignition on my partner and hit the road.

A few days later, I was in some small-town saloon, dealing a hand of five cards each. My opponent was an outlaw with a bounty on his head. Through the gap under his ten-gallon hat, I could see he had a full house. That was thanks to my little technique at dealing. I kept

pushing the raise, and eventually the scumbag folded under the pressure.

"What was your hand, anyway?"

"Pig..." I muttered.

"Huh?"

"A pig hand, obviously. We're all pigs here, aren't we?"

"You were bluffing?!"

I grinned. As if I'd bluff against a pig.

Sensing danger, the outlaw bolted for the door. No way I'd let him run. I fired a few warning shots at his feet. Then I pressed my shotgun's muzzle against the back of the head that was about to feed me a paycheck.

"Who the hell are you?"

He asked again. At that point, I was still courteous enough to answer honest questions.

"I'm a bad guy."

"Don't screw with me!"

Only a twisted personality would make jokes in a moment like this.

"Fine, let's do it this way: I'm Father Maxwell, strapped for time and money, hounded by the God of Death and the God of Poverty. And I'm collecting your life and bounty."

Before I even finished, he tried to draw his pistol. I put a shotgun blast through his skull first.

Over time, my soul got warped and twisted like compound fractures. That's how I became a two-bit gambler, bounty hunter, and occasional caretaker, sending hush-money donations to the Schbeiker Orphanage (Church) under my new name: Father Maxwell.

MC-0018 NEXT WINTER

Because Schbeiker Orphanage also served as a church, they apparently held some kind of Christmas. The date was random, they picked whatever day suited them. Anyway, it was just a small party with carols and maybe some fun and games. If they'd had a bit of sparkling wine, I could've enjoyed it, too.

I heard about Christmas while wiring a donation from the Airport Bank. Hilde's reply message said:

"You're Santa, right? Don't forget to bring actual presents."

Another role? I'd already been forced into so many. Still, it'd been more than a year and a half since I asked her to look after Naina Peacecraft, three Earth years, by my estimate. Hilde kept grumbling

that "Cyrene Wind" still hadn't shown up. Odd, considering how much she'd benefited from Naina's help.

She also told me that snot-nosed brat with the nasty glare (named Duo, ironically) had indeed been forced into wearing a braid. I nearly died laughing, he was basically a younger version of me. Typical Hilde mischief. Poor kid's probably getting bullied in my place. But I get it, if you're wrangling a bunch of rowdy orphans, you need some outlet for stress.

I felt no need to comfort him. He's a tough little scamp; let him handle it. Then again, that's what I used to say about myself. Maybe life's burdens weigh us both down more than we realize.

I picked up an old Santa suit at a thrift store, plus a fake beard. I also stuffed a sack with gifts, "way too heavy for a single Santa to lug," but these kids needed something. Then I hopped on my partner's seat, left the airport, and headed for Lanagreene.

My ride was aging, though, shaking with problems in every joint. If I didn't fully overhaul it soon, next year's touring might be impossible. Maybe that brat would help if I treated him like a grown-up.

I'd noticed a mature sadness lurking behind his eyes, same as Naina. Martian kids all shared that look, hardship and despair from the get-go. It wasn't fixable, not with so many suffering children out here. But I'd decided I could at least help the few orphans at Schbeiker Church. A volunteer job with no real payoff, except maybe the scumbags I killed were the unlucky ones.

I actually liked Mars's gritty air. Saved me from pity or comfort I never wanted.

When the old camel-shaped hill came into view, I realized I had no nerve for the double jump anymore. One broken bone on a winter night would ruin my Santa act. Maybe if I'd found a cloned reindeer to pull a sleigh, that could've made a splash. Instead, I heard kids singing carols at the church. With a deep breath, I smacked my chest protector to puff it up and presto, a plump Santa.

I flung the door open.

"Ho-ho-ho, Merry Christmas!"

I found way more kids than before. Twelve or so around Naina and Duo's age.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Santa Claus is here!"

I tried my best clown routine, but got a lukewarm response:

"Why're you wearing red?"

"Father, did you get fat?"

"That beard looks dumb."

Even Hilde, who knew about Santa, wasn't used to the costume. None of them were.

"What a bunch of ignorant punks."

I felt let down. Why'd I bother wearing this getup? At least they liked the presents. Their unguarded smiles were something I hadn't seen in a while. Duo seemed to be the leader now, carefully distributing gifts. Naina, looking more grown-up, smiled warmly. Hilde's dark hair showed a few silver strands, and her eyes looked tired. I figured I'd lend an ear to her gripes tonight.

That meant no booze, no smokes.

Later, I was in the back warehouse, dismantling my partner's engine, just as I expected. He showed up: that brat with the braided hair. When I pretended not to notice him, he muttered:

"Geez, can't watch you fumble around like that."

He dipped the disassembled parts in oil and scrubbed them with a brush.

"Thanks..."

No reply.

"Here, handle these, too."

I shoved a big wooden box crammed with gears, nuts, chains, shafts, my personal "Christmas present" to a budding mechanic.

It was a quiet night.

The boy called Duo skillfully used a small cloth to wipe away oily residue from each piece. We made decent progress.

"Hey, about Sister Hilde..."

He spoke first, probably bored by the repetitive work.

"Was she some kind of special agent before?"

When asked a question, my style is to ask one back:

"Why do you think that?"

"She pinned me down once. It friggin' hurt."

"Heh heh... you can say that again."

She'd once broken my right arm as if it were nothing.

"So you're not gonna marry her?"

"Idiot! Priests and nuns can't marry, you know."

"Like you're a real priest. Gimme a break."

"..."

There's a mountain of "adult matters" this brat doesn't need to know.

"You sure do worry about everyone else, huh? Maybe fret about yourself for once?"

"I don't matter... Not me."

"..."

"It's Naina I'm worried about. She stares out the window every night, waiting..."

"Gotcha..."

"Parents are a pain. She keeps waiting for her old man."

No matter how much you chase freedom, you can't pick your parents. Being a Peacecraft and a Neuenheim is one hell of a destiny.

"I guess I'm lucky I'm just a drifter."

"Yeah, and Hilde found you, right? That's some luck, too."

I wasn't trying to comfort him, but the words slipped out.

"Yeah, guess so... She's nice to me."

So maybe that "bullying" wasn't actually so bad. Good for him. When I was his age, I was sleeping in alleys and pickpocketing to survive. By comparison, this was paradise. He met Hilde two years sooner than I met Sister Helen. Lucky kid.

We kept working in silence.

"You know," the little braided philosopher murmured, "I figure people's worth is in the kindness and memories they carry inside."

"Oh?"

"Parents are a pain, but without 'em, we wouldn't exist. And if you don't have anything in your heart worth living for, life's meaningless."

I'd once wrestled with thoughts like that, right after I arrived on Mars. He'd hashed it out in his own tiny head. For once, I felt like having a real debate with a kid.

"I won't argue about kindness, but memories? Not so sure."

"Huh? Memories are important, right?"

"Memories are basically a bunch of data in your brain. We call that 'memory.'"

"I know that much, genius."

"Then listen."

I decided to talk freely. In my case, when assembling, my hands work better when my mouth moves.

"If a person dies, those memories vanish with them. I can't see much inherent value in that. Plus, some memories are vile, the kind you'd rather never recall."

"Ugh, I'm getting sleepy..."

"In the end, your drive to face the future is more important than any illusions about the past. Hilde once warned me: if you keep letting the past drag you down, you'll look around one day and find yourself paralyzed by sentimentality."

"..."



"If memories really did matter, then so would every human life. And if that's true, then every time I, the God of Death, kill someone, I'm destroying something precious. Humanity's so-called treasure. Doesn't that make me the worst kind of villain?"

Ah... so that's it. I can't accept this brat's answer because I'm still searching for some leftover peace among dead bodies, refusing to admit I'm stuck in my own sentimental stagnation. I may have hacked off my braid, but in my mind, it's still there, long and trailing behind me.

My mind flashed to that half-demolished statue of the Holy Mother, the shattered stained glass... the Maxwell Church tragedy. I'd been frozen in that moment ever since. A killer and a priest, wanting someone else to kill me and grant me salvation. That's the truth.

When I came back to my senses, Duo was sprawled on the floor, fast asleep.

"You'll catch a cold."

I considered waking him, but instead I draped him with the cheap Santa cape. I'd planned to toss it after it got covered in oil anyway. No big loss.

The quiet, quiet night grew even deeper. I finished assembling my partner soon enough. Just as I was about to go check on Hilde and hear her gripes, I heard a small shriek in the darkness—definitely Naina's voice. I slipped outside the warehouse, scanning the area. The wind rustled the trees, and above was Deimos, the "frozen teardrop," drifting across the sky. It gave little light, so everything was still pitch-dark.

Once my eyes adjusted, I saw silhouettes: several men carrying an unconscious Naina into the woods. I tore off my silly Santa hat and threw on my black long coat, heavy with my usual "tools of the trade."

I wouldn't stand for this.

They must have abducted her from her second-floor window.

They did it so quietly that neither Hilde nor the other kids noticed.

A pro job.

I moved with as little noise as possible, chasing them. I counted four footsteps. Their formation said they had serious training, looked like a small military unit. My adrenaline spiked at the first real danger I'd felt in a while.

Good thing I was sober.

Time to become the God of Death again. No mere bandits or thugs coordinate like that. Likely a Mars Federation or Neuenheim Konzern special ops team. The faint mechanical hum was probably their Mars Suits waiting on the far side of the woods. I sure couldn't handle them unarmed.

My only choice would be to steal one of those suits... or let them take Naina.

Like hell I would.

When I emerged from the trees, I saw four Mars Suits standing by the shore of the Lanagreene Sea. Next to them was a fast hovercraft. The four men in black were hefting Naina onto it. She started to regain consciousness, giving them mild resistance.

Perfect chance. I was deciding which suit to hijack when a brilliant flash of gold tore through the night.

A machine unlike any Mars Suit soared into view. I only saw its outline for a second, but it wasn't a Gundam or any other mobile suit I recognized.

"I'm here for you, Naina!"

A cold, familiar voice thundered overhead. Cyrene Wind.

"Daddy—!"

Naina cried out desperately. In the next moment, three of the four Mars Suits were ripped to shreds. I couldn't tell what weapon he used. Their explosions filled the air with smoke, making it even harder to see. By the time I could focus again, that blinding golden machine had already destroyed the last suit. If I'd gotten inside one, I'd have been next.

"Stop! We have Naina Neuenheim right here!"

The man who seemed to be the leader among the black-suited assailants held a gun to Naina's neck. Yet Naina showed no fear.

"You're mistaken. I'm Naina Peacecraft."

She said calmly.

"Dad! Don't worry about me, please do what you must!"

The cockpit of that radiant machine opened, and he emerged.

"You've grown... and you've become even more beautiful, Naina."

The kidnapers froze in shock, apparently realizing how much he resembled their so-called "top brass" from the Federation or from Neuenheim. Of course, they had no clue he was the real one and the other was the fake.

I decided to pull out a scoped rifle from under my long coat instead of my usual shotgun. Naina stood her ground.

"Father! Please, kill them!"

That was my cue. Even if I was just a pretend priest, I could at least do one priestly deed. Bang! I took out the leader holding her hostage.

No life is worthless enough to deserve being murdered, trust me, coming from the God of Death himself.

Freed, Naina ran toward Cyrene Wind. The remaining three tried to chase her or revive their boss. I lined them up in my scope and *Bang! Bang! Bang!* took them each out in turn.

My aim had rusted a bit, I used four shots to kill four men, whereas in the old days, two bullets would've been plenty. They were professionals, it was backlit, and this was my first big kill since "coming back," so cut me some slack.

Those four, along with the four from the Mars Suits, had their own memories and maybe kindness in their hearts. But they were unlucky enough to cross paths with a fairy and Cyrene Wind.

Worst of all, they tried to steal a precious girl right from Hilde's and my church. If you don't want to lose what matters, you don't go tearing that preciousness away from others.

"Naina..."

"Daddy..."

In that golden glow, Naina and the man embraced. I'd never seen a father and daughter with such a profound bond. It was dazzling, like some unreachable light. I could never have that.

From the light, Naina yelled:

"Father! You're out there, aren't you?"

I stepped forward into the glare, and she tossed me a small pouch.

"Please give that to Duo. It's his Christmas present."

Inside was a brown hair ring, neatly wrapped in transparent paper with a cute bunny sticker. Very girlish.

"I'm sorry it's nothing fancy. I think his braid looks really good on him."

She bowed politely. Standing so close to that blazing radiance felt like the sun was right there. I shielded my eyes with one hand, but couldn't see a thing clearly. The machine's shape was still impossible to make out.

"Hey, you just gonna leave? Why not give it to him yourself?"

"He's shy, you know... And any more of this will cause trouble for all of you."

"I'm taking Naina back to Noin. Thanks for everything, Father Maxwell."

They vanished into the light, probably closing the cockpit hatch.

"Give Sister Hilde my regards."

The machine glowed fiercely, then took off. The distinct roar of overpowered thrusters felt oddly nostalgic, something from a very distant memory.

"Could that be...?"



I had an idea which suit it might be, though I knew the model Cyrene Wind was originally after was slightly different. Darkness returned with a vengeance after that bright glow disappeared.

"She's gone..."

Hilde's voice came from behind.

"Yeah. She said to say thanks."

"That girl was really sweet. Hope she didn't pick up any bad habits from our little rascals."

"Nah, she'll be fine. Oh, this is for Duo, from Naina."

I handed over the brown hair tie.

"Wow, not bad! Until now, she'd just been using something like your old shoelaces."

"Idiot, I used rubber bands."

"Same difference. She had a soft spot for Duo... and he was always going 'Big Sis Naina, Big Sis Naina,' strangely attached."

On that Silent Night, our quiet Christmas, our fairy took off with Cyrene Wind.

"...Gonna be lonely."

Above, Deimos drifted slowly, like a snail crawling across the sky, just a "frozen teardrop."

"Oh, we'll be fine. Duo's the big boss around here, right?"

We stood there listening to the gentle waves.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Suddenly, an ear-piercing comm alert split the air. Amid the static, someone was yelling at the other end.

"This is Warlock! Respond, damn it!"

My idiot "son" was screaming. Kathy calmly replied:

"There's security in place. Use S-L before contacting us again."

"Screw that complicated—"

Kathy cut the transmission.

Smart.

Even digital lines can be intercepted, especially in a war zone. Who tries long-range calls mid-battle? I'd taught him some basics after Hilde foisted him on me, but the brat still had much to learn.

A moment later, the link re-opened through the proper password. Now on the secured line, the scowling face of that brat Duo appeared on the virtual monitor, looking as sour as ever.

"Hey, Crapswell! I heard Zechs Merquise is on the move. Let me go deal with him, nobody else but me can handle this!"

He still wore the same hair ring Naina had given him, holding his braid in place. I also noticed a scrap of Santa's outfit pinned around his collar, lovingly kept all these years. It might've been cute if he weren't such a snotty brat.

"Knock yourself out."

"Heh, obviously."

The screen switched to Heero next.

"So WuFei launched in Natak. That true?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"Like anyone can stop him! By the time we knew something was up, he had already flown off!"

"Understood. I'll go clean up your mess."

He cut the connection without waiting for a reply.

"That bastard..."

Heero's always had a gift for pissing people off with minimal words. Snow White and Warlock advanced to the intercept point. Kathy reported:

"Father, I've successfully hacked into the surveillance satellites."

"Excellent..."

She definitely took after her mother, she's quite capable. I'd bury her in a boring sermon later as a "reward."

"Natak and Epyon will make contact in twenty seconds!"

On the main monitor, I saw Epyon, transformed into a red mobile armor, skimming low across Mars's crimson terrain.

"All right... let's see this Epyon Ares none of us have witnessed yet."

Requiem for a Perpetual Chain

Mars File 3 (Part.03)

A few seconds later...

A gleaming white, three-headed wyvern, Natak, arrived on the scene. The footage came from different camera angles belonging to a Mars Federation surveillance satellite. Against the crimson Martian terrain, those white wings stood out brilliantly. Then, almost immediately, the feed shifted into a sandstorm.

For a split second, my stomach lurched, wondering if the Federation had discovered our hack.

"Were we jammed?"

"No, it's probably just the magnetic storm," Kathy said calmly. "Even if they spotted something suspicious, we've got multiple security traps in place. They shouldn't have any clue what's really going on."

"Right..."

I exhaled a short sigh, my thoughts drifting toward the machine WuFei was piloting.

"Should I put on some coffee?"

Her thoughtfulness was impeccable as always.

"Sure. Black, please. Strong and bitter."

"Understood."

I like my coffee the same way I like battles and life itself: on the bitter side. I'm a desperado by nature; bitterness just suits me.

The defining feature of Epyon Pi's flight-mode mobile armor lay in the third dragon located between the twin heads. In contrast, it lacked the shield-linked heat rod you'd expect from the original design. Instead, the beam trident was stored where that rod would normally go.

Fitted with machine guns and a large beam cannon, referred to as the "Dragon Fang," it allowed airborne combat reminiscent of the old Aries and Taurus models. Yet in the AC era, airborne MS-versus-MS dogfights were possible but rarely happened. One reason was the high accuracy of air-to-air missiles on both sides, more often than not, a mutual knockout.

On top of that, controlling recoil from missile launches, readjusting to flight posture, and maintaining position through constant vernier tweaks piled huge burdens on the pilot. Back then, I never engaged in airborne duels where gravity was involved. Others felt the same, so you only saw high-altitude bombing or similar aerial offensives; true defensive dogfights were practically nonexistent. If you wanted to

survive, you landed first on advantageous terrain before engaging the enemy. That strategy produced more certain results and a higher survival rate. Soldiers might live in the shadow of death, but they still cling to life.

Naturally, mobile armor aerial combat never materialized, partly due to the scarcity of units, but primarily because pilots' fundamental survival instincts prevailed. Even Heero, who once seemed indifferent to living or dying, never truly experienced a "dogfight" while piloting Wing Gundam. That so-called "bird mode" was typically for bombing, flying away, or securing a landing point before reverting to mobile suit form for ground combat.

But all that was on Earth, though. On this storm-swept Mars, radar detection is virtually useless, and air-to-air missiles can't really hit anything reliably. While Mars Suits include several variants optimized for the planet's low gravity aerial combat, none feature the heavy armor and transformable flight capabilities of their predecessors.

Still, here we have WuFei...

His Epyon Pi, codenamed Nataka, judging from the data I saw moments before the signal cut out, seemed to be holding a high altitude as it lay in wait for the enemy.

The predicted engagement time had technically passed, but they still hadn't made contact. Likely because that white triple-headed wyvern was planning a fresh, untested kind of mobile armor dogfight, one nobody had ever seen.

Major General Zechs Merquise's crimson double-headed drake had been flying at high speed just above the ground right before the sandstorm cut off our feed. The original Epyon was tuned exclusively for close-quarters combat, designed around a duelist's code of chivalry. Fitting, since it was a masterpiece from Treize Khushrenada, the "unparalleled eccentric."

Normally, you'd think flight capability would be unnecessary for a melee-centric design, but the shield-linked heat rod had the most destructive range in mobile armor mode. When superheated, that rod inflicted even greater damage at high speed, as Heero, the suit's first pilot, had once demonstrated.

Though I've only seen it in historical footage, I believe it was during the battle of Luxembourg on Earth. The Epyon sliced through a cluster of mobile suits on the ground in an instant, triggering explosions across the whole formation. All thanks to the oscillating heat rod, presumably calculated by the installed ZERO System for maximum effectiveness,

rather than a deliberate choice by Heero. Strictly speaking, back then the system was called “Epyon System,” but for all practical purposes it was the same, so “ZERO” works fine as a general name.

The real puzzle is how, despite being built for “dueling,” the system also allowed for large-scale slaughter. Even though the concept emphasized minimal bloodshed via one-on-one battles, it was still capable of “maximum annihilation” if faced with a large force. A brutal contradiction, or maybe an intentional, ice-cold paradox. Like “fighting a ‘war’ for ‘peace.’” The purposeful goal and the mechanical function constantly conflict.

Treize must have known all this, yet he gave Epyon the ZERO System and a transformable flight mode anyway. I don’t pretend to know his deeper motives. I only learned later that Treize once called Epyon “a guiding star.” Maybe he meant pilots should choose their own path—“duel” or “massacre”. Yet whichever path you picked, that choice put enormous psychological strain on the operator. Indeed, Heero, Epyon’s first pilot, suffered a mental overload: after losing sight of who the actual enemy was, he just destroyed weapons and those wielding them indiscriminately.

He was, no doubt, straying into madness.

Then Miliardo Peacecraft, calling himself Zechs, took over. Whether he went mad is unclear, but as leader of White Fang, he attempted a planet-wide “purge” of Earth’s population, another recorded historical fact.

Kathy came over with coffee, brewed with precise care. The temperature was perfect, the bitterness and acidity in superb balance.

“This is delicious... Did your mother teach you?”

Sally Po was a woman of many talents, medicine, gunfights, warship command, but apparently not coffee?

“No, she was all thumbs at this sort of thing.”

Somehow surprising but strangely fitting.

“So WuFei’s used to coffee like this?”

“No, Master Chang only eats and drinks what he makes himself.”

I studied the steaming dark liquid in my mug.

“Typical.”

He still doesn’t trust anyone but himself...

He surely hadn’t activated ZERO on Nataka, preferring his own instincts over any automated battlefield analysis. That’s just how he is. To add another point about understanding WuFei’s nature, consider how he personally assembled and tuned Epyon Pi from Treize’s old



schematics, then took it out for a shakedown in live combat, classic Chang WuFei. What puzzles me more is his choice of white and blue for its primary colors.

Maybe he isn't hung up on Treize after all, he nicknamed it "Nataku," suggesting different motivations. On the flip side, why hadn't Treize painted the original Epyon white if it was meant for duels?

I've always viewed that red-and-black scheme as the color of the "loser," in a grand sense, the loser who brings about the next historical change. Less elegance than raw, splendid force.

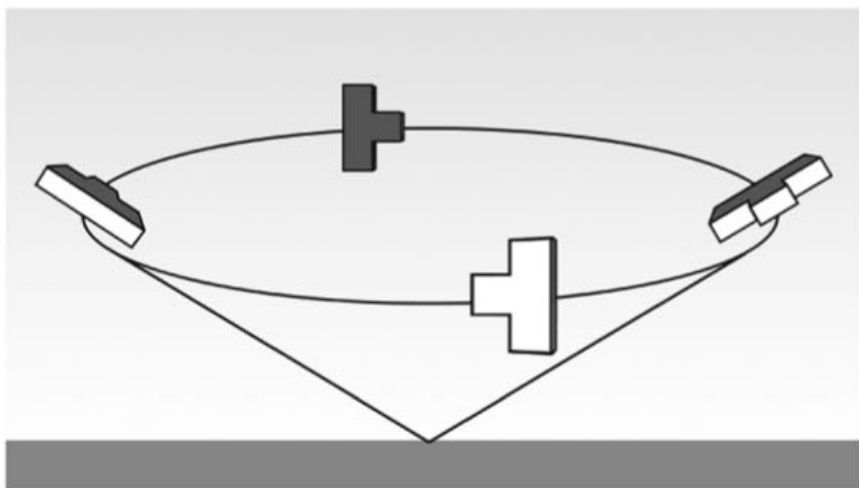
If Treize called white and blue "the colors of the graceful hero," then the original Epyon's red and black sat on the opposite end of the spectrum.

Just then, the sandstorm feed on the main monitor cleared, reverting to the previous view.

"Looks like the magnetic storm's passed."

"Y-yeah..."

Now Zechs would surely spot the enemy above. Despite that, fighting hadn't yet begun. On-screen, WuFei's Nataku circled in a wide cone, keeping Epyon at its center, an application of a "pylon turn," the type of pursuit that lets you transition to a "hit-and-away" or "dogfight" simply by diving.



PYLON TURN

If Zechs wanted to flee at full throttle, he probably could, but he'd widen the gap with his incoming support, the Virgo IV units. ZERO might well be advising him to draw out the fight until friendly forces arrive.

Meanwhile, secondary monitor data indicated that Nataku boasted superior range and straight-line speed, but Epyon outclassed it in maneuverability, especially at close range. And if it came to close combat, Epyon would always hold the advantage.

Still, I suspect WuFei intends to engage in an aerial dogfight, right where Epyon is strongest, just to overpower it head-on. That's always been his style: challenge the foe at their strongest point, subdue them through sheer will, and stand triumphant. He's had enough time to warm up in this "test flight," so the moment's ripe.

"What's he waiting for?"

At that instant, the twin-headed drake made the first move. It suddenly pulled its nose up, climbing nearly vertical. Zechs took the initiative. In this sky-bound battlefield, ZERO must have decided that was optimal. The twin-headed drake bared its fangs, and its dual beam cannons opened fire, aimed precisely at Nataku's predicted flight path.

"No way he can dodge that..."

Knowing WuFei, he'd power through even if it meant taking a hit. If he were using ZERO, he'd probably drop altitude fast to evade. But the two beams just couldn't catch Nataku; it slipped between them with ease and sped up further.

"That's... impossible..."

I was stunned. ZERO's calculations shouldn't miss. Their system would've fully analyzed Nataku's max speed, local wind, pressure... everything.

"Any error in the suit specs?" I asked, eyeing the sub-monitor.

"No errors." Kathy answered firmly, pride in her voice. "Everything matches the data we have here at the polar base, and the live feed's analysis confirms it, too."

"He said he'd never even piloted that thing before now, right?"

"Yes."

I folded my arms, pondering. If the data's correct, WuFei must be tapping into something beyond "normal" specs. Something not accounted for, maybe not just his skill.

Nataku then banked hard right, swinging wide left in a high-speed turn to launch a counterattack, as if shifting up a gear.

"He's going straight at the Epyon?!"

Surely he'd be blasted by Epyon's twin cannons. But first, Nataku spewed a burst of energy from the Dragon Fang. The Epyon fired

back, but not even close. In the blink of an eye, crimson wing and white wing crossed paths. Zechs's Epyon took a direct hit from the beam cannon, while its heat rod swung wide, missing Nataku by a hair. Epyon's damage was minor, but systematically having all predictions thwarted was far more critical.

By now, ZERO's in a frenzy, re-evaluating everything.

Just a few seconds, but no way someone like Wufei would waste that time lag. Nataku, still ascending fast, abruptly flipped and dive-bombed, machine guns blazing from the Dragon Fang.

Each shot was ridiculously precise.

Black smoke belched from one of Epyon's left-wing thrusters.

He'd always favored relentless combos. Once Wufei got in stride, he hammered you with a chain of attacks.

Nataku latched onto the Epyon's tail, unleashing beam cannon shots one after another. Epyon, with skill, dodged by a razor's edge, but it was clearly on the defensive.

"I never imagined Master Chang could fight this well."

"Y-yeah... color me surprised, too."

It's up against an Epyon with ZERO. How was he dominating so quickly?

"Huh?"

Then I noticed something about the two sets of wings. The Epyon's crimson drake was caked in Martian dust, while Nataku's silvery-white wings stayed glossy. WuFei must have polished them meticulously.

If two evenly matched machines clashed, the better-maintained one would take the edge. WuFei's painstaking care likely allowed Nataku to exceed even its own nominal specs, and in an aerial duel, every bit of extra acceleration matters.

ZERO can't factor in the pilot's love for his machine.

As a fellow Gundam pilot (albeit retired), I had to tip my hat. He's always been full of surprises.

"He's still at the top of his game."

Nataku kept up its furious assault; Epyon simply evaded, using that quick, nimble flight to survive. Zechs jettisoned the damaged vernier tank, and even the intact one on the other wing for balance. A bold, but wise choice, normally, no pilot would willingly toss away something still intact.

That slight sacrifice worked in Epyon's favor.

Now lighter, it accelerated sharply, dipping its wings in rapid, unpredictable motions, giving Wufei no clear shot from behind. He tried to lock on, but Epyon's acrobatic maneuvers thwarted him.

Nataku, in hot pursuit, revved even harder, pushing from full throttle up another gear into top speed.

"He can accelerate again?!"

Kathy gasped.

"Yep! This is his chance. Gotta finish it before it drags on."

Nataku steadily gained on Epyon's tail, closing in dangerously near the heat rod. I found myself yelling in excitement:

"Yes! Perfect!"

No point worrying about limits.

"Now's the time! Land a decisive blow before it's too late!"

Suddenly Epyon pulled a brutal brake, flipping backward in an unbelievable somersault, seizing Nataku's six. A textbook "dogfight," like two hounds snapping at each other's tails, ignoring the insane g-forces.

"Dammit..."

I clicked my tongue. This was inevitable. ZERO constantly adapts, so extending the fight was always a bad idea. WuFei failed to deal a finishing blow earlier, so here we are. But Nataku didn't quit. It fired verniers again and pulled off a mind-boggling acceleration, creating a gap so wide it looked like it vanished.

"No way..."

"That's insane..."

We were dumbstruck. Nataku had pushed beyond "top gear," achieving an insane velocity. No mere "meticulous maintenance" could explain it. It was as though everything before had been a casual warmup.

"ZERO will have to recalculate all over again."

"He's dominating," Kathy remarked in awe.

"We'll see..." I muttered.

Nataku swung back around head-on, unleashing beams and bullets from the Dragon Fang. Epyon could only manage to soak up damage; it was being driven into a corner. WuFei's offensive looked unstoppable.

Right then, the base's loudspeakers burst into Richard Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries.

"What the...?"

"That's 'Ride of the Valkyries,' Father."

"I know the piece, I'm asking why it's playing."

"Part of Operation Mythos. And, well, if we're going to watch, we might as well get in the mood, right?"

I don't get it. But Kathy continued:

"We want Master Chang at his best."



Riling us up might be pointless, but okay.

“Does he hear it, too?”

“No, of course not.”

Kathy sipped her coffee, wholly composed.

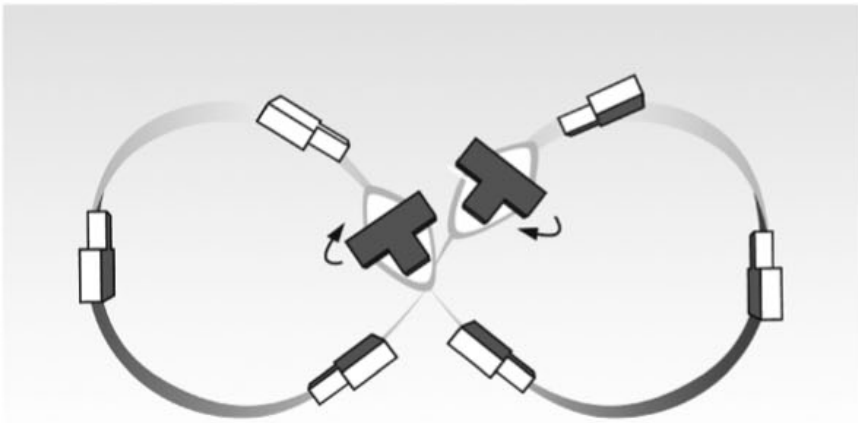
“But our hopes can still reach him.”

If WuFei keeps winning, Wagner’s piece stirs courage. If he loses, the grandeur becomes tragedy. Spotting my grim expression, Kathy said softly:

“Don’t worry. Master Chang will win in Nataku.”

Sally Po, Kathy’s mother, had a knack for uncanny intuition; maybe it’s inherited. Belief alone won’t guarantee victory, but maybe having something to believe in does enrich life.

Nataku stuck close behind Epyon, piling on beam cannon blasts in a steadier tempo, ideal from our perspective. Out of nowhere, Epyon seemed to stall and drop altitude. Did WuFei finally shoot it down? Nataku dove after it, but it was a trap. Epyon snapped upright into a “cuban eight” figure loop.



CUBAN EIGHT

Nataku had come in too close, so ZERO easily predicted its path, letting the heat rod sweep a wide arc and gouging a deep wound into Nataku’s shield. It was one thing to see that maneuver from a nimble

jet fighter, but a heavily armed mobile armor pulling off a Cuban eight was extraordinary.

The shield damage practically meant Natakū, so far ruling the sky with its raw speed, just lost a chunk of its wings. Air resistance was now twisted and uneven. Continuing an aerial duel was out of the question. Sure enough, Natakū began spiraling downward, out of control. Yet Epyon was crashing, too.

Apparently, in that single, frantic exchange, Wufei had jammed his beam trident right into Epyon's chest, even the unyielding warrior, dealing a blow at the cost of injury. In terms of the aerial fight, Natakū clearly took the upper hand.

Before slamming into the ground, both suits reverted to their mobile suit forms and landed upright.

There, two strange machines, both dubbed "Epyon," though clearly worlds apart from any Gundam we'd ever known. One with a sense of heavy armor, the other sleek and nimble. Their weaponry contrasted similarly.

The first: Wufei's Natakū, the Epyon Pi, white and blue at its core, sporting a bulky Dragon Fang, but overall slender and streamlined.

Zechs's Epyon, a sinister black machine brandishing a huge green beam sword in its right hand, a blazing-hot rod coiled around its silver left arm, plus a crimson-rose shield. That silver left arm must be a replacement after it was cut off during the EVE WARS by Wing Gundam Zero.

The left chest-shoulder area still had Natakū's beam trident jammed in, sparking with violent energy. Epyon stabbed its massive beam sword into the ground, then gripped that trident with its now-free right hand, tearing it out of its own shoulder and casually hurling it back at Wufei's Natakū, a show of sheer arrogance.

It was as though Zechs intended to eliminate any handicap before resuming a fair duel, outright ignoring the cloak-and-dagger game of the previous aerial clash. Like he was unbothered by this level of damage, giving off a fiercely robust impression.

"Why would Zechs Merquise do that...?" Kathy asked.

By then, the rousing music had ended.

"Because he's 'Zechs.'"

By now my coffee was lukewarm.

"But you said that Major General Zechs Merquise isn't actually Zechs, right?"

I set the half-finished mug on the side table.

“No, he isn't the real one, but his mindset, his behavior, is exactly like the Zechs Merquise we once knew..”

At the same time, Nataku wordlessly caught the returned beam trident, spun it overhead, and leveled it forward in perfect stance, brimming with martial spirit. I could almost hear WuFei's roar of determination.

Epyon, by contrast, stood in cold silence, seemingly sizing up its opponent. The aerial combat had ended, but the outcome was still unknown. They glared each other down, each waiting for that moment to strike.

First to move: Zechs's Epyon. At that range, the superheated rod gave it the advantage. With a wide flourish, the rod whipped like a serpent, then shot straight at Nataku.

WuFei hopped back a half-step and immediately sliced downward with the beam trident, except the heat rod coiled away, then wrapped around the trident's shaft, locking WuFei's weapon in place.

If it were me and my old partner, I'd charge forward right then, forcing a close-range melee to nullify that whip, hacking away until the end. But WuFei took a different approach.

He retreated another half-step, extending the trident-carrying left arm, forcing the rod to fully straighten, and then blasted Epyon with the dragon cannon from the right arm. The more logical choice, avoiding my usual risks.

I was certain it would land a direct hit, but Epyon dodged.

As if ZERO had already predicted it, Epyon soared overhead and swung its massive beam sword. That same sword once took down the space fortress Barge, a legendary destructive force. But WuFi's hallmark bravery is that he never shrinks back, even at a moment of lethal danger, he rushes in.

The second Epyon swung, he fired his shoulder thrusters, thrusting upward with the beam trident from below. Sparks flashed as Nataku's trident clashed with Epyon's sword, tip to tip.

If they'd been in zero gravity, Nataku might have won, especially with Epyon lacking a vernier tank. But Epyon leveraged Mars's gravity, igniting all remaining thrusters to push the trident down by brute force. Nataku slammed into the ground, landing on its back. Maybe WuFei lunged a fraction of a second too early, missing that exact window for a counter.

Epyon bore down, beam sword raised. Nataku blocked with its battered shield, fought back with the trident, even unleashed a point-

blank blast from the Dragon Fang. But apparently ZERO had foreseen that too, weaving around Wufei's combos and dragging the fight closer to Epyon's strong suit: hand-to-hand.

It was astonishing how Nataku had kept dodging lethal hits from Epyon's beam sword at such close quarters. Still, every near-miss left fresh scratches. The shield was practically in shreds. If Wufei didn't break contact soon,

Epyon's relentless tempo was accelerating. It was just a matter of time before Nataku suffered a fatal blow.

"But how... how can he escape a situation like that...?"

I found myself murmuring my thoughts aloud. Then Kathy spoke something unexpected.

"Master Chang... use ZERO..."

"Huh?"

"Please activate the ZERO System!"

Her tone was like a fervent prayer. She was right, ZERO might be the only way to turn the tables. But WuFei hated letting anything fight for him. He's a man who relies solely on himself, no matter the situation.

"You should be able to trust it."

The conviction in her eyes took me aback.

"Why else would you name that machine Nataku?"

Maybe that's the strength she gained from delving into the old AC files, made her more like her mother: fearless. Suddenly, I caught a flash: the spherical combat analysis sphere at Nataku's chest center flared from green to red.

"No way... he's doing it..."

What changed his mind, I can't guess. But he'd definitely powered up Nataku's real ability, ZERO. I worried it might be too late.

But my concerns were unfounded.

Immediately, his evasive maneuvers sped up, the beam cannon's accuracy jumped significantly, all focusing on Epyon's compromised left chest-shoulder area, strategically sound, if a bit ruthless. Sacrificing pride for survival, a pragmatic counterattack.

By attacking and defending almost simultaneously, he threw Epyon's offense-defense rhythm off-kilter.

The momentum flipped in an instant. Zechs's Epyon recoiled under the concentrated cannon volley, arching backward. Wufei followed with a fierce side blow from the Dragon Fang, sending Epyon stumbling. Nataku seized the chance to pull back and reposition at a safer distance.

His suits reaction speed now felt beyond what any “mobile suit” might achieve. It was as though these two “unseen ZERO Systems” were waging a new kind of “next-level fight,” one we’d never witnessed directly before.

“I’m proud of you, Master...”

Kathy breathed in relief, though that flawless timing...

“Hey, we don’t have a comm link with him, do we?”

“No. Of course not.”

Coincidence, or heartfelt connection? Either way, something in WuFei had changed, some new capacity for trust or forbearance. A man once stubbornly old-minded from childhood now seemed open to new possibilities.

The battlefield quieted as both suits stood facing each other, neither moving. Their damage seemed about equal. With enough will to die, either side could still snatch victory, probably leading to mutual destruction.

Both ZERO systems might foresee a stalemate. I recall an old rumor from when the rebuilt Sanc Kingdom was attacked: Wing Zero (piloted by Zechs) and Epyon (piloted by Heero) faced off. Their dual ZERO systems predicted an endless loop, culminating in mutual system shutdown.

But this was different; here, Zechs’s Epyon and WuFei’s Natakū were genuine enemies, not secret allies. The deciding factor would be the pilots themselves. The techniques may match, but... Zechs might obey ZERO to the letter, while WuFei, newly embracing Natakū’s ZERO, might push beyond it. That difference is all I see.

But before they could settle it, something we’d overlooked happened.

“Father! It’s what we feared!”

Kathy’s face went pale. Another monitor’s radar caught three incoming signatures.

The surveillance satellite showed the delayed Virgo IV mobile dolls arriving. Each had high-speed thruster packs, which they jettisoned upon landing. Now they’d move in perfect sync with Zechs’s will, meaning a full, high-level tactical unit integrated into ZERO’s calculations. A total nightmare.

If Natakū’s ZERO focuses solely on defeating Epyon, WuFei will lose for sure. But there’s no other way out.

The future just turned pitch black.

My memory says that the Virgo III mass-produced units once came out of the OZ MD Auto-Plant Vulcanus, located in orbit around Mars. After the Mariemaia Incident, all mobile dolls and related facilities were supposed to have been scrapped, but it wouldn't surprise me if those conniving Neuenheim Konzern bastards secretly salvaged them. They likely converted or repurposed them into Mars Suits, or MTF units, for large-scale production. And the Virgo, once at the III stage, was upgraded into Virgo IV.

From a glance, the IV model doesn't look much different from the II type White Fang used. No special changes to its color scheme, either; the same old design I remember fighting.

The analysis screen confirmed it still had eight planet defenders in total, four mounted on each shoulder. But on this new Virgo IV, the system was reinforced with cutting-edge tech, now called neo planet defenders featuring a stronger electromagnetic shield. Moreover, its long-barreled beam rifle resembled the one from Vayeate and boasted destructive power surpassing Nataku's Dragon Fang beam cannon, possibly close to Wing Zero's Twin Buster Rifle.

Immediately, the three Virgo IVs opened fire with that high-powered beam rifle. WuFei's Nataku jumped backward using thrusters, narrowly dodging. Had it been a normal leap, he'd have eaten those shots. At the outer edge of his Dragon Fang's range, Nataku fired back with its beam cannon, but the three Virgo IV units deployed twenty-four Neo Planet Defensors in total, forming a complex triple-layer electromagnetic barrier. Nataku's beam cannon couldn't even pierce the outermost shield.

It was obvious the tide was turning against WuFei.

The difference in raw firepower and defense was overwhelming. Even if you didn't bother comparing stats, it was clear how difficult it'd be for him alone to take on all three. Likely Epyon's ZERO System had already calculated that the Virgo IVs would arrive right at this moment. If so, they had both the superior force and strategy, no question. WuFei's only choice was to flee.

His Nataku shifted into mobile armor mode, the white, three-headed wyvern, and took to the skies, preserving what little advantage its aerial mobility gave. If a full retreat were allowed, he could've just flown out of range. But I knew WuFei would never yield. He would keep executing evasive maneuvers until Nataku's ZERO proposed some way out. A typically stubborn, defiant choice from someone who fights on no matter how dire the outlook, even if the end waiting for him was grim.

Both Kathy and I had nearly given in to despair when an encrypted transmission arrived.

“Trowa Phobos here... requesting response on secret lines F through T.”

Kathy swiftly switched channels and answered via the secure line.

“North Polar Base here, line is secure.”

Phobos appeared on-screen.

“I have a message from Snow White. ‘Will direct Nataku’s withdraw route. Head northeast to point O2-PX-78DY.’”

I spoke up, practically growling at the comm:

“Tell Heero to give the damn message himself!”

“He can’t. He’s in the middle of a op using the ZERO System and can’t open comms. I also tried contacting Nataku but got no response.”

“He’s in an op using ZERO?”

I swallowed the sudden surge of “hope” welling up in my gut. On the main monitor, the white three-headed wyvern abruptly pivoted northeast.

“Then...”

A grin tugged at my lips. How could I not smile?

“Do me a favor. Tell Heero that Nataku’s ZERO System is online, so no one can talk to him either.”

“We can’t reach him any more than you can. I’ve already said that.”

“Then pass it on to my damn brat! Just tell him WuFei’s heading for the designated point!”

“Kathy Po, I’m sorry, but I’m not your liaison. Once I’ve delivered Snow White’s message, my job is done. I’m certainly not going to babysit the elderly.”

“Understood... We’ll contact Warlock ourselves,” Kathy replied, forcing a polite smile. She looked more at ease now. “But Phobos, you could be a bit kinder, you know? Older folks and girls have more fragile hearts than you might think.”

“Over and out.”

Trowa Phobos cut the line unceremoniously.

“Did I... say something that offended him?” Kathy murmured, puzzled.

She was unaware (thanks to being busy with the “Zechs File”) that “girls” and “getting hurt” are taboo trigger-words for him these days. Frankly, I was amused. Anyway, both of them had just referred to me as “old,” so I’ll let it slide this time.

More importantly, this changed everything. If Heero’s Snow White was employing ZERO, that meant they had a plan to break this

hopeless deadlock. And with Nataku's own ZERO synchronized to Snow White's strategy, WuFei must have decided to fly in a direction that offered some path to victory.

"I've finished contacting Warlock," Kathy reported.

"Good. Put that withdrawal route up on the main monitor."

"Right."

A complex topographic map popped up, highlighting a blinking waypoint in a deep canyon, flanked by 500-meter-high rock walls closing in the farther you went.

"Well, hell..."

A total dead end.

"They'll run out of places to hide."

"But Master Chang's already on his way there," Kathy noted.

Our glimmer of hope darkened. If there's any tactical advantage to that terrain...

I rarely used that part of my brain, but I tried to reason it out. Quatre could probably have spelled it out in five seconds. Maybe they'd ambush the Epyon and Virgo IV inside that bottleneck, then seal it off while Snow White, Warlock, and Nataku close in for a pincer strike or total annihilation. But Epyon's ZERO would sniff that out easily.

Even a simultaneous three-way assault might barely scratch the triple-layer neo planet defensor barrier. And if by some miracle they stole a Virgo IV beam rifle, it still wouldn't guarantee punching through all three layers.

"Any other possible plan...?"

Impossible to guess. I had no choice but to watch these battles unfold on the main monitor, trusting them. Then Kathy said:

"Duo just messaged back."

"What does it say?"

"Sit back and watch me save the day!"

"What the hell...?"

I was dumbfounded. Same old clown. Not that I'm any better.

On-screen, the white wyvern kept flying toward the designated point, taking a few hits along the way. Its speed was noticeably lower now, maybe it was an act to bait the enemy, or maybe that was its real limit after all the damage. In any event, they had to move fast before Epyon's ZERO sensed Heero and the others.

And then my predictions got toppled by something unexpected.

"That idiot... so much for 'saving the day'."

Standing tall at the canyon entrance, cloak fluttering and beam scythe in hand, was the Warlock. That machine is best used covertly,

where its abilities really shine. Great, my brilliant idea to let him adopt the name “Duo” is backfiring.

“Kid, you’ve got nothing I can rely on here.”

Now the Virgo IVs reoriented, designating the Warlock as an additional target. They concentrated their beam rifle fire immediately, but Warlock dashed left and right, cloak trailing in strange arcs. That fancy footwork wasn’t half bad. Probably on the Virgo IV monitors, Warlock’s silhouette appeared multiple times in conflicting positions, messing with their aim. The rifles fired at empty air. So maybe it was a real “magic trick.”

But no matter how close Warlock got, those thick electromagnetic shields from the neo planet defensors remained impenetrable. The scythe slash at point-blank distance did nothing, it couldn’t pierce that fortress. Circling around for a blind spot was pointless; the planet defensors offered no weaknesses.

Meanwhile, up above, the battered three-headed wyvern reversed course and soared back in, presumably to help. That was suicidal: with all that damage, how would they stand a chance?

Sure enough, the Virgo rifles tilted skyward. At the same moment, Warlock slashed with the beam scythe again and Natakū’s Dragon Fang fired. They combined into a wave-like pattern of attacks from land and sky, a decent combo but nowhere near unstoppable.

“Think that’s just a diversion?” Kathy asked.

“Both suits are probably decoys...” I mused.

All that flashy fighting must be a smokescreen while Snow White lines up the real shot somewhere. Even the Mars Federation satellites, or Epyon’s ZERO-based analysis net, likely wouldn’t detect Snow White’s cloaked form.

A fleeting memory crossed my mind: the data from that earlier scuffle where Snow White and Warlock faced Quaterine’s Maguanac. Heero stuck to using only a beam saber, he’d never touched his Buster Rifle. I was pretty sure that rifle had been loaded aboard the long-range hover vessel *Voyage*, but he’d withheld it, even when he threatened to “kill Quaterine.”

So presumably, that rifle’s still the trump card. If it was a three-shot max-power, cartridge-loaded type like Wing Gundam’s, plus three more spares, that was six potential blasts. Except... even full-power Buster Rifle shots can’t break the triple-layer electromagnetic field from neo planet defensors. Hitting the same spot repeatedly might take out just the outer layer. Not enough for a one-hit kill.

You'd need some bigger area-of-effect or chain reaction. And you'd have to do it all at once...

"You can't do that... but I can."

Heero said that to me a lifetime ago, making the impossible possible. I sighed, resigning myself to see how they'd pull it off.

The black-cloaked Warlock kept flitting around the electromagnetic field. The Virgo IV wasn't specialized for melee, so it didn't push in close. Meanwhile, Epyon, built for close combat, presumably wouldn't let Warlock keep harassing them like that. Sure enough, the moment the Virgo units fired upward at the wyvern, Zechs's Epyon lunged with its beam sword raised. The kid had been waiting for that. Warlock flung something skyward, like a grenade.

It was a Buster Rifle spare cartridge.

Epyon's sword came crashing down at the same time Warlock's scythe shot upward, meeting at the midpoint in a shower of sparks. Warlock twisted its wrist, locking Epyon's sword in place. Then in the other hand, with showy flourish reminiscent of a magician, he tossed two more cartridges into the air.

"So that's it!" I exclaimed.

Heero's definitely perched somewhere high, rifle aimed at those drifting spares. At point O2-PX-78DY, presumably lying low on a cliff ledge. If those three spare cartridges fell into the triple electromagnetic field...

A blazing beam flashed from precisely where I expected. Heero fired the Buster Rifle at max power, nailing the first falling cartridge's primer, triggering a massive explosion. The outermost field and all eight planet defenders vanished at once. Even ZERO couldn't stop that pinpoint shot, a display of jaw-dropping marksmanship. Targeting a spinning cartridge's tiny primer at such distance was astounding. Only by doing this could he multiply the Buster Rifle's effective power to negate both field and defenders.

A couple tenths of a second later, the second cartridge detonated, eliminating the second electromagnetic layer. Another fraction of a second after that, the third blew, annihilating every last neo planet defender and shield. A monstrous plasma surge and scorching wave of superheated gas flooded the area in a blinding flash.

The Virgo IV units lost their strongest defense.

Naturally, that didn't make them surrender. But WuFei in particular never shows mercy. As the white wyvern dive-bombed and transformed back into Nataka, he landed with a flurry of beam trident thrusts and Dragon Fang cannon bursts, ripping the Virgo IV units to

pieces in the blink of an eye. Impossible speed. That left only one adversary: Zechs's Epyon.

Warlock presumably could've moved to restrain Epyon right then, but Duo froze for just a moment during that intense flash. Hard to blame him. He'd done plenty already, above and beyond.

Meanwhile, the Epyon shifted back into the crimson two-headed drake form and shot skyward, clearly retreating. Even if Nataku gave chase, it was too damaged to catch up. Both sides' ZERO Systems had no alternative better than letting them go.

"Mission all over... We got through it," Kathy said.

Right then, a coded message came from WuFei.

"This is Nataku. Terminating operation."

"Acknowledged! Master Chang, you fought brilliantly!" Kathy responded.

"No, Captain-Major Kathy... I was weak."

"That's not—"

"Nataku will never accept me like this."

"Don't say that! I'm honored to serve under someone as brave as you, Master Chang!"

"I'll be returning now... Kathy, would you mind putting on some coffee when I get back?"

"Yes, I'd be delighted!"

She beamed and saluted.

"Do you take milk or sugar?"

"Both. Lots of it."

"Understood!"

"Thank you," he'd replied in Chinese.

The feed cut, leaving us relieved.

"Thank goodness..." Kathy exhaled.

"Yeah, you were right about WuFei. Nataku pulled through."

"It doesn't look like it's going to be that simple."

A girl's voice piped in from the comm. Then the big main monitor switched to show Quaterine, all smiles.

"The Mars Federation Forces Airborne Division will be there any moment now."

Her remark made Kathy frantically widen the radar's search parameters.

"Confirmed... Fifty heavy transport hovercraft are closing in over the battlefield where Master Chang and the others just fought!"

A cunning, more strategic way to secure victory. So, the Federation was no monolith.



“You hacked the surveillance satellites, weren’t you? So, you should have assumed that the MFF was watching the same footage and expected that this would be their response.”

Quaterine’s voice had that same irritating correctness Quatre used to have.

“...”

I said nothing, trying to cut the transmission, but I found myself locked out. She’d hacked us, disabling all controls.

“Oh, that’s pointless. Security codes and secret lines mean nothing to me.”

She giggled.

“Took a fair bit of effort, though!”

“How many Mars Suits are on those hovercraft?” I asked.

Before Kathy could answer, Katerine casually adjusted her glasses, continuing.

“They’re loaded with unmanned airborne Mars Suits, ten per transport, so five hundred total. Not even the Lanagreene Republic’s Major General Zechs Merquise could outrun that many.”

“Right... So they’ll wipe out WuFei and the others too, huh?”

“I realize I may look like a traitor to you, but please understand one thing... We need the Gundams, and Heero Yuy in particular.”

“You could’ve done this a helluva lot more smoothly.”

Quaterine returned her spectacles to her face, eyes shining a cool aquamarine.

“I would have, obviously... but the Federation isn’t a monolith, and its upper brass has gone rogue, and we can’t stop them either.”

“The hovercraft just released those unmanned airborne Mars Suits! Snow White, Warlock, and Natakū are engaging, but—”

“Assuming that I believed that you didn’t order this in the first place, why did you bother to call us? I doubt it was to make excuses for betraying us.”

“Heh. Partly that, yes.”

“What?”

“That was a joke. But I’m also giving you a heads-up that two uninvited guests are heading to your base. I wanted to give you advance warning.”

“What guests?”

“Welcome them a warm welcome. Over and out.”

The main monitor reverted to the surveillance feed.

“PS: please pass on my regards to Hilde Schbeiker. And ask her not to cause us too much trouble.”

She ended with an unhelpful parting shot.

Everyone knows I'm in no position to ask Hilde anything.

Anyway, we focused on the crisis at hand. The feed showed a monstrous aerial clash over that canyon. Five hundred Mars Suits against Heero in Snow White, Duo in Warlock, and WuFei in Nataka, plus, presumably, Zechs's Epyon. But those four were already worn out from consecutive battles. And the Buster Rifle was depleted. Their only choice was close combat, hacking through wave after wave. If Epyon got roped in too, that meant each pilot faced 125 enemies. A ridiculous fight.

Even "one-man-army" has its limits, especially without enough heavy firepower.

They were in deep trouble.

That's when the rear door of the command room opened. Kathy and I whirled around, stunned. Standing there were the second president of the Mars Federation, masked, and her aide.

"Relena..."

"...Peacecraft..."

The President removed her mask, letting her soft hair sway, her clear eyes watching us intently.

"Greetings, everyone."

Kathy tried to move, but I quietly motioned for her to hold back. The President raised a hand.

"Please, don't go to any trouble on my account. I brought my own tea."

Her aide, Lucrezia Noin, set out a Royal Copenhagen teapot and cups. Meanwhile, Relena gazed sorrowfully at the large monitor's brutal dogfight, then looked away with a pained shake of her head.

"Say, Madame President, can't you order them to stop? Don't you have the power?"

"The president of the Federation doesn't hold as much power as you think. Plus, there are only a small handful of people who agree with the desire for peace."

"So you waltz into enemy territory for an afternoon tea party? You're as gutsy as ever, I see."

She took a sip of tea, gave a nostalgic smile, and spoke.

"I see you haven't changed either. I'm relieved."

She still had that aura of regal beauty, refusing to let others near her essence.

"I owe you my thanks for taking care of Naina, Father Maxwell."

Time had inevitably aged her appearance, yet she remained a beauty. The soulful eyes and entrancing smile were pure Noin, unchanged from the old days.

“So what’s your business at this base?” I asked.

I’m not holding any grudge, but hostility crept into my words despite myself.

“I’ll say this up front: I won’t bow to your ‘total pacifism.’ I doubt anything ‘total’ or ‘perfect’ can be realized in this world—”

“Heero...” she said firmly, staring at me. “His awakening was successful, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. And his head’s screwed on much straighter than yours is.”

“Thank you.”

She bowed politely, more than I expected. Then Relena handed her teacup to Noin and walked past us toward the communications console behind Kathy.

“...”

None of us could kill Relena Peacecraft even if we wanted to. With the Perfect Peace Program in effect, only Heero could do that. I, for one, had been vaccinated (or so they claimed) with that virus after my Mars bike crash in MC-0014.

She activated the standard long-range line and hailed Snow White.

“Heero... Heero, please respond.”

“It’s no use, Madame President. Heero Yuy is in the ZERO System right—”

Suddenly a response came.

The monitor showed Heero’s face.

“Snow White here. Do you need something?”

He was calm, despite fighting hundreds of enemies.

“Heero...”

Relena’s eyes welled with tears of joy, looking at him like she’d longed for this moment.

“I’ve missed you, Heero... I...”

Her voice wavered, her tears rolling down her cheek.

“I’m sorry, but I’m in the middle of a battle. Just tell me what you want.”

“All right.”

She wiped her tears, gathering herself and speaking with quiet resolve.

“Heero... I’m right over here, so hurry and come kill me.”

She spoke with a startling calm, as though she’d braced herself. Even if Heero was the only one she could ask, it was a heartbreaking way to



talk to the man she loved. Heero, for his part, replied in the same frosty tone.

"I've already accepted that mission. Once this battle ends, I'll carry it out immediately."

"..."

"But Relena, you haven't finished your own battle yet."

"My own battle?"

"Terminating transmission."

The monitor reverted to the satellite feed of the raging battle. Relena lowered her head, thinking. Then she lifted her face, addressing Kathy:

"Major Sally—"

"No, ma'am. I'm her daughter, Kathy. Captain-Major Kathy Po, Madame President."

"Would you mind if I copied all the files you used in the Princess Aurora awakening process?"

"Father, what do you think?"

Kathy asked me. I grunted.

"You're barking up the wrong tree if you think all the answers lie in the past."

Relena met my gaze with unwavering conviction.

"I know that. But as I am now, I can't fight at all."

"Do you think it's really possible? The realization of total pacifism?"

"It won't be the same movement as before. I'm trying to forge a new kind of total pacifism."

Hope shone in her eyes.

"Fine. Take it."

"I'm sorry. And... thank you."

My chest felt a slight ache.

"Thanks, Duo," she whispered, smiling sweetly, like the innocent girl she once was.

"Don't worry, lady, I'm not about to use my final weapon on you. I'd rather not."

Noin started copying the data from Kathy's memory chip while the monitor continued showing that fierce fight. Our guys had already cut the unmanned suits down by half, some two hundred and fifty left. Impressive indeed, especially from Heero and WuFei. Not to mention the upstart Warlock pilot and Major General Zechs, who'd apparently joined the fray despite being an enemy moments ago.

They were far beyond their limits.

Then, a radiant golden light appeared overhead. I knew that brilliance.

“Cyrene Wind...”

Four years ago at Christmas, I'd glimpsed that same glow. Noin, finishing the data transfer, smiled softly at the shining figure on the main screen.

“Tallgeese Heaven?”

From the golden radiance emerged a white mobile suit with glorious angelic wings.

Relena, too, smiled.

“So, my brother made it after all.”

Last time, I couldn't see it clearly through the glare. But via the satellite feed, I saw it now, undeniably a Tallgeese successor. Slicing through dense cloud layers, that white brilliance was almost divine. The golden aura swirling around it formed an energy ring like a colossal halo.

Suddenly, that halo expanded to maximum size, engulfing all two hundred fifty Mars Suits, and erasing them from existence in an instant.

Afterword

I'm certainly not in any position to call myself a "novelist," yet it's still amazing how many misconceptions and outright fabrications about me get around. A humorous example cropped up this past April Fool's, when my editor told me about an article on a US-based site called "Manga Market." The piece claimed, "New Mobile Report Gundam Wing is being adapted into a Hollywood live-action film!"—and guess who was supposedly interviewed about it? Me! According to that "interview," I rattled off all sorts of English phrases that, frankly, I've never in my life even seen, let alone used. I was stunned, and laughing my head off.

As a fun gag, it's actually kind of flattering. But then there's the Wikipedia entry on Gundam Wing. It cites me as saying, "I aimed to write scripts that anime otaku and magazine editors couldn't possibly keep up with," complete with an official-sounding source, apparently some decades-old production notes ("PART I," which is definitely out of print). So now it'll be enshrined as fact forever. The truth is, that quote was originally Director Masashi Ikeda's mandate to me: "Aim for a script so ambitious nobody can keep up." It wasn't something I just proclaimed on my own. And there was a line just before it that read, "That includes general audience as well," which has also been edited out. It looks suspiciously like someone's trying to paint me as antagonistic of all those folks.

You might be thinking, "Then just edit it on Wikipedia," right? Sadly, I'm not savvy enough with computers to do that myself. Nor do I feel sly enough about asking my editor to fix it. So, all I can do is grit my teeth, thinking, "But I never said that..." while hoping someone out there will step in and help.

Anyway, hello there, dear readers. I remain my same old worthless, boozy self.

When I first started writing this novel, I asked Torii, the bartender at the establishment Voyage, to craft an original cocktail called Frozen Teardrop. I'll give you a quick peek at the recipe: the base is Hypnotiq, a lovely pale aquamarine grapefruit liqueur, combined with crushed ice and Absolut Kurant (a blackcurrant-flavored vodka). They're blended into a frosty slush in the mixer, then poured into a short cocktail glass and

topped with a red cherry, our stand-in for "Mars." The exact proportions can be tricky. The finishing touch is two small, teardrop-shaped ice cubes representing "Phobos" and "Deimos." As for the cherry? It could be green or blue, too. In this world, Mars has completed its terraforming, so who's to say what color it really is?

It's an absolutely delicious drink. It's gently sweet, like a hazy dream; it's tangy, reminiscent of a bittersweet first love; it's soothingly cool. People who don't normally imbibe can sip it down with ease, but two glasses in, you get pretty sleepy. After all, "Hypnotiq," from the French "hypnose," might literally put you to sleep, like Heero and Relena drifting off into cold sleep. Torii also created a gorgeous apple liqueur-based cocktail, "Snow White." A true master of their craft. Right now, they're off riding their motorcycle around Hokkaido and the Tōhoku region, sort of like a real-life Father Maxwell. May or may not be back by Christmas, but Captain Sakai, the owner of Voyage, is also a fantastic bartender, so I'm still a regular there.

I realize some of you readers are underage, so I'm sorry for so much alcohol talk. Let's pivot (though... not sure how logical a pivot that is!) and share some behind-the-scenes stories about the voice actors who brought Gundam Wing's characters to life.

Since my day job is writing anime scripts, the way I shape characters is hugely influenced by the personalities of the voice actors. People often say the female characters in Gundam W are portrayed as strong and courageous, which is nice to hear. In reality, though, we owe that to the actors themselves; all the actresses involved were radiant and graceful. And among them, Relena is basically the poster child. Her determination to face adversity is precisely the same steely spirit that Akiko Yajima herself exudes.

Interestingly, my most memorable Akiko Yajima story didn't happen in a Gundam Wing recording session, but elsewhere. Once, on an overnight wrap-party trip for some show, a bunch of drunken guys got up to mischief late at night, until Akiko unleashed her diaphragm-trained "That's enough, all of you!" in a big, bold voice. I'll never forget that moment.

Yet, she can also look so wistful, almost fragile, murmuring, "I'm finding this role so hard to pin down," which reminds me of Relena wrestling with, "How can we truly end war?"

Then there's another moment from a while later: when Akiko ran into Director Ikeda again after a long hiatus. They exchanged pleasantries, and her first follow-up remark was a casual, "This time, please don't disappear on me, okay?" which was just too adorably blunt. It blew my

mind. I practically wanted to shout, "She's real! The real Relena is right here!" like some excited Inspector Acht.

Some of you may notice a faint difference in how Relena is depicted in this new novel, she might come across as less self-assured than you'd expect. But in truth, that subtle duality is classic Gundam Wing. If you can embrace that, the whole story opens up in new and fascinating ways.

Father Maxwell doesn't have finalized artwork yet, but asking Toshihiko Seki (Duo Maxwell's voice actor) to voice him in my head gave the character that narrative role he has in Volume 4. Obviously, the fun mischief of "cute but brash" Duo stems from Seki's performance, too.

There's a certain warmth in his voice that suggests a character who is world-weary and always looking out for others, someone who stays cool on the surface yet quietly steps up when he sees someone in trouble. It's so gentle and refreshing at the same time.

So, if you imagine the voice in your mind as you read, I suspect it'll sound something like that. I'm really glad I went with this "rotating narrator, told in first-person" approach, even if nobody's given me any credit for it. Anyway, I had plenty more to say, but I'll have to wrap it up here.

I hope you'll indulge me yet again when Volume 5 comes out, and maybe send along your thoughts or comments.

Till next time!

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.04 Requiem for a Perpetual Chain (Part.02)

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