

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP 8

新機動戦記ガンダムW
フローズンティアドロップ

Written by
Katsuyuki Sumizawa

Cover Art by **Sakura Asagi**
Hajime Katoki

Original Work by
Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino

5 NOCTURNE IN MOURNING (Part.1)



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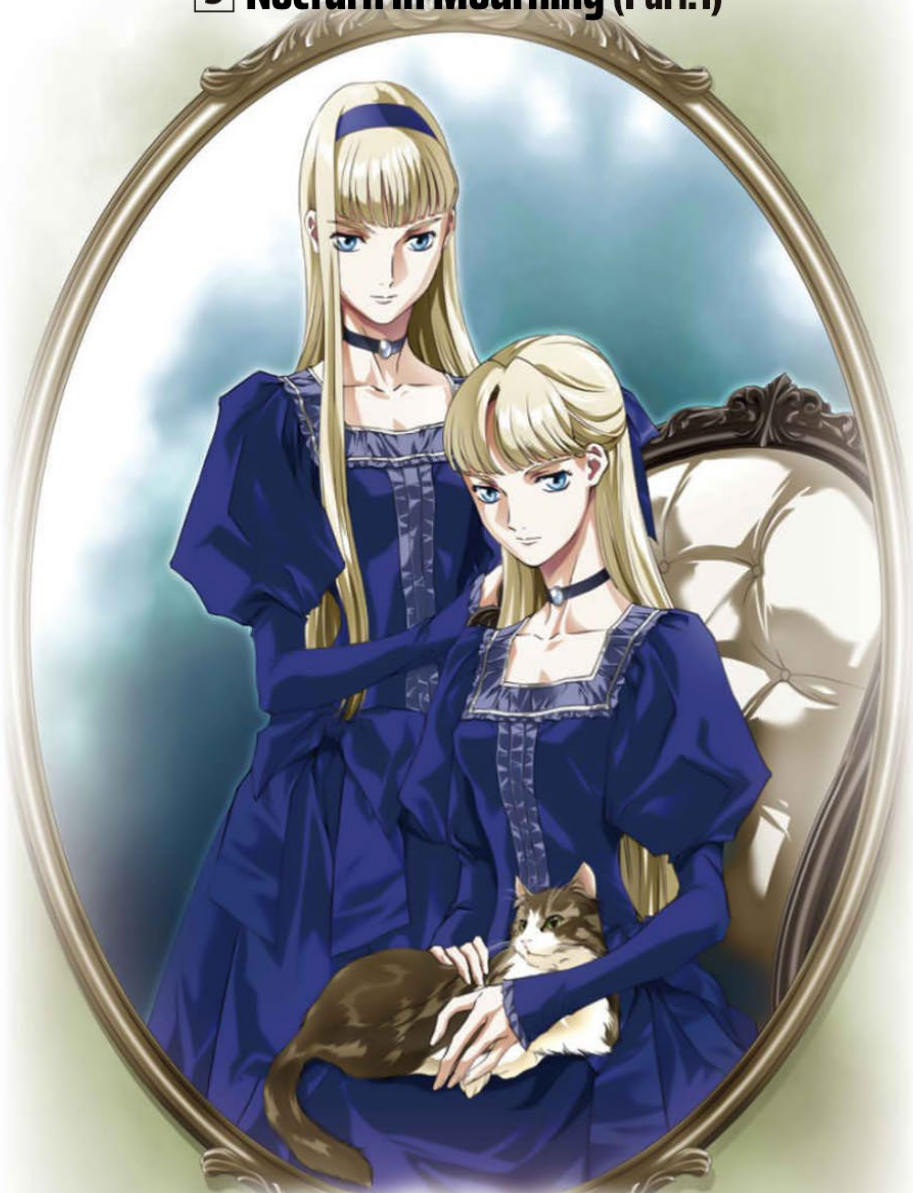
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Nocturn in Mourning
Peacecraft File 1

"Of course! No doubt, they will do everything they can to try and stop me. "

"So you're waiting for them, huh?"

"Those pilots don't act in a way that's perceived as inevitable or predestined. That's what makes them professionals in combat. Like me, Zechs Merquise!"

—AC-195 EVE WARS Libra—
Zechs & Noin

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

A radiant flood of golden light burst across the monitor, so bright it practically seared my eyes. It was the energy unleashed by the Tallgeese Heaven, my father's mobile suit.

Only when that blinding brilliance began to subside did I see two hundred fifty Mars Suits hurtling down, their forms scattered like falling debris in the sky.

"Wow... that's incredible," Quaterine murmured beside me, her already-large eyes widening in awe.

"That shimmering cloud of gold particles from the Tallgeese Heaven is a nano-defenser, one developed specifically to fight unmanned units," Naina explained matter-of-factly. While she spoke, she flipped open a lunch box in her lap. "Apparently, back in the After Colony era, Treize Khushrenada commissioned its design to instantaneously wipe out the mobile dolls that were dominating the battlefield."

Quaterine's inquisitive gaze shifted from Naina to me. "But can technology that ancient really hold up in today's battles?"

Naina took a sandwich from the lunch box. "Quaterine, believing technology will always progress beyond its past, that it will never fail to surpass it, is a kind of 'superstition.' Or more like blind faith."

She handed a sandwich to each of us with an apologetic smile. "Sorry it's such a late lunch."

"Are we still en route to our rendezvous point?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"No."

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Wait, you mean we've already arrived?"

Chewing on my sandwich, I nodded.

"Yup..."

I switched the large hovercraft's control system over to automatic, letting it hold position in midair. The vegetables, especially the tomatoes inside the sandwich, were lusciously juicy and brightened every bite.

As I savored that rich flavor, I glanced absently at a small point of light drawing closer to us. Even at a distance, I recognized it as the small craft carrying my mother and President Relena. They were mere seconds away from docking.

Behind me, Quaterine's shoulders sagged as she let out a deep sigh. "I had no idea I was fighting alongside... a whole family, the Maguanac."

I wanted to tell her that wasn't quite right.

The nano-defenser instantly resets the cumulative data in unmanned units. However, if there's a human operator overseeing the mobile doll systems, they can feed the data back in and get those suits running again. The Maguanac Corps, for instance, would handle it without a hitch... That was my reasoning, but Naina beat me to the explanation.

"Still," she said, turning to Quaterine, "it worked wonders against both Snow White and Warlock, didn't it? Even if it's an older concept, nano-technology has only recently progressed to the point of practical application. So yes, the theory may come from a past era, but it's modern research that's made it truly functional."

People often say I'm too quiet, but I suspect it's just that Naina's quick-wittedness overshadows me.

"This is delicious!" Quaterine exclaimed, beaming with delight. "I've never had a sandwich this good in my life."

Naina took a bite of her own and spoke softly, as though remembering something poignant. "Sister Hilde taught me the recipe. The trick is getting the right balance of mustard and mayonnaise...that hidden touch really brings out the sweetness of the tomatoes."

Quaterine's voice went dreamy as she continued to savor every mouthful. "And now Dr. Schbeiker, Sister Hilde, is hailed as an authority on nano-technology, isn't she?"

Naina's expression grew a bit distant.

"Before she founded the orphanage, she worked as a librarian in the National Library of the Lanagreene Republic; that was her official position, at least. In reality, she was sifting through an enormous

memory library of older records, extracting data that could be applied in practice to further her research."

"But didn't all of that lead to the reemergence of 'Major General Zechs Merquise'?" Quaterine asked, glancing at a sub-monitor. Its long-range radar showed a point of light speeding away, the Gundam Epyon had quickly broken from the battle and was retreating toward Lanagreene in its flying mobile armor form.

"No, Quaterine," Naina refuted again, quicker than I could speak. "That hologram was programmed to activate the moment Dixneuf Neuenheim died. All Sister Hilde did was unearth it. She ended up getting used."

The residual consciousness of my father stored within Gundam Epyon's ZERO System had been converted into a three-dimensional hologram by the Neuenheim Corporation, only to be hacked by someone in Lanagreene. Quaterine and I initially thought Dr. Hilde Schbeiker was the mastermind, but Naina insisted that was impossible, she believed there was a far more insidious puppeteer lurking within the Lanagreene Republic's own government. And if Naina, who lived with Dr. Schbeiker for years, claimed it couldn't be Hilde, she was almost certainly right. The closeness of their relationship was evident in how exquisite this sandwich tasted; the care Dr. Schbeiker gave to her craft was abundantly clear.

"Then... is the Perfect Peace Program also not Dr. Schbeiker's doing?" Quaterine asked. Right as she spoke, the door behind us slid open, and in walked my mother, Lucrezia, and President Relena.

"It's the opposite," my mother said. "Dr. Hilde Schbeiker resumed her research to free Father Maxwell from the chains of the Perfect Peace Program."

I couldn't help noticing again how alike my mother's voice and Naina's were. Hearing them one after the other could easily cause confusion.

"Besides," my mother went on, "the core concept behind Perfect Peace Program existed long before any of us were born."

She handed me two microchips, her expression resolute. "Here: one is a copy from the Preventer base, and the other is a file Dr. Schbeiker sent us."

President Relena addressed me with disarming politeness, even though I hardly deserved it.

"Mille, would you mind?"

"Of course," I said, accepting the chips. When merged with our own "Zechs File" and processed through the ZERO System, they should combine multiple perspectives into a new historical record.



"What should we name this file?" I asked. A fresh file would need its own designation before saving.

With a hopeful gleam in her blue eyes, President Relena said, "Let's call it the 'Peacecraft File.' Please. Appropriate for one creating peace."

Examining the data, I noticed the oldest record dated back to AC-130. My father and mother were both born in AC-176, so these documents reached far into the past.

A sudden pang of confusion hit me when I saw the name "Heero Yuy" under the personal records section. Then I remembered, this wasn't the codename of Snow White's pilot but rather the legendary leader of the space colonies.

Prior research never clarified Heero Yuy's origins. One story claimed he was born into a poor family of space laborers, struggled to fund his education, then traveled to Earth to attend a prestigious college, where he studied political philosophy and ideology before returning to champion the colonies. Another asserted he was born into wealth on Earth and only became an advocate for colony independence after witnessing the dire conditions on a college study trip. Either way, as the representative of the colonies, Heero Yuy firmly opposed the United Earth Sphere Alliance.

So how old would he have been around AC-130?

He became publicly prominent around AC-165 and, by AC-173, advocated for a demilitarized, nonviolent path to colony autonomy, a plea famously referred to as the "Heart of Space Declaration." Two years later, on April 7th of AC-175, the Earth-side powers orchestrated his assassination.

His time in the spotlight spanned barely a decade, but in those ten years he seemed to pour his entire existence into achieving peace for the whole Earth Sphere, dedicating his every breath to the well-being and independence of the colonies.

Still, one mystery lingered: what burned so brightly within him that he devoted his life so fiercely to the cause? The deeper motivation behind his passion, like his birthplace, remained hidden.

Yet something in this new Peacecraft File felt like it might shed light on the roots of Heero Yuy's convictions. The possibility of glimpsing how he became the man he was ignited a surge of curiosity in me.

Sometimes, I'm impulsive to a fault. Once I get that spark, I can't resist the urge to delve in. So, I asked Naina to pilot the hovercraft onward to Elysium Island while I got permission from President Relena and my mother to examine the contents of the file.

Slipping on my virtual visor, I immediately saw the word "ZERO" flash before my eyes.

And then it began, an account starting with the story of a princess who was, in fact, my great-grandmother...

AC-130~144

In the northern reaches of Europe lies a modest realm called the Sanc Kingdom, home to the Peacecraft lineage. It was here, in the spring of AC-130, that twin princesses were born: Princess Sabrina and Princess Katerina.

Both had hair like spun gold and clear blue eyes so vivid they seemed to reflect the sky itself. Yet for centuries, the royal family had held to a custom that forbade raising twin heirs together. Thus, the elder sister, Sabrina, remained in the kingdom, while the younger, Katerina, was sent away at just a few months old to Colony L-1C11234, once part of the Sanc Kingdom's own space territories.

For Katerina, the separation brought a kind of good fortune. The one who suffered more deeply was Sabrina, the heir apparent. She was subjected to rigorous instruction fit for the next queen, compelled to master the old-world etiquette of European courts. On top of that, the kingdom itself was in dire straits. Buffeted by the machinations of nearby European powers, the Sanc Kingdom found itself repeatedly dragged into conflicts. Revolutionary and rebel forces, locked in retreat, often fled to its borders, only for the United Earth Sphere Alliance to lay siege and transform the kingdom's land into yet another battleground.

Geopolitically, the kingdom was situated in a peninsula region of Europe, seemingly destined to bear the brunt of mainland forces and their sweeping campaigns. Rebels and revolutionaries, pushed to desperation, would attempt one last stand; in turn, the Alliance, with its overwhelming military might, would move to annihilate them.

The Sanc Kingdom, forced against its will to become a war zone, had little choice but to use what meager funds remained to sustain an army and join the fray. After each conflict, the vanquished parties or foreign powers would pay paltry reparations, from which the kingdom struggled to rebuild what had been ruined. With no abundant natural resources and an ever-faltering economy, this small realm teetered on the brink of poverty.

Still, the people never rose in revolt. They cherished the gentle Peacecraft dynasty, and young Princess Sabrina, whose radiant beauty inspired hope in a land so accustomed to devastation.

Growing up in such a kingdom confined Sabrina largely indoors, and she developed a reserved, quiet temperament, a "princess in a tower," so to speak. She cultivated a love for the arts, especially painting and music. Her rare smiles were said to glow with angelic warmth, yet her eyes often betrayed a quiet sorrow.

Her closest companion was a Norwegian Forest Cat, a black-and-white longhair, gifted to her on her thirteenth birthday. She named him "Somewhere," drawn from the opening lines of the old Judy Garland classic *Over the Rainbow*. Before long, as happens with many pets, people simply called him "Sam."

Perhaps cats can sense human loneliness. Whenever Sabrina, feeling wistful, sat at her piano, Sam would hop up on the left side of the keyboard, sprawling out and producing the first discordant notes. This always made her smile. Then, echoing a famous line from another bygone film, *Casablanca*, she would murmur, "Play it once, Sam," and let her fingers drift across the keys.

She did not strike up a jaunty jazz piece or *As Time Goes By*. Instead, as Sam let out a gentle meow, Sabrina would begin to play Chopin's *Nocturne No. 1* at a slightly slowed tempo, caressing each chord with a delicate sadness. Occasionally, Sam's shifting would spark a low, off-key thrum, but she paid it little mind. With her head bowed, Sabrina's performance felt like a melancholic nocturne in mourning of a world locked in ceaseless conflict, or perhaps a quiet lullaby meant to comfort the little cat dozing at her side.

Meanwhile, Princess Katerina, born the same day, led a carefree life on the space colony. Raised by the Darlian family, who governed L-1C11234, she basked in bright freedom and endless activity. Even as a young child, she rose at dawn to go horseback riding, enjoyed weekly excursions into open space, and mingled warmly with the colony's construction workers.

They referred to her simply as the "young lady of the Darlian household" and eagerly awaited her visits bearing cookies and chocolates. An oft-repeated tale claims that by the time she turned thirteen, Katerina was piloting a large construction craft, complete with manipulator arms, to help build a new spaceport. The Darlians, lenient by nature, merely offered mild admonitions and allowed their princess to remain as energetic and unrestrained as ever.

The diverging paths of these twin sisters, Sabrina and Katerina, may have stemmed from the stark contrast in their upbringings, one bound by strict courtly discipline, the other given near-limitless freedom.

Yet what truly shaped them were the worlds they beheld each day.

Sabrina grew up in a land often reduced to rubble, only to be patched together and destroyed again. Katerina thrived in a colony brimming with optimism, forging new frontiers as it expanded into space.

The difference between rebuilding a world doomed to repeated devastation and joyously building a world yet to come could hardly be greater. In time, the sisters' personalities, their actions, even the look in their eyes seemed to diverge so much that one would scarcely believe them twins at all.

Where one saw hope and gazed outward at each new possibility, the other, weighed down by tragedy, often cast her eyes downward. The same half-finished steel framework would appear entirely different through such vastly contrasting perspectives.

AC-145 SPRING

By the time Katerina turned fifteen, her lessons had always been overseen by an elderly female tutor. One day, this tutor informed the head of the Darlian household that she wished to "return to her homeland on Earth and enjoy a quiet retirement."

"I'll bring back the most promising teacher from the L-1 colony cluster to take my place," she added.

That teacher's name was Heero Yuy. Though still a college student, he had been working part-time as a high school lecturer. Reportedly, he had no single area of specialization. He excelled at subjects like chemistry and mathematics, yet he also had a deep appreciation for philosophy, the arts, and a wide range of other fields.

"He's a bit young for the job, isn't he?"

It raised concerns that the new tutor would be too close in age to Katerina.

"If I may speak freely," the older tutor said, looking thoroughly worn out, "Miss Katerina is so energetic that someone like me can hardly keep up."

The Darlian family recognized the truth in her words. After all, Katerina did have a rather wild streak for a princess. Besides, if they could provide financial support to a hardworking, gifted young scholar, that, too, seemed worthwhile.

A few days later, Heero Yuy appeared in Katerina's room. Each afternoon into early evening was set aside as her study period.

"Huh... so you're my new teacher?"

Katerina looked him up and down, as though taking his measure. At a certain angle, perhaps he was somewhat handsome, but his clothes

were unremarkable, his shoulders slight, and he generally gave off a frail impression. She thought the colony workers she knew were far more robust and appealing by comparison.

"I'm Heero Yuy. Pleased to meet you."

He was only four years older than she was.

"So tell me, Teacher. What exactly could someone as young as you possibly teach me?"

"I don't know," he said curtly. "What would you like to learn?"

"Nothing in particular... I don't need a tutor. My study program is more than enough."

After that, they spent the rest of their time in near silence. Katerina methodically worked through assignments on her computer, while Heero read a book he'd brought with him. When her allocated study hours ended, she dismissed him, having learned nothing at all from him that day.

The next day passed much the same. The day after, Katerina, exhausted from her early-morning riding practice, dozed off in her seat. If her new teacher had told her to wake up, she might have listened, yet he said nothing and continued quietly reading.

*

Heero Yuy lacked anything resembling passion. Even his college friends called him "the extreme rationalist." He seemed determined to avoid expending energy on unnecessary emotions, whether in his studies or in life. Almost never speaking, he breathed in a carefully controlled manner, as though striving to minimize any pointless rise in his own "heat entropy."

His meager pay as a temporary high school lecturer didn't cover his living expenses, so he had recently taken a job doing manual labor on the colony's exterior. Though the colony's centrifugal rotation offered a measure of gravity, there was no air in that workspace, making it a grueling environment. With his slight frame, it was only by being extremely "efficient" in every movement that he managed to persevere. And, in a vacuum, there was no point talking needlessly. That practicality suited him perfectly.

Apart from a small privileged class, the people of the colonies generally lived in hardship, though Earth was hardly better off. Still, if you believed in a brighter future, you could face each day with optimism. Six years earlier, in AC-139, there had been an attempt to establish a self-governing colonial body led by laborers. But the United

Earth Sphere Alliance refused to recognize it and, hinting at military intervention, forced the colonies to abandon that idea in under a year.

Even so, many colony residents remained good-humored and optimistic, insisting that "it's still better here, at least we don't have natural disasters." The pro-independence activists of that time took to speeches and demonstrations, but rarely resorted to terrorism or armed force. Perhaps it was because the Alliance's oppression was still just tolerable enough to endure.

Over the next five years, though, the Alliance incrementally increased its pressure on the colonies. Earth was plagued by endless terror attacks and conflicts, while out in space, a semblance of stability and peace lingered. The Alliance found this infuriating. They may have resented that people living safely in orbit dared demand rights for themselves.

This silent pressure on the colonies fed off the Alliance's mix of contempt and jealousy. Meanwhile, many anti-Alliance thinkers gathered at Heero's college; military police regularly hauled them off, never to be seen again. Most of these activists and philosophers were alumni, who then roped in brilliant younger students, creating a natural nexus that connected them to Heero's circle of acquaintances.

Eventually, student activists formed a clandestine group based at the college. One friend repeatedly asked Heero to join them, but he refused, always remaining disinterested. He had already decided such unauthorized underground activities were "pointless" and "wasteful." That friend, later known as Doctor J, the genius who helped develop both Tallgeese and the Gundams, remains something of a mystery regarding his precise involvement in those student activities.

Heero had made a point of blending into the background, believing it was the best way to be left alone. He especially disliked sacrificing his own time for unknown strangers without any reward. Tired of the constant recruitment attempts, he applied for a leave of absence from college. He had already settled on his thesis topic, and, being a scholarship student exempt from tuition, he had no second thoughts.

At about that time, news of the Darlian family's opening for a private tutor reached him...

*

A week passed this way.

The sum of words exchanged between them remained bare greetings.

Katerina found it tedious.

She could already tell her unresponsive tutor would never scold or guide her as her previous teacher had.

"I'd rather have the old lady back," she thought.

She gazed out the window. Heero kept reading. The colony's climate-control system sent a gentle, springlike breeze drifting by, setting the lacy curtains dancing in soft, billowing waves.

Thoroughly bored, Katerina turned her eyes back to him and asked, "Hey, Teacher, do you have a family?"

"My parents are dead. My older sister got married and moved to Earth."

He answered succinctly, so she pivoted fully to face him. A new question had popped into her mind about this unassuming figure who seemed to fade into the background of the room.

"Tell me, Teacher... why do we even exist out here in space?"

Still not looking up from his book, Heero responded in an even tone, "When you say 'why we exist,' do you mean our purpose as humans living in space? Or are you asking from a scientific and technological standpoint?"

"I'm... not sure. Maybe both?"

Without raising his gaze, he flipped a page and replied, "From a social Darwinist view, you might say humanity's expansion into space marks the next evolutionary step, a 'new awakening' of sorts. But from a purely scientific standpoint, the fact that humankind extended its living environment from Earth to the entire Earth Sphere is an achievement belonging to our species as a whole. You could argue there's no difference in value between those who remain on Earth and those who ventured into orbit."

"Amazing!" Katerina's eyes sparkled. "I don't understand a word you're saying!"

She leaned in, practically quivering with excitement. Heero finally closed his book and looked her way.

"So what are you asking?" he said, sounding almost resigned, yet he wouldn't ignore a student who'd shown sudden genuine interest. He started explaining himself piece by piece: clarifying each term, giving historical and social context, and then more context on top of that. Inevitably, the conversation stretched into a dense web of complicated ideas that left Katerina dazed.

Unable to stand it anymore, she interrupted, "So, in the end, does it have meaning or not?"

"There really isn't a tidy 'conclusion' for that," he responded.



"No conclusion at all?" Katerina's shoulders slumped in disappointment. Heero exhaled a slow sigh.

"Is a conclusion that important?" he asked.

"Huh?"

She blinked, confused. As far as she knew, reports and tests always hinged on having the right answer.

"It's more important to examine things from multiple angles, weigh those observations, keep thinking it through, and debate with other perspectives," he went on. "It's the conversation itself that counts."

"Conversation? That's the conclusion?"

"It might be. Or it might not," Heero said calmly. "In this sort of scenario, a 'conclusion' can be the same as shutting down your own thoughts. There's meaning in continuing to think."

"That's it, we do have meaning!" Katerina exclaimed.

"Uh... "

"Right? You said there's meaning in keeping our minds open. That's what living in space is all about, yes?"

"No, that's not exactly—"

Before either realized it, hours had slipped by. Their minds were like two gears of wildly different sizes, spinning fruitlessly without ever truly meshing. Soon enough, her study time ended.

"That's it for today," he said.

"Teacher, I'll see you tomorrow!" Katerina's eyes gleamed with fresh enthusiasm for this young man whose every other word baffled her.

"Oh... right," Heero replied, remembering, perhaps for the first time in ages, the odd satisfaction of genuine back-and-forth conversation.

The next day, Katerina started again with a simple question.

"Hey, Teacher, do you think God really exists?"

"Well," Heero answered, "some say God doesn't exist yet is necessary, while others say God does exist but isn't needed. It's contradictory, but from a metaphysical point of view, both lines of thought can coexist."

"Wonderful! I have no idea what you just said!"

"That's actually a good thing. 'Knowing that you know nothing' is more valuable than most forms of knowledge."

"So... why aren't people equal? Is it because there's no God... or because there is one? They say we're all equal in God's eyes, right?"

Once again, as on the previous day, their conversation flowed on mismatched tracks. The day after, they had a similar back-and-forth. In the days to come, they strayed into discussions of everything from philosophy and abstract concepts to historical customs, contemporary

case studies, modern space science, and even classical literature. From an outside perspective, these talks might have seemed downright nonsensical, yet they were never meaningless.

Between them, a kind of chemical reaction of values was already taking place.

For Heero, he began to realize how "inefficient" his so-called "efficient" approach really was. He'd believed that brief, straightforward comments conveyed understanding, but it often had the opposite effect. In avoiding "waste" or "meaningless efforts," he'd also stopped truly deliberating or exploring. Though he used to prize "motivation" over "result," he found that somewhere along the way, he'd slipped into a utilitarian rut, ceasing to think too deeply at all.

For Katerina, a brand-new world opened up. She felt an infinite sense of possibility. Surely there was meaning in living out here in space. Likewise, there might be meaning for those on Earth, too. Whether on Earth or in a colony, both existed in the same universe. Each had its own value system. And to go even further: if people can discover meaning in simply "being alive," then each individual's perspective matters more than the specific place or history that shapes them. No time is ever truly wasted. No thought is inherently worthless. Even emptiness can hold value, just like the vacuum of space itself.

It's not that Katerina had perfectly articulated all these ideas at the time. But accounts from later years indicate she "felt" something of this sort in her heart back then.

Likewise, Heero Yuy would eventually draft the famous "Heart of Space Declaration." He later revealed that a letter Katerina wrote during those days, expressing her own youthful feelings, served as the catalyst for that declaration.

As for whether these two ever developed deeper feelings for each other...

For the record, that letter wasn't a love note. Even as the years passed, Katerina Peacecraft and Heero Yuy seemed to remain teacher and student, at least on the surface. Of course, one can only speculate what truly lay beneath.

AC-145 SUMMER

A new conflict had flared up around the Sanc Kingdom on Earth once again.

This time, an entire rebel fleet, dozens of vessels, had sailed right into the kingdom's bay, imposing a naval blockade on a massive scale. In response, the Alliance prepared to mobilize its full might on land, sea, and air, setting the stage for another sweeping encirclement and annihilation campaign.

By this point, it was practically a foregone conclusion that the Sanc Kingdom would be ravaged. Yet in the midst of these grim prospects, something unexpected occurred.

In a stunning turn of events, a special forces unit from the rebel army managed to land and storm the royal palace, seizing it in a swift takeover and taking members of the royal family hostage. Because of this, the Alliance suddenly found itself unable to act.

Though the Sanc Kingdom was only a minor state, it had been cooperative with the Alliance, and the Alliance forces could not afford to casually abandon a royal family that had supported them. If they did, they would betray the trust of every other cooperative nation. Unity in the Alliance would crumble, possibly destroying it from within.

Thus, the Alliance and the rebels were locked in deadlock, each side hesitant to ignite a full-scale battle.

Only Sabrina and her cat, Sam, happened to be visiting the neighboring Marquis Werridge at the time. Unbeknownst to them, this meant they avoided the sudden calamity. When news reached Sabrina, she was aghast.

She could not return to her homeland in such turmoil.

"Oh... Father, Mother..." she whispered.

"Princess Sabrina, as difficult as this is, you must take refuge at the Darlian household on L-1 Colony," Marquis Werridge urged.

The Marquis was a member of the European aristocracy linked to the Romefeller Foundation, he was, in fact, the grandfather of the individual who would later become an important supporter of Relena Peacecraft.

"You want me to go into space?"

"Yes. Before long, northern Europe will be swallowed by ferocious fighting. I fear your family cannot escape unharmed."

"That can't be..."

"There is more. My sources say rebel collaborators hide in many European courts. Likely someone in your royal circle acted as an informant, allowing the rebels to overrun the palace so easily."

It was almost too much to believe. But given the kingdom's dire finances of late, perhaps it was not impossible that desperate times had turned even close aides against them.

"I'm afraid there's another rumor that's even harder to speak aloud," the Marquis went on. "They say the Peacecraft line itself is secretly helping the rebels... Princess Sabrina, there is nowhere safe for you on Earth."

Sabrina had little choice at this point. If the ancient Peacecraft bloodline died out here, it would be a tragedy for the kingdom. She realized now, with more clarity than ever, the importance placed upon continuity and tradition, things she had heard all her life.

Her sister Katerina was on L-1 with the Darlians. She was the only relative Sabrina was certain was still safe. There was no one else to turn to.

Over the course of several days, Sabrina traveled by ordinary passenger car, rather than a conspicuous luxury limousine, to reach the spaceport outside Brussels. The previous night's rain had cleared, leaving the early-summer greenery vividly radiant. Clouds were nowhere to be seen, and the sky beyond the sunroof looked a piercing shade of blue. Despite the beauty, Sabrina's thoughts circled anxiously around her family and her endangered kingdom.

A rainbow arched ahead of the windshield.

"Somewhere over the rainbow..." she sang softly.

Even in such a small whisper, the melody gave her a fragile sliver of courage.

"Please don't worry," Marquis Werridge murmured from beside her. "Space will be your realm of new possibilities."

Contrary to expectations, the Brussels spaceport had been placed under martial law. Other European royals and nobles, hoping to flee to space, were converging there in droves, and the upper ranks of the Alliance would not allow them all to evacuate. After all, who knew how many might be rebel collaborators? Moreover, it seemed the Alliance leadership scorned the idea of these privileged classes seeking only their own safety.

"That's exactly why the rebels can take advantage of you!" the officers fumed, shouting at frightened lords and ladies, and Sabrina watched it all from inside her car, trembling.

At this rate, she would never reach space.

Just then, the Marquis returned.

"I've spoken with Duke Cinquant Khushrenada of the Romefeller Foundation," he told her. "Apparently there's a special flight going out on an 'Earth Delegation' to visit the colonies."

"And we can join them?" she asked.

"Yes..."

At that moment, Sam was dozing on Sabrina's lap, but the Marquis gently lifted him away.

"I'm sorry. We can't bring him with us into space."

"I understand... Please take care of Sam."

Sam stirred, letting out a soft "myaa" in protest.

"I'll be back soon," Sabrina said, stroking his chin. "Be good and wait for me, all right?"

"Meow, meow!"

Up to that point, Sabrina had held herself together bravely, but seeing Sam's sorrowful face brought tears to her eyes for the very first time.

Cinquant Khushrenada welcomed Sabrina with a refined, courtly smile.

"They say your beauty is legendary, and I see the rumors are true," he said.

"Thank you for receiving me," Sabrina answered, inclining her head.

"We're set to visit the Winner family in the L-4 Colony first, then make our way to L-2 and the L-1 colony cluster in order. It may take a little while, but I promise I'll see you safely to Colony C11234."

Even in Sabrina's worried gaze, the middle-aged gentleman stood out as gracious and poised, someone who was expected to become a high-ranking figure in the Romefeller Foundation in the near future.

He would, in fact, become its charismatic representative a few years later. His daughter, Angelina, would be born seven years after that, and his grandson, Treize, would come into the world twenty-six years down the line.

Because the Alliance higher-ups dared not oppose the Romefeller Foundation, and this "Earth Delegation" to the colonies had been scheduled long before the recent rebellion, there was no legitimate way to interfere. Thus, word was put out that Sabrina would travel as Duke Khushrenada's niece, and she was waved through to board the shuttle.

As the craft lifted off and exited the atmosphere, Sabrina saw Earth spread out below for the first time in her life. Its magnificence was something she would never forget.

Then she beheld the boundless expanse of space, a silent vista unlike anything she had known in her cloistered life at court.

But the feeling in her heart was neither giddy excitement nor dread. It was calm.

Night... She felt as though she were drifting through a timeless, peaceful night that went on forever, and the thought comforted her deeply.

In her mind, she began to play that familiar nocturne, this time for dear Sam, the cat she had left behind.

AC-145 AUTUMN

The visit to the Winner family on L-4 Colony went off without a hitch, and the inspection of L-2 Colony likewise concluded without incident. But just before boarding the shuttle for the L-1 colonies, Sabrina felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, Cinquant Khushrenada was calling for her.

"You could remain here on L-2," he said quietly. "But if anyone finds out, our plans will all be for nothing."

"Plans?" she asked, blinking in confusion.

"Princess Sabrina... please take this."

He handed her an astro-suit designed for use in open space.

"I made a promise to my old friend, Marquis Werridge," Cinquant went on in a hushed voice. "And I intend to keep it. You see, this shuttle will be destroyed by an explosion before it reaches the L-1 colonies. So, just before that happens, you must board an escape pod and wait to be rescued."

"Destroyed?"

He confirmed his own astro-suit's readiness.

"Yes. It will be blamed on an act of terrorism by activists from the colonies who boarded at L-2."

"I don't understand..."

Sabrina felt utterly lost.

"If you already know about the bomb, shouldn't you be trying to stop it?"

"It's a setup, a ruse. Earth needs a convenient enemy in space to unite against. That's the story we're spinning."

"I still... don't understand."

Cinquant sighed.

"Your kingdom has now fallen completely to the rebel forces. They've launched invasions into neighboring states. It appears the Peaceraft royal family has stooped to collaborating with the rebels."

"My father... my mother...?"

The revelation that the Sanc Kingdom had betrayed the Alliance made Sabrina's own position more perilous than ever. In that moment, she knew instinctively: there was no going back to Earth.

With a somber look, Cinquant asked, "Have you ever wondered why, when Earth is supposed to be unified, it remains so fractured, why the fighting never stops?"

"That doesn't mean we should paint the people in the colonies as villains," she murmured.

"I agree. But if Earth can't rally together in this moment by creating a conflict with space, its ruin is assured."

Sabrina could easily picture Earth being laid to waste. All she had to do was imagine the once-lovely streets of the Sanc Kingdom, reduced to rubble, and multiply that image across every continent.

"Yes, but..."

Wouldn't this just lead to more chaos? she thought. And with both the rebels and space as enemies, the Alliance stood little chance at all. It seemed like a recipe for disaster.

"Don't worry..." Cinquant said. "No real military power exists in the colonies. And the rebel forces will soon be suppressed. It won't take much effort."

"Even so..."

Down below, members of the "Earth Delegation" boarded the shuttle in amiable spirits.

"What about those people?"

"They're from a more old-fashioned branch of the Foundation," he replied. "When a new age dawns, sacrifices sometimes become unavoidable."

Sabrina still did not feel convinced, but she could see no real option except to follow Cinquant's lead.

"This is what I call 'the darkness before creation,'" he remarked. His unwavering eyes and resolute bearing left no room for disagreement. "You said C11234 Colony, yes? The bomb is set to detonate just before that. I'll make sure you get to the escape capsule in time."

He boarded the shuttle with surprising calm. Yet all the while, Sabrina's thoughts spiraled around a single idea: Perhaps I should die along with it.

All these years, she had lived for the sake of the Sanc Kingdom, and if her homeland truly belonged to the rebels now, what point was there in going on? What meaning could remain in bearing the tragedy of the Peacecraft legacy when everything she'd cherished lay in ruins?

The shuttle left the spaceport behind, gliding away until the Moon lay below them. Beyond the Moon's far side waited the L-1 cluster. Through the window, the Moon's surface spread out in grim gray, a

patchwork of countless craters, so barren and lifeless it was like glimpsing "the world after death."

Sabrina kept her gaze fixed on that sight, strengthening her resolve. Dying might be the only way to find peace. Dying might be the only way to be free. Slowly, painfully, such thoughts took hold in her mind.

At last, the L-1 colonies came into view, looming closer. She remained by the window until a calm voice spoke behind her. Turning, she saw Cinquant standing there with a soft smile.

"Shall we make our preparations?"

*

That same day, Heero Yuy had a day off from tutoring and was working his usual construction job, assembling more of the colony. He had a bit of financial breathing room now but kept at this labor as a way to stay in shape. In truth, those aimless conversations with Katerina had become a source of vitality for him.

After more than half a year on the job, he was well adjusted, and his chest and shoulders had grown noticeably stronger. Lately he'd been cleared to work outside in open space with an astro-suit. Today, he primarily handled materials transfer, operating a large construction machine equipped with manipulators. He was just getting comfortable piloting it.

Then, out of nowhere, Katerina, also in an astro-suit, popped into view on his main monitor, clinging to the front of his machine. When he opened the comm line, she greeted him with her usual bright voice.

"Teacher, how's it going?"

"Don't get in my way."

She only grinned wider.

"I was lonely not seeing your face."

"Go back," he muttered.

"By the way, that conversation we had two days ago about evolution was fascinating!" she said cheerfully.

"Glad to hear it."

"If, as Darwin suggests, species adapt to their environment, then we humans living here in space might someday evolve into a new type of humanity, right?"

"That'd be a matter of dozens of generations. Just because we live out here doesn't mean we'll suddenly develop inheritable traits. Besides, it's dangerous to even give birth in space, didn't you read those reports? Anyway, new research on DNA suggests—"

He scowled. "Why am I standing here lecturing? Katerina, move away! I have work to do."

"Huh? What's that?" she said suddenly, looking past him. She had noticed a shuttle in the distance, from which two points of light were detaching.

"What?"

Heero aimed his monitor at the same spot. At that instant, the shuttle itself vanished in a blinding flash.

"An explosion?!"

"This is bad!"

He activated the manipulator arms, pulling Katerina closer and using the machine's bulk to shield her. A few shards from the blast came flying, impacting the craft's exterior. Without that protection, she might well have been fatally struck.

"Those lights must be escape capsules," Heero said. Quickly, he brought up his manual for space operations on the monitor to refresh himself on the emergency guidelines. "I knew it."

He read the line instructing that "if you find an escape capsule, commence immediate rescue." Of the two lights, one veered toward D11587, while the other drifted toward C11234 Colony.

Leaving Katerina behind, Heero accelerated his construction machine in pursuit of the capsule headed for C11234.

"Attention, first capsule," he said into the comm. "Please respond! Pull the retro-thrust lever, if you keep accelerating, I can't rescue you!"

There was no reply. At first, he thought maybe the capsule was unmanned, but its subtle course changes suggested someone inside was deliberately veering away. Heero fired a rescue cable from his vehicle, snagging the escape pod's thruster section, and used every last bit of propellant to slow it down.

Over the comm, he heard a faint voice:

"...Leave me...please...don't bother..."

He thought he recognized that voice somehow, similar to someone else's.

"...I want to die..." it whispered.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he shouted, uncharacteristically expending all that "unnecessary energy." "If you really wanted to die, you shouldn't have bothered escaping!"

He popped open his machine's hatch and crawled along the cable toward the capsule. In the process, he banged his own battery box, disabling his radio. Unaware that his transmitter had gone dead, he kept yelling.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but there's no way I'm letting you throw your life away!"

No response. Heero grabbed the external release lever. "You had your radio on, so you must be wearing a helmet, right?" He waited, but naturally no reply came.

He braced himself and unsealed the hatch. Inside, he found a single female survivor, wearing a proper astro-suit. Relief flooded him. Spotting the retro-thrust lever, he yanked it as hard as he could, slowing the capsule to a stop.

The visor on the woman's helmet was set to mirror mode, so they couldn't see each other's faces.

"You okay? Can you stand? What happened?" Heero bombarded her with questions, only to realize she wasn't responding at all. Checking his suit, he finally noticed the broken battery box. He was running dangerously low on air.

He hurried back to retrieve a spare. Taking the woman by the hand, he guided her to the construction machine. She didn't appear to be unconscious, but she neither resisted nor spoke.

Of course, that woman was Sabrina.

*

Sabrina was bewildered. Why was this person, who had suddenly gone mute and seemed determined to save her, willing to do so much? She couldn't fathom his motive. And then, faintly, she heard what seemed like a hallucination over the comm:

"Teacher, are you okay? Come on, answer me!"

It was a voice much like her own, Katerina's voice, though Sabrina had no way of knowing that. She felt a knocking sound on her helmet, as if someone were trying to adjust the frequency or volume, and through that static distortion, she picked up something like Sam's gentle "meow" from Earth.

"Sam..." Tears welled up in her eyes. All the sorrow she'd been bottling up burst free in one rush.

"I want to see Sam again..."

She recalled the lush green of Earth, its vast blue sky, the splendid rainbow she had once gazed upon. She realized she did not truly want to die, not yet. She had to return to Sam. She had to thank the person who'd saved her.

"...Thank you," she murmured. "My name is..."

She composed herself enough to offer a proper introduction.

"My name is Sabrina Peacecraft... and you are...?"

Slowly, she extended a hand toward the one who had rescued her.

*

Hearing the name over the radio, Katerina was astonished.

"Sabrina? Peacecraft?!"

She had never actually met her older sister, but Katerina certainly knew that name.

Nocturn in Mourning
Peacecraft File 2

AC-145 WINTER

In the region around the L-1 colony cluster, the Earth Delegation shuttle explosion was officially announced by the United Earth Sphere Alliance as an act of terrorism carried out by extremist colonists. Duke Cinquant Khushrenada, the sole publicly acknowledged survivor, expressed his regret that “the path to peaceful coexistence between Earth and space has been severed,” adding that a permanent Alliance garrison in the colonies might now be necessary. As for Sabrina Peacecraft, who should, by all accounts, have been the second survivor, media reports claimed she perished along with the other passengers when the shuttle blew apart.

History, in truth, had long been filled with ornamentation and deceit, shaped by the pretty lies best suited to those in power. Even before this incident, but certainly by AC-145, fact and fabrication often blurred in service to a convenient narrative. Though Earth and the colonies would come into sharper conflict after this so-called terror attack, the entire catalyst was contrived from the start.

Meanwhile, the standoff between rebel forces and the UESA in the northern Sanc Kingdom persisted. Despite minor skirmishes on land that seesawed back and forth, and a naval blockade in the kingdom’s waters going on half a year, neither side could deliver a decisive blow.

It was at this point that a particular catchphrase, “phrase of the times,” took root. Though it was little more than a fleeting fad, people clung to it as if it were some immutable truth. Historically, such “phrases” had often emerged and led the public astray, and in the AC-era, that phrase was:

“Early resolution.”

This was a form of simplistic, ends-justify-the-means logic born of mental laziness. Naturally, an urgent crisis must be resolved as swiftly as possible if it’s rapidly worsening. But in a stalemate that allows slow, potentially positive change, there’s no need for a rushed conclusion. In concrete terms, the argument went something like this:

“If the war’s to continue anyway, casualties are inevitable, so we might as well use a weapon of mass destruction to eradicate the rebel forces all at once.”

Such thinking utterly missed the point. Yet many people believed it originated in their own independent reasoning. Public sentiment began to place more value on “finishing the war” than on protecting human lives. The media, eager to cater to the mood of the masses, carelessly fueled cries for an “early resolution.”

In secret, the top brass of the UESA decided to launch region-specific special “nuclear warheads” from satellites orbiting Earth.

“Launch time set for 00:00 on November 27, Colony Standard Time.”

This highest-level classified command never leaked outside official channels.

Bewitched by the superstition that “sooner is better,” people remained blind to their own complicity as aggressors. Conclusion-driven thinking allowed no broader perspective, no progress, no imagination. Once robbed of imagination, a person can only place value on outcomes, a sad state of mind indeed, and one that breeds a grave sort of guilt.

*

Having survived the shuttle incident, Sabrina was taken in by the Darlian household. Unfortunately, the Darlians were no longer wealthy. Their once-fine mansion and extensive lands were mortgaged, and within a few months, they would have to relinquish them. The root cause was that their home nation, the Sanc Kingdom, had fallen under rebel control, prompting the UESA to impose crippling new taxes.

Additionally, the colony’s middle class had mandated “wealth redistribution,” dismantling long-held privileges of the upper classes. The Darlians, historically a tolerant and accommodating family, accepted every demand, willingly surrendering their assets.

A sudden collapse ensued.

Katerina had no choice but to give up her morning horse rides and weekly spacewalks. Even her beloved horse found its way to a new owner. Having lost so much, they could no longer afford a private tutor. Hence, Heero Yuy would be dismissed at the end of the month.

Katerina desperately wished otherwise, but Heero agreed. He had never truly done much “tutoring” in the traditional sense and felt guilty receiving a salary under false pretenses. A subtle loneliness sprouted in Katerina’s heart. She would not realize until much later that this feeling was the seed of something akin to love.

Sabrina, meanwhile, breathed an entirely different air from the rest of the household. She had closed herself off, playing piano relentlessly. She chose Chopin’s *Revolutionary Étude*, or sometimes the more difficult Mazurkas, requiring utter concentration on the keys if one hoped to capture their swift, dynamic spirit. But in her case, the

performances were technical rather than emotional, as though something in her was stifled.

It seemed she wanted to erase her memories: her country, her parents, the people who died in the shuttle explosion... and perhaps even her own identity, which now felt like no one's at all. Yet the more she lost herself in the music, the more vividly those lost faces returned to her. Sinking into that negative spiral, she clung even harder to her endless loop of piano practice, drifting further from those around her.

Now and again, in her almost trance-like state, she heard voices that seemed to seep through the walls. Although she struck the keyboard in a fortissimo passage, she could still catch the heated tones of Katerina and Heero Yuy talking in the next room. Their urgent conversation, tinged with the sense that time was running out on their short-lived relationship, echoed loudly enough that even Sabrina noticed.

"I don't recall Immanuel Kant's Perpetual Peace ever outright saying 'lies are forbidden,'" Katerina insisted.

"Kant establishes the idea in his foundations of metaphysical morals: 'One must never lie under any circumstance.' Obviously, that extends to his notion of peace. True peace requires both a noble purpose and a dutiful motivation. You can't cloak it in falsehood or condone blood-soaked means of warfare in its pursuit. If peace is merely the 'result,' it has no value."

Sabrina stopped playing. Drawn in, she followed the voices into the other room. The moment she entered, she questioned them.

"Could you please explain? I understand that 'peace' is morally correct. But doesn't that make achieving peace, by any means necessary, even more crucial?"

"So, if you can bring peace through violence, you think that's justified?" Heero asked.

"Yes..." Sabrina replied in a subdued voice.

Heero beckoned.

"Come in. You're mistaken."

Just before his final lesson ended, he found himself with two students.

"I am mistaken!" Sabrina's eyes filled with tears. "Of course I'm wrong!"

She threw herself against Heero's chest, sobbing uncontrollably, unleashing a storm of raw emotion he had never witnessed in her.

"I want to see Sam... I just want to see Sam again," she choked out.

"Sam...?" Heero repeated, puzzled.

Sabrina's sole emotional lifeline remained her beloved cat, left behind on Earth. Katerina could sympathize with that part of her sister's grief, but watching Sabrina cry against Heero's chest stirred unease. Her usual bright expression vanished, replaced by a dark flicker of jealousy.

"Even though we share the same face, Sabrina is an angel from Earth... while I'm just some waif abandoned in space..."

In that instant, Katerina sensed the truth: her "freedom" was, in fact, its own form of bondage.

*

On the surface, Sabrina and Katerina behaved like friendly sisters, but beneath that veneer lay a simmering competitiveness, perhaps even enmity neither wanted to admit. It bordered on a form of familial resentment. They never shared a bedroom. Indeed, though their rooms were side by side, neither came to visit the other. They never passed the night in conversation, nor did they try to console or understand each other's feelings.

No words could bridge the gulf between them. Worrying over their homeland, grieving for their parents, such thoughts seemed bound to end in sighs and silence. The rift between them seemed impossible to mend.

Yet Katerina remembered something Heero Yuy had taught her: if we truly believe there is meaning in living, then each person's viewpoint matters, independent of their history, location, or environment. She decided to set aside the notion that Sabrina was her twin sister, to see her simply as another girl in need of care, and mustered the courage to knock on Sabrina's door.

"Sabrina, I'd like to talk to you!"

The unassuming older sister blinked in surprise.

"What are your dreams? What do you want to be someday?"

Heero had once told Katerina that a person's present worth is revealed in "the future they imagine for themselves."

Sabrina only shook her head.

"I'm...not really alive anymore."

"That's only on the record!" Katerina said sharply, refusing to hide her frustration. "You can breathe, you can cry, you can still fall in love!"

"And you, Katerina?" Sabrina asked quietly. "What do you want to be?"

Katerina gave her answer without hesitation.

“An astronaut! I want to dash all around space.”

“But you’re a girl,” Sabrina noted softly.

“That doesn’t matter!”

“What if it’s impossible?”

Sabrina’s question was a coldly realistic one. With the Darlians’ finances in shambles, Katerina could no longer afford bold life pursuits. Becoming an astronaut, especially in the private sector, required a fortune in tuition. While joining the United Earth Sphere Alliance military might spare her some of those costs, Katerina had no desire to be a soldier. Thinking of a backup plan, she said, “Maybe I could be... a teacher. Although, with my grades, that might be a stretch.”

“No, it isn’t!” Sabrina assured her with an encouraging smile. “You have conversations with Heero about such difficult topics, of course you can be a teacher.”

She paused, then confessed a small dream of her own future:

“I’d like to teach children how to play the piano and live a quiet life...”

“That’s completely possible, isn’t it?” Katerina exclaimed. “After all, you’re not a princess anymore.”

“R-right. Yes...you’re right.”

Many girls enjoy being “a girl.” All the while, they constantly battle that fact in their own hearts.

“Sabrina,” Katerina said, “I think I see you differently now.”

“Katerina... You’re far more wonderful than I realized.”

They locked eyes in a moment of silent understanding, hoping they might truly trust each other from now on.

*

Heero paid a visit to his old college after many months on leave, seeking out his friend Jay Null.

“Well, look who showed up, Heero Yuy,” Jay greeted him.

The man’s underground lab was downright eerie. Old-fashioned blackboards were scrawled with inscrutable equations, and the walls bore a retro-styled stag’s head. Beneath it, a corkboard lay plastered with random notes, while piles of books, documents, and data chips teetered in unstable towers, some tumbling across the floor. There was hardly space to stand.

No one knew precisely what Jay’s field was or what he researched.

“There’s a meeting the day after tomorrow,” he informed Heero. “Everyone’ll be thrilled to see you.”

“That’s not why I came,” Heero replied.



Jay sighed in mock disappointment.

“What a shame.”

Heero had heard plenty of unsavory rumors about Jay: that he owned vast patents on fusion reactor engines, yet also cheated on taxes; that he funded his research via hacking; that he misused cutting-edge school equipment to build something in secret; that he was so brilliant even the colony’s underground organizations considered him dangerous. All hearsay, but Heero paid it little mind.

“What exactly are you working on now?” he asked.

“A new type of life form, using silicon instead of carbon. Just a simple experiment...”

No sooner had he spoken than a small explosion rocked the lab.

“Dammit! Another failure!” Jay yelled, scrambling to beat out the flames on a nearby desk.

Clearing his throat, Heero held up a small plastic bag of cat hair.

“I’d like you to clone a cat from this,” he said flatly.

Jay, in the midst of his frantic firefighting, glanced back.

“Sure, just leave it somewhere over there. I’ll bring it when we meet the day after tomorrow.”

“You can really do it?”

“Of course I can. There’s nothing I can’t do,” Jay said, eyes gleaming.

*

Two days later, in the afternoon, Jay arrived at the Darlian estate with something that looked like an airplane painted pure white, seventeen meters long, and loaded onto an enormous trailer. It resembled a twin-headed pteranodon more than any conventional aircraft.

“Rejoice, Heero,” he called out. “I’ve brought the merchandise you asked for.”

“What on earth is this?” Heero asked, eyeing the monstrous shape with suspicion.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s the ‘Wyvern.’”

“I asked you for a Norwegian Forest Cat. I’m pretty sure the young lady here didn’t order some bizarre two-headed flying beast.”

Jay clicked his tongue.

“You really have no sense of what’s practical, do you?”

“Coming from you, that’s pretty rich,” Heero shot back.

“Listen, what you brought me was a single cat hair. Likely snagged on the hem of the young lady’s skirt, right?”

Heero shrugged. "You guessed it."

"That means no root follicle. If there's no living cell, I can't simply decode the DNA in two days. It's impossible."

"So you're saying you can't do it?"

"I told you already, nothing is impossible for me," Jay said with a broad grin. "Which is why I decided to employ artificial intelligence."

"Artificial intelligence?" Heero echoed, frowning.

The Wyvern was moved to the manor's backyard, an area close to both Sabrina's and Katerina's rooms.

"Originally," Jay continued, "this Wyvern needed a servo mechanism for solo flight. It has to operate free of a pilot, free of ground crews, free of a flight controller micromanaging its every move. The system that allows it to land safely anywhere, under any conditions, that entire 'situational awareness' piece, we're delegating to AI."

Heero raised an eyebrow, genuinely impressed.

"You're saying you're *that* well-versed in advanced AI?"

Jay shook his head.

"Wish I could claim all the credit. The programming's mostly done by my teammate here, Thomas Currant."

A pale, bespectacled young man emerged from the trailer, eyes darting nervously. He peered at Heero through thick lenses.

"My name is Thomas Currant. I specialize in early-stage programming for quantum computers, extending genetic algorithms to create a system that can 'assess its surroundings instantly and perform high-speed calculations.' Once we refine it, we'll have what we call the 'ZERO System.'"

Heero folded his arms.

"I'm having trouble seeing why you'd need an entire next-generation AI system just to clone a single cat."

Jay sighed theatrically.

"This is why amateurs are such a pain. Currant, did you connect the AI to the estate's computer?"

"All set."

"Then let's boot it up."

Nicknamed the Wyvern, this machine bore an uncanny resemblance to what would later be known as the mobile armor form of the Gundam Epyon. Near the end of AC-195, Doctor J, then in captivity on the White Fang battleship Libra, caught wind of a Gundam called Epyon that had destroyed the fortress Barge. Studying Treize's blueprints, Doctor J noticed the design for a "mobile armor" flight mode. According to one technical officer's later account, Doctor J had mused aloud:

"I appreciate the design philosophy of making the Gundam transform into a wyvern, following my Bird mode... But 'mobile armor'... could they have picked a duller name?"

With a weary shrug, Dr. J reportedly added, "That flamboyant loser Treize Khushrenada must've dreamed up the design, but he sure lacks flair when it comes to naming."

Such anecdotes, of course, drifted out long after the fact.

*

Before long, Jay and Currant made their way to Sabrina's room, where they began inputting the cat's data into her terminal.

"We already have basic information on Norwegian Forest Cats," Currant explained. "Now, if you'll provide the specific traits that made your cat unique..."

"Wait, but...", Sabrina hesitated.

Without missing a beat, Currant clacked away at the keyboard. "Your cat's name?"

"Somewhere..."

Jay let out a little whoop. "That's perfect! We should call this AI system 'Somewhere,' as in, it'll land 'somewhere' safe, rather than 'ZERO.' What do you think?"

"I always just called him 'Sam,' though," Sabrina said quietly.

"...Ah, never mind," Jay replied, deflating a bit as Currant pulled up a photo of Sam and traced it into the computer. Then Jay gave Sabrina a mischievous grin.

"You know, we've heard quite a bit about you," he said.

"Really?" she asked, startled.

"Sure. You used to drop by the outer-wall construction site a lot, remember? We were working part-time out there."

"Oh, and I loved those homemade cookies," Currant chimed in with a bashful smile.

"That would've been my sister, Katerina," Sabrina corrected gently.

"Ah, my mistake."

That was all it took for the conversation to grind to an awkward halt. Jay attempted to smooth it over, laughing too loudly.

"Well, if you're twins, a little confusion is bound to happen!"

"Exactly," Currant agreed.

Turning back to the keyboard, Currant spent several minutes peppering Sabrina with questions, making tiny adjustments at every step. Finally, he pressed Enter with a flourish.

“All done. Now, just treat this simulated ‘Sam’ the way you always did. It’ll gradually learn how to mimic your real Sam’s behavior.”

When Sabrina typed “Sam,” the cat on the monitor answered, “Meow,” in the very voice and expression of the pet she’d left behind on Earth.

“I’ve missed you so much, Sam,” she murmured.

“Meow, meow,” chirped the tiny cat image.

Standing behind her, Heero and Katerina watched with a hint of unease, wondering whether this was truly the right thing. Katerina couldn’t help commenting:

“Isn’t this basically one of those old digital pet games?”

“Not even close!” Carrant protested, sounding slightly offended. “This Sam can experience genuine emotions!”

He launched into a vigorous lecture, rattling off specialized terminology. The gist was that real intelligence forms composite, often ambiguous judgments based on countless subtle cues. If you notice a cranky old man in a café, how exactly do you sense his irritation? A scowling brow or a snappy attitude might be a clue, but your mind also gathers countless micro-signals: the way he rattles his cup, how his newspaper is crinkled, maybe restless gestures or oddly loud sighs, or the hush that falls when the café staff tries to avoid him. Human beings read these things holistically, often without even realizing it.

By contrast, older computers might measure quantifiable data, heart rate, blood pressure, any number of physiological signals, yet not truly grasp the emotion behind them. The same goes for soothing a lonely child: no fancy speech required, just staying close can be enough. But for a computer to “know” the difference between a quiet presence and a meaningless physical gesture, it has to recognize intangible emotions like loneliness and anxiety. That requires immense data, countless interactions, and time.

In other words, real empathy, “sharing the feelings of another,” demands the power of a quantum-class computer system that can continually refine itself. Carrant talked on and on, but Katerina and Heero could only absorb about half before getting lost.

Eventually, Jay, in his usual booming manner, threw an arm around Carrant’s shoulders, gesturing that it was time to go.

“See ya, Heero! Tonight’s gathering is at nine in the subterranean Third Auditorium, don’t you dare bail on us!”

“Uh... right,” Heero replied, brow furrowed. “But what about the Wyvern? You’re just leaving it here?”

"We'll keep it parked until we can develop a replacement AI. Besides, we couldn't hide that thing on campus any longer. This kills two birds with one stone, huh? Yuk yuk yuk!"

With that cackling laugh, Jay and Currant climbed back into their transport, departing as abruptly as they had come. It felt as though a typhoon had swept through the Darlian estate.

"I've got a hunch Jay just wanted to ditch it," Heero remarked. "If the authorities find this monster here, it'll blow up into a massive scandal."

Katerina gave a weak shrug.

"You always seemed eccentric, but your friends are on another level."

"Your assessment's not far off," he agreed with a sigh.

They spent the rest of the afternoon covering the ominous machine with a large tarp. Their lessons for the day were, inevitably, canceled.

*

That night, Sabrina decided to treat the digital version of Sam to one of her cherished nocturnes, something she hadn't played in a long while. Leaning toward the monitor, she whispered:

"Play it once, Sam."

"Meow," came the gentle reply, and on-screen Sam curled up contentedly, just like the real cat had always done. Even the way he rolled over mid-performance was uncanny in its accuracy.

Sabrina's nocturne went on and on, filling the quiet night with a gentle hush. Little by little, a sense of peace returned to her, a soothing calm she had thought lost. When she finished playing the nocturne, her fingers glided seamlessly into Chopin's *Waltz No. 2*, the so-called *Grand Waltz Brillante*.

Outside, in the Darlian estate's back garden, Heero and Katerina had just finished covering the hulking Wyvern with a protective sheet. From where they stood, the lilting strains of piano drifted clearly into the mild evening air. Enchanted by the dance-like rhythm, Katerina suddenly turned to Heero, adopting the perfect formal posture she had seen Sabrina use.

"Teacher, would you do me the honor of a dance?"

Heero let out a slightly embarrassed laugh.

"Normally, a man's supposed to do the asking, isn't he?"

Katerina smiled.

"Oh? Has there ever been a single moment when you actually thought of me as a girl?"



"This is the first," he admitted.

And, though he didn't speak it aloud, he suspected it would also be the last. He planned to quit as Katerina's tutor after tonight. It wasn't just the strain on the Darlian family's finances; Heero worried that his ties to Jay and Thomas Currant, both deep in underground activism, might cause trouble here.

Still, for this one final evening, he allowed himself a moment of uncharacteristic indulgence. He took Katerina's hand, guiding her into a gentle waltz beneath the star-laden sky. They stepped lightly over the grass, as though time itself had slowed to let them dance forever. In reality, it was awkward to move so smoothly across uneven turf.

"Someday," Katerina said, half-laughing, "I want to dance with you at a real party, on a proper floor."

"Just how badly do you want me to embarrass myself?"

"No, Teacher," she replied with quiet warmth. "For someone so uptight, you're surprisingly light on your feet."

"And for someone as rambunctious as you, your steps are pretty impressive."

Against the softly lit backdrop of the manor, they looked almost impossibly graceful.

"Thank you," Katerina murmured, "for saving Sabrina."

"Helping a student in need is only natural."

"Then... can you help me, too?"

"Help you?"

"Yes... I'm in so much pain right now."

She almost added, because I've fallen in love, but at that precise moment, the distant piano fell silent. From an upstairs window, Sabrina's voice called:

"Teacher, Katerina! I'm sorry for hogging all the fun! I'll come lend a hand!"

"It's fine, Sabrina," Katerina answered, glancing up. "We've already finished."

No moment lasts forever, and the two knew their dance had to end. Heero checked his watch.

"I should get going," he said. "I promised Jay I'd be at the meeting."

"That gathering? The student activists?"

"I'll just pop in and come back."

Without saying goodbye, he slipped into the darkness of the night, perhaps believing they would someday meet again. Katerina stood there, watching him go, her hand still raised as though reaching after him. Sabrina came to her side, looking down the same shadowed path.

"Has Heero left already?"

Katerina remained focused on that distant spot.

"I am Katerina Peacecraft... And you are...?"

Sabrina tilted her head at her sister's odd behavior.

"What are you doing?"

"It's all right," Katerina said softly. "Now I'm in the same position you once were."

In that instant, Katerina knew for certain: she was in love with Heero. And simply realizing it made her heart light with joy.

*

Later that night, hundreds of people gathered in the college's underground third auditorium. A man of middle-class bearing stood on the stage, delivering an impassioned speech:

"We in these colonies have lived under a so-called monarchy masquerading as democracy, drowning in endless taxes. Are we meant to toil only so Earth can enjoy its comforts? We colonists pay fifteen percent more in taxes than those on Earth, and where does that money go? Into the coffers of the United Earth Sphere Alliance's military! It's absurd! There is no conflict in space, so why must we shoulder the cost of war? And that's not all, nearly every resource, every scrap of safe produce, is shipped from us to Earth. Why are we oppressed like this?"

Heero slipped in midway, and Jay, ever alert, caught sight of him, waving him over to a seat. Even without hearing the whole speech, Heero could tell this man was pushing a libertarian angle. He predicted what was coming:

"That's why now, more than ever, we must stand up! We're not an abandoned people, no, we are the chosen ones who ventured into space by our own will! We have the right to live free!"

Just as applause threatened to break out, a lone figure rose from the front row and lifted a hand.

"Pardon me. I am Cinquant Khushrenada, of Earth's Romefeller Foundation."

A stir ran through the hall. Having an Earth aristocrat present was surprising enough; to have him speak up was unthinkable. A few in the crowd recognized him as the sole public survivor of the recent shuttle explosion. Word spread in hushed tones, and the atmosphere turned tense. Heero, who had personally witnessed that explosion, narrowed his eyes.

"So, he's that other light I saw heading in the opposite direction..."

He had never pressed Sabrina for details, but he couldn't help suspecting something orchestrated in the timing.

"Your remarks, sir, are correct on many points," Cinquant began, "but I do have a few questions."

"G-go ahead," the speaker managed.

"You speak of 'freedom' and 'rights.' But what exactly is this freedom you champion? What are these rights you seek? Are you trying to dismantle all order and plunge the world back into lawlessness? If you abolish law and taxation, do you honestly think your way of life, your economy, will remain viable? You'll find yourselves 'unfree' in an instant. Without Earth, neither you nor your so-called rights would exist. Before demanding anything, I suggest you acknowledge your debt to Earth. And what about the matter of childbirth, hmm? Yes, pursue independence, if you must, strive to stand on your own. But do remember: a living, natural Earth is essential for all that. Supporting Earth means supporting your own future."

Silence spread through the auditorium as though someone had doused the flames of debate. Heero, observing from his seat, gave a small, almost mocking smile. To him, these weren't genuine questions but rather a lecture from the Earth side, delivered as if it were reasoned inquiry.

Stepping calmly onto the stage, Cinquant placed a gold-and-gem-studded pistol and dagger on the speaker's podium.

"Many of you likely know: after that shuttle explosion, I'm basically a dead man walking. If you truly believe bloodshed is the path to your freedom, well, here is my heart. Pierce it, if your resolve is that strong. This life is bound to Earth, which stands on the brink of ruin! Gun or blade, the choice is yours."

Shocked murmurs spread. This gathering was meant to stir rebellious passion, not to host some lethal demonstration. Nobody there had thought about actual bloodshed.

"Enough already!"

Heero Yuy stood, voice resounding.

"None of us want anyone's blood spilled! It isn't a question of whether we have resolve. We simply believe in a peaceful future for both Earth and space!"

"And you are...?"

"I'm just a student who works on colony construction and studies here."

"What do you call this 'peaceful future'? I'd like to hear it."

Heero drew a steady breath.

“Just as the colonies need Earth, Earth also needs the colonies. We don’t need this constant friction, this cycle of hatred. If we rid ourselves of that needless animosity, the path to our future should become clear. To build the Earth Sphere’s future, we need a noble ideal as its foundation, but that doesn’t mean forced unification. We want respect for each individual. If you’ll treat us as fellow human beings, then yes, we can cooperate. Never forget that all humans deserve dignity. If Earth wants to rule with justice, then it must grant us freedom. You ask, ‘What is freedom?’ We’re not asking for much. Just the ability for everyone to care for their families, for every person to find a job, for those who wish to study to be allowed that chance, and for all humanity to dream of a world without war. If you guarantee even this small freedom, I believe we can accept the rule of Earth’s laws and systems...”

Heero’s words were idealistic, almost naively so. Yet they stirred something in the young audience, lighting a spark in many hearts.

“And one more point: please, don’t unjustly arrest or imprison innocent people.”

Cinquant Khushrenada’s gaze rested on him.

“May I ask your name?”

“Heero Yuy.”

“I’ll remember it,” said Cinquant, his voice carrying an odd gravitas.

The third auditorium dispersed shortly thereafter, as though nothing dramatic had happened. In time, Cinquant and Heero would stand on equal footing, each representing Earth and the colonies, occasionally at odds, occasionally in partnership, but always acknowledging each other.

*

A thunderous explosion echoed through the corridors just minutes after the third auditorium had dispersed.

It came from a time bomb planted by special operatives of the United Earth Sphere Alliance, intended to wipe out the underground activists in one fell swoop. However, Cinquant Khushrenada’s unexpected appearance had thrown off their timing, forcing them to detonate at a moment that accomplished little more than chaos.

Only a handful of people were injured, which might sound fortunate, though to those few, it was anything but. Among them were Heero Yuy, Thomas Carrant, and Jay Null. Jay lost his left arm; Heero

suffered severe burns along his back; Currant's abdomen had been deeply gouged.

"Guess we're just a bunch of fools, huh?"

Currant managed the words in breathless gasps.

"We'll carry him together," Jay muttered. "Heero, help me... If the authorities catch us, we're screwed."

"R-right..."

Heero still seemed half in a daze. Maybe the ringing in his ears was to blame, or perhaps he was just reeling from how instantly and completely their ideals had been blown to bits.

Currant, half-lucid and trying to encourage Heero, mumbled to himself the entire time. "Ideals... nothing but ideals..."

He coughed up thick clots of blood and let out a sad little laugh.

"Still...I always believed in peace without fighting..."

"That's impossible," Jay growled bitterly. "Just shut up already!"

But Currant refused to stop talking.

"So close... 'P4'... the Prototype Perfect Peace Program... would've been finished soon. Shame..."

"That program's too risky. Better it stayed incomplete," Jay snapped, glancing over his shoulder. They could hear the stomping boots of the military police, no doubt following the blood trail.

"S-sorry... just leave me here," Currant whispered, fighting to hold onto consciousness. "You two go on without me..."

But they ignored his plea. Realizing that dragging him further might only endanger his life, they opted to stay. Unsurprisingly, the authorities arrived swiftly. An emergency medic unit accompanied them, but by the time the first responders moved in, Thomas Currant had lost too much blood to survive.

*

News of the third-auditorium explosion reached the Darlian household. Both Sabrina and Katerina were shaken to their core when they saw the televised report. A handful of victims' names and faces flashed across the screen, along with a list of those arrested. Thomas Currant was among the dead, and Heero Yuy's and Jay Null's names were listed among those apprehended.

"This can't be happening..."

"How could they possibly arrest them?"

According to the official story, the bombing had resulted from escalating internal disputes within the underground movement, a clash

of factions vying for power. The authorities further alleged that, just like the shuttle incident, a “radical group from the L-1 colony cluster” was responsible. Sabrina sensed at once that history was being distorted yet again.

Katerina, who understood Heero well enough to know he wouldn’t do such a thing, also guessed that he wouldn’t be released quickly, his moral convictions meant he would never flatter or placate his interrogators. Still, she felt helpless. What, after all, could they do?

They mulled a dozen ideas, only to dismiss every one. Maybe as a daughter of the Darlian family, Katerina could request a meeting; but given how the colony’s mood had soured on the aristocracy, it might backfire. Round and round they went, never reaching a plan.

Katerina, in particular, suffered acutely. She had only just discovered her feelings for Heero, and in the very next moment he was torn from her side. The frustration and guilt gnawed at her, her own cowardice, her inability to do anything, left her heart in turmoil.

Under her breath, Sabrina began humming, so softly that Katerina scarcely heard.

“Somewhere over the rainbow—”

*

Two weeks into November, Heero Yuy remained locked up as a “thought criminal.” The authorities had already learned he hadn’t planted the bomb, but his constant insistence on reason and principle led them to brand him “defiant.” Worse, no one had stepped forward to vouch for him. He could have asked the Darlian family to intercede, but he didn’t. In the interrogation room, he avoided even mentioning his job as a tutor.

Perhaps he didn’t want to burden Sabrina or Katerina, or risk exposing that two-headed dragon hidden in the backyard. His burns had healed quickly, but Curren’s death weighed heavily on him.

Then, one day, the military police released Heero without warning. To his surprise, the foreman of the colony’s outer-wall construction crew was there, waiting.

“I got a call from a Duke Khushrenada,” the man explained. “Told me to come get you out of there.”

“Khushrenada...?”

“Yeah, he paid your bail too. Guess these Earth nobles can be mighty generous when the fancy strikes them.”

Heero could only guess at Cinquant's motives.

"Oh, and that Jay fellow you're friends with, he's under your foreman's guarantee as well."

*

As all this was transpiring, the Darlian household was in the midst of moving. Their next home would be a cheap downtown apartment, just big enough for Lord and Lady Darlian and the two sisters. Nearly all their possessions had been sold at auction.

The white Wyvern that sat in the backyard had been appraised by a few visitors, but none recognized its worth, dismissing it as scrap from some construction project.

Katerina spent her days baking enormous batches of cookies.

"If there's nothing else I can do," she had decided, "then at least I'll do something." It had become a near-daily ritual, and something akin to her personal creed.

Sabrina had tried offering help now and then, but Katerina stubbornly refused. Left with little else to occupy her, Sabrina sat before the computer, bidding an emotional farewell to the virtual Sam.

"If the real Sam were here, I could at least bring him along... but I'm sorry, this is all I can do."

On-screen, Sam looked more melancholy than ever, not even meowing in reply. Maybe, Sabrina thought, he sensed that she was going to leave him behind.

Katerina came in with a fresh tray of cookies, wearing a rare smile.

"I think these are my best batch yet!"

But Sabrina, and even Sam on the monitor, seemed despondent.

"What's wrong?" Katerina asked gently.

"Sam won't respond," said Sabrina, glancing worriedly at the screen.

Katerina leaned over the back of the chair. The little cat in the display acted as though it were spooked, ears pricked, glancing over its shoulder again and again. Its fur stood on end, tail puffed out.

"Fff...!"

Occasionally it even looked furious, as though hissing at some unseen threat.

Sabrina's voice trembled with sadness.

"Do you think it's just because he knows I'm leaving him behind?"

Katerina shook her head.

"No. It's something worse than that."

She traded places with her sister, taking the seat at the computer and clicking through a few commands.

"Something's going on," she said quietly. "Something big."

*

Jay and Heero slipped into the research lab at the college once used by Currant. They intended to sort through the possessions he'd left behind.

Compared to Jay's own chaotic workspace, Currant's lab was remarkably orderly, dozens of large computers sat in neat rows, not a speck of dust on the floor.

"Tch," Jay muttered. "All that's left of the guy's personal effects is a single microchip of research data."

"What about all these computers?" Heero asked.

"They're the college's property. Nothing in here actually belonged to Currant."

"Any family?"

"He had a younger brother... I think he's still in high school."

"What's his name?"

"I'm pretty sure it was 'Quinze.' Never met him, though."

Heero recalled a slender boy named Quinze, someone who, despite his slight build, picked fights with anyone and always got knocked down. Half a year before, Heero had spotted him at dusk near the edge of the schoolyard, crouched on the ground with a split lip and a swollen cheek, tears brimming in his eyes as he whispered, "Leave me alone." Heero had all but dragged the boy to the nurse's office. The memory was still vivid.

"I'll take him the microchip," Heero said. "I covered for a few classes at that school once."

"Then I'll let you handle it."

Just then, Jay's gaze darted around, tension clear on his face. "These computers are running at full capacity! Something big's going on..."

Indeed, the room was noticeably warm. Heero undid the top button of his collar.

"Aren't these supposed to be quantum computers?" he asked.

"That thing we installed in the Wyvern is the first prototype," Jay snapped. "It's not something you can crank out overnight! Damn it all..."

He clenched his fists, frustration showing plainly.

"What is it?" Heero prompted.

"I need you to handle the keyboard! I'm not used to this mechanical arm yet," he said, waving his newly attached prosthetic in irritation.

Heero settled into the seat before the monitor, taking over Jay's role. Jay exhaled sharply, then said, "Type in this password: 'PEACECRAFT×2 HEERO YUY.'" "

Heero paused. "Why something like that?"

But when he typed it in, an ocean of data flooded the screen, jammed with lines upon lines of text. The color drained from Jay's face as he stared at the monitor.

*

Katerina was doing her best to make sense of the frantic flood of data streaming across her network connections. At last, she arrived at a chilling truth: the Sanc Kingdom was about to be struck with a nuclear attack.

It seemed that the "ZERO System" Currant had built was so advanced it could even predict top-secret operations by the Alliance military.

"What are we going to do?" Sabrina murmured, voice shaking with alarm.

Katerina didn't respond right away. Fear flashed across her eyes. But she did have one unshakable resolve:

When you can't do anything, do whatever you can. Never let yourself live in regret.

She repeated those words in her mind like a mantra. Just then, Heero's face appeared on the monitor, contacting them through the communications line.

"Teacher!" Katerina exclaimed. "You've been released?"

"Yes, just this morning..."

"Thank goodness," Sabrina breathed, relieved.

Heero got straight to the point.

"Looks like there's a crisis heading for your homeland."

"We've just found that out ourselves," Katerina replied.

"If you plan on taking action, you'd better do it soon."

Another window opened on the screen, showing Jay's face.

"You'll have to destroy the satellite that's carrying the strike weapon," Jay said. "Go use that Wyvern in your backyard."

"I'll give it a try," Heero began. "I'll head over there—"

"No, Teacher," Katerina cut him off firmly. "I refuse."

She wanted to do the most meaningful thing she could with her own two hands.

"The Sanc Kingdom is our home," Katerina continued, "and it has nothing to do with you."

Her thoughts darted back to the awful powerlessness she'd felt trying, and failing, to help Heero weeks earlier. She refused to let herself feel that useless again.

"But I'm the one who built the Wyvern!" Jay's voice crackled. "I'm the one who decides who flies it!"

"You're absolutely right... But 'Sam' has bonded with me and Sabrina," Katerina pointed out calmly. Sabrina isn't suited to piloting, but I might be. She was determined to save her sister's kingdom, no one understood Sabrina's longing for home better than she did.

"You're saying you'll be the pilot?"

"Yes," Katerina answered without hesitation. "I'm a far better operator than Teacher, especially with a flight system."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Jay blustered. "This isn't the same as those construction mechs for outer-wall repairs!"

"If you think you can scare me away that easily, you've got another thing coming," Katerina snapped. "That quantum AI we call Sam? He can handle my piloting just fine."

"I see you've done some reading..." Jay muttered.

Katerina forged ahead.

"I've memorized the basic manual. I'd be more reliable than Heero any day!"

"Still..."

He clearly wasn't convinced. Katerina sighed. This left her no choice but to use her trump card.

"I have a brand-new batch of the best cookies I've ever made. You're free to eat them all. I made a big mountain of them."

"Fine," Jay conceded at last, his voice softening. "Then I'll let you take the Wyvern."

"Thank you!" Katerina exclaimed. "That's why I like you, Jay."

She gave the camera a playful wink.

Through it all, Heero had stayed silent, evidently unsure how to respond. But before he could muster a protest, Sabrina tried to intervene.

"Katerina, no! I can't let you risk your life like that!"

Yet Katerina refused to listen. She dashed over to the half-packed luggage they'd readied for moving, yanked out an old astro-suit, and started changing right there in the hall before sprinting out to the backyard.

Sabrina ran after her, shouting, "Why do you have to go this far? What will we even tell the Darlians?!"

Katerina stopped, turning to face her sister.

"Sabrina, we trust each other, right?"

"O-of course we do," Sabrina said, confusion in her eyes.

"I'm going to give you something that matters to me. In exchange, I'm taking something that matters to you."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I'm trading with you, all right?" Katerina declared, eyes alight with resolve. "I'm taking Sam. So, you make sure you don't lose Heero!"

"I don't understand... what are you—"

But Katerina had already pulled the tarp from the Wyvern and leaped into the cockpit.

"Let's go, Sam!"

"Meown!" chirped Sam from a sub-monitor, brimming with energy.

Katerina systematically booted up the thrusters. Jay's face popped in on the comm.

"You can rely on Sam for flight control, but watch your speed. It's tricky, don't push it too far."

"Got it!"

At full throttle, she launched. The Wyvern streaked away so fast it seemed to rip the air behind it.

Sabrina stood frozen, emotions coursing through her.

Her sister was setting off to save a kingdom that had once cast Sabrina aside. Twin sisters they might be, but Katerina was willingly taking on a punishing fate. Sabrina had yet to realize fully what Katerina had just given her.

It wasn't really "Heero Yuy" himself, rather, Katerina had placed her own hope of love in Sabrina's care.

*

Once the Wyvern cleared the spaceport and soared into open space, Katerina pointed its nose toward Earth. At her command, Sam conducted a rapid scan and discovered eight high-orbit military satellites belonging to the United Earth Sphere Alliance. Any of them could be armed with nuclear warhead missiles, and it remained unclear which satellite, if any, planned to target the Sanc Kingdom.

"Sam, can you figure it out?" Katerina asked.

"Meow," came the little cat's reply.

Text scrolled across the monitor:

“Unable to predict launch time. There is at least a 25% probability for each satellite. Cannot pinpoint the target.”

“In that case, Sam, calculate a route for attacking all of them!”

“Meow!”

Katerina’s decisions came as swiftly as the thoughts entered her head. Destroying all eight satellites would surely incur astronomical costs if the Alliance demanded reparations. Even if the kingdom remained intact, an unfathomable debt could bankrupt it completely.

“Doesn’t matter. Right now, I just have to protect the Sanc Kingdom!”

But that was only the start of her problems. Katerina had to answer a barrage of queries Sam posed: methods of attack, fuel requirements, the limit of how close they could approach Earth’s gravity well, and so on.

Because they were dealing with nuclear warheads, Katerina couldn’t simply fire beams or missiles and risk contaminating the upper layers of Earth’s atmosphere. Nor did she want to create any more space debris.

“What if we fling them beyond Earth’s orbit?” she mused.

“Meow.”

Sam’s solution indicated that by precisely adjusting the rotation of each satellite’s thrusters, especially those designed to position it in orbit, they could nudge the satellites off course and send them into a graveyard orbit far outside Earth’s sphere of influence.

The trickiest satellites were those designed to destroy meteors and large debris. They had an upper and lower thruster array spinning in opposite directions, stabilizing the entire structure; in other words, they’d attempt to dodge any external attack.

“We won’t need to refuel,” she murmured, scanning the data. “We’ll circle the planet once and eject each satellite. Then we’ll dive into the atmosphere and land.”

Her chance of success hovered near zero, hovering ever closer to the impossible. Katerina’s heart wavered at moments.

“But it’s not zero,” she reminded herself.

“Meow.”

Steeling herself, she pressed on, poised to confront despair. At that moment, an alert rang through the cockpit’s speakers.

“This is Heero Yuy. Wyvern, do you read me?”

His face, the one she most wanted to see, appeared on the monitor.

“Teacher!”

“Jay managed to hack the Alliance system. Launch time is set for midnight, November 27, Colony Standard Time.”

“That’s perfect! With that, I can figure out which satellite is responsible.”

“Meowa,” Sam chimed in gratefully.

“There’s something I’d like to ask you,” Heero said, voice solemn.

“Some time ago, you mentioned you were in pain.”

“Yes! And to be honest, I still am.”

“Tell me, what was it?”

“That’s a secret for now. If this mission succeeds, I’ll tell you.”

“All right... But that means you’d better come back alive.”

“Roger that, Teacher!”

“Meow-meow!”

*

The satellite Sam identified bore the designation “Gemina MW.” It was on the far side of Earth, the greatest distance from the Wyvern’s current position. A countdown clock blinked on the display, marking the time until the nuclear missile would be launched. Even at the Wyvern’s top speed, Katerina would barely make it in time.

Worse news followed: Gemina MW was one of those two-tiered attack satellites, with an upper and lower section each spinning in counter-rotation for precision aiming.

“Recommended attack: Destroy the rotary-axis assembly connecting the upper and lower segments at close range.”

Katerina read the text on-screen in a hushed murmur, committing the plan to memory. If she could sever that axis without causing an explosion, the satellite’s thrusters would go berserk, flinging it out of Earth’s orbit. The weapon of choice: a manipulator arm extending from the twin dragon’s head, tipped with a beam saber.

It demanded split-second timing and near-superhuman finesse. The satellite hovered close enough to Earth’s gravity that a careless slash would result in it tumbling into the atmosphere, warhead and all.

*

By the time the Wyvern’s radar locked onto Gemina MW, the mission clock was already past the predicted limit. Sam jammed the satellite’s remote guidance with ECM, but the launch routine was already irreversible.

"I expected that," Katerina muttered, focusing on her manipulator controls. She ignited the beam saber housed in one of the Wyvern's twin "heads."

"All right, Sam, take care of the piloting."

"Meow."

The Wyvern banked in a broad curve, slipping inside Gemina MW's orbit.

"Perfect," she whispered, "even if the worst happens, at least the Sanc Kingdom can be spared."

If the missile locked onto her, she'd be the only casualty. But Katerina had no intention of dying.

"I still have so many things I want to do!"

She gunned the Wyvern's thrusters. Leaning back, she deployed a scope from behind her seat, zeroing in on the magnetically stabilized core within Gemina MW. She could see the launch gate sliding open a sliver, revealing a grim, foreboding warhead reflecting the light from Earth far below.

"I won't allow it," she hissed, vowing to fling it into deep space. Easing forward, she let the ECM cloak her approach. The satellite, blinded to the Wyvern's presence, did not attempt any evasive maneuver.

At point-blank range, Katerina exhaled, staring into the targeting scope.

"..."

She took another deep breath, then softly began to sing.

"Somewhere over the rainbow, over that rainbow, I'll go—"

It was the old Judy Garland tune Sabrina had taught her recently, a tiny spark of courage in this life-threatening moment. Feeling strangely tranquil, or perhaps in some altered state of consciousness, her hands moved with practiced speed and accuracy, guiding the manipulator. Timing was everything, demanding impossible precision.

In that instant, it seemed like a miracle.

The beam saber carved precisely into the rotating axis of Gemina MW, scattering tiny plumes of sparks.

"Mission complete," she breathed.

"Meow!"

A small, triumphant grin crossed her face.

But the satellite, suddenly aware it was under attack, tried to execute a rapid escape maneuver. Instead, its thrusters synchronized in the same direction, sending it spinning away from Earth and out of orbit. Unable to launch the nuclear warhead, Gemina MW tumbled into the empty darkness beyond.



*

Now the Wyvern began slipping into Earth's gravitational pull. Feeling that subtle G-force, Katerina addressed Sam with words she often heard from her sister.

"Play it once, Sam?"

"Meow."

"Plot a wave course for atmospheric reentry."

"Meow!"

"And after that, we're heading to liberate the Sanc Kingdom!"

"Meow-meow!"

With that, Katerina and the Wyvern plunged into Earth's atmosphere. Brilliant flames wreathed the cockpit as she fought the punishing G-forces, throwing back her head to shout:

"I am Katerina Peacecraft, Second in line to the throne of the Sanc Kingdom!"

Swathed in a blinding aura of reentry, the Wyvern's white frame glowed with renewed radiance.

"Here and now, November 27, AC-145, I declare war on the rebel forces occupying my kingdom. I hereby proclaim the restoration of the Sanc Kingdom!"

Nocturn in Mourning
Peacecraft File 3

AC-145 DECEMBER

A legend was on the verge of unfolding.

When Katerina Peacecraft entered Earth's atmosphere aboard the Wyvern, the craft and its pilot, later hailed as the "Lightning Queen," blazed down from the heavens like a radiant, twin-headed dragon of white-silver. Dazzling, almost divine, they loomed before the world below.

But despite that breathtaking display, Katerina and her Wyvern made no immediate moves. November slipped away in unnerving quiet. The rebel forces occupying the Sanc Kingdom were left on edge by the stillness. Even after three days into December, they offered only dismissive responses to Katerina's declaration of war.

At first, they assumed it was just a childish prank. Even if a Peacecraft heir to the throne had appeared, it hardly seemed cause for alarm, nobody expected her to mount a genuine attack alone. Indeed, there was no sign of enemy radar activity, nor any rumor of an approaching army.

Then came a startling leak from a spy embedded within the UESA.

Apparently, the Alliance had intended to launch nuclear missiles from military satellites toward northern Europe in a bid for a swift victory, but a single mysterious space fighter had thwarted the entire operation.

The spy's report added that he himself knew nothing of this fighter's existence, meaning the rebels must possess a secret weapon and an intelligence network capable of foreseeing the Alliance's nuclear assault.

"I once believed I was the top agent in all the secret services," the spy confessed. "I see now that I was mistaken."

This news shook the rebel high command to the core. While the fact that the Alliance nearly resorted to nuclear weapons was shocking, even more unsettling was that a lone fighter, apparently unaffiliated with the rebels themselves, had launched a counter-strike and succeeded.

"Could it be..." murmured several officers in the rebel ranks, "that her declaration of war was serious all along?"

Nor was that their only worry.

If this fighter had indeed neutralized the Alliance's nuke, perhaps it still had possession of that warhead. The idea that "the girl might turn the nuke against us" left the rebel leaders paralyzed.

"That seems unlikely," said Martix Rex, a young lieutenant aboard the rebel flagship Robin Hood. "A young lady from the Sanc Kingdom, bent on saving her own kingdom, wouldn't drop a nuke and turn it into a wasteland."

"Kids her age sometimes charge in with bombs strapped to their chests," snarled the older chief of staff. "When formulating a defense, we have to plan for every possibility. Keep your mouth shut, boy."

Martix bristled at being dismissed as a "boy" but, aware of his place, muttered a vague apology and returned to his quarters.

There, he kept a stray puppy he'd found in town, a mixed-breed he'd named Spade for the spade-shaped marking that stretched from its right eye to its nose. Spade scarcely made a sound, not even a whimper, so Martix could air his frustrations to the little dog in peace.

"Honestly, it's a sorry state," he sighed, stroking Spade's head. "If Katerina Peacecraft really planned a suicidal attack, would she have bothered with a formal declaration of war? And if she's been swept up by youthful recklessness, why hasn't she attacked yet?"

He paused, reflecting.

"If she really had a nuke in her hands, you'd think she'd have dropped it the instant she declared war. But she didn't."

In Martix's view, the real trouble lay in the possibility that the rebels might convince themselves she had a nuke, leading to anxiety and overreaction among the troops. Paralyzing tension bred mistakes, openings that could be exploited.

He stiffened.

"So it's all a bluff?"

If this was an intentional ruse to disrupt them, it was working. Maybe there was a master strategist behind this. Or perhaps that fifteen-year-old girl was a tactical genius by nature.

"Heh... kind of funny if you think about it," Martix mused with a thin smile, ruffling the pup's ears. "Someone like that is a far more terrifying enemy than any maniac threatening a nuclear suicide run. Looks like we'll be facing a foe more complicated than the United Earth Sphere Alliance itself."

He gazed at Spade's unflinching eyes.

"I wonder what she's really like. You want to meet her too?"

Lieutenant Martix Rex of the rebel forces found himself harboring a curious sort of admiration, an almost longing, for this young warrior who called herself Katerina Peacecraft.

*

Winter had arrived unusually mild this year. Rather than snow piling high, the Sanc Kingdom and surrounding regions saw more slush and rain. December felt strangely quiet and not all that cold, only adding to the discomfort of the rebel troops, unwelcome guests in a kingdom they had occupied.

That day, a fierce winter storm raged across northern Europe. Waves battered the Sanc Kingdom's coastal waters especially hard. Angry black clouds brought claps of thunder, gales howled across the sea, and the surf rose perilously high. Despite the violent seas tossing their warships, the rebel fleet braced itself for an aerial assault. High above the storm, a patrol plane fitted with advanced radar circled in search of any sign of an approaching enemy.

Warships, battleships, cruisers, and escort vessels, totaling hundreds of gun turrets lay in wait, all trained on the storm-darkened skies. Each ship stood ready for the moment the patrol plane might report "Enemy aircraft inbound!"

Determined to secure air superiority, a large carrier had its fighters prepped for immediate launch, intending to trap any attacker from above and below. Above all else, the rebels desperately wanted to avoid the worst-case scenario of "nuclear deployment."

On the bridge of the fleet's flagship, the Robin Hood, the overall commander and his chief of staff seethed in frustration each time the patrol plane radioed back, "All clear."

"You think they'll strike?"

"If there's ever a time for it, it's now."

Behind them, Martix listened silently, privately in agreement.

"They're not wrong," he thought. "The real question is from which angle they'll launch the attack..."

In tactical and strategic terms, operating a fleet in such brutal weather was all but unthinkable. Merely having readied a defensive posture in the midst of this storm was a near-miracle, a testament to the officers' leadership skills.

Nevertheless...

They were fixated on the skies, convinced the enemy would come from above. Martix felt no inclination to speak up; after all, the chief of staff had brusquely told him, "Keep quiet, boy." So he maintained a sullen detachment. Yet he couldn't help noticing how many vulnerabilities the fleet showed.

Because of the storm, each ship had increased the distance between itself and its neighbors to avoid collisions, severely weakening their

coordination. Gaps loomed wide around the flagship, the Robin Hood, leaving the formation far from ideal.

"I just hope they're not in for a nasty surprise," Martix said under his breath. He wore a faint, cynical smirk, like a bystander awaiting the grand entrance of the "princess of the ruined kingdom."

Black storm clouds churned overhead, and sheets of rain lashed mercilessly against the decks. Already twelve hours of combat readiness had worn the troops to a breaking point.

Then a brilliant flare cut the sky.

It was a bolt of lightning from the raging storm, striking the lightning rod atop an outer perimeter escort ship's radar mast. Another vessel's commander, glimpsing that sudden flash, mistook it for enemy fire and panicked, issuing an order for return fire. Tense to the verge of collapse, other ships followed suit, unleashing a barrage into the storm-torn heavens, their guns aimed blindly into the darkness.

Within seconds, the entire fleet's cannons lit the clouds. The moment the artillery ceased, dozens of fighters launched from the carrier. Though chaotic, this sequence of actions had been mapped out as part of a planned engagement, just in case.

"Cease fire! Everyone, stay calm!" the chief of staff shouted. "We've had no enemy sighting from the patrol plane above, there's no sign of an intruder!"

He was the most unsettled of them all, yet struggled to quell the turmoil. That was precisely when it happened:

"Low-altitude radar contact, approaching from our six o'clock!" the radar operator cried. "It's headed straight for our flagship!"

"Calm down," muttered the chief of staff. In his mind, it must be one of their own planes, damaged by friendly fire. But next came the communications officer:

"It's hailing us, sir, requesting permission to land on our deck!"

"Find out which unit it's from!"

"They claim... they're with the Sanc Kingdom... They say the pilot's name is Peacecraft."

"What?!"

A white craft, Katerina's Wyvern, sped between the warships at extreme low altitude, weaving past battleships and escorts alike, skimming over stormy seas with dizzying speed. It could easily have attacked from the rear, yet instead soared upright above the Robin Hood, hovering like a warning overhead.

"This is Katerina Peacecraft," came the pilot's voice. "If you deny me permission to land, I may be forced to resort to other measures."

The phrase "other measures" felt like a final ultimatum. The rain, so relentless just moments ago, had miraculously subsided, though the wind still gusted fiercely. Grey waves rose and fell, a rolling steel-colored sea. In defiance of the gale and the flagship's unsteady deck, the Wyvern dropped down for a landing as though in total command of the elements.

Martix and a host of officers awaited her on the deck. Katerina Peacecraft opened the cockpit hatch and slipped onto the steel plating in a near-silent motion.

"Welcome to the Robin Hood!" one of the lower-ranking officers called, snapping a salute. "Princess Katerina, we offer you our sincerest greetings."

His words were genuine. Martix, too, found himself disarmed by the young princess. She removed her helmet in one elegant motion and returned the greeting with a perfectly executed bow. Golden hair tumbled over her shoulders, rustling in the wind.

"I appreciate the courteous reception," she said with the warmest of smiles. Then, speaking into the small comm device on her helmet, "Wait here for me, Sam."

"Meow," came a feline chirp from inside. At once, the Wyvern's hatch slid shut and locked with a metallic clunk.

The men eyed that helmet nervously. Whoever she was communicating with, it suggested the slightest misstep on their part could bring swift retaliation. Had she truly come alone? Did she perhaps have allies nearby?

Observing how skittish they all seemed, Martix nearly laughed aloud.

He led Katerina to the fleet's strategy room, where the supreme commander and chief of staff stood rigid, looking none too pleased. Polite introductions were exchanged. Seating herself across the table from the two men, helmet in her lap, Katerina took a calm breath.

"Thank you for allowing me this audience. To prevent needless bloodshed, I'd like to ask the rebel army to accept a ceasefire."

With a sardonic tone, the commander replied, "A ceasefire? Sounds an awful lot like you're demanding our surrender."

"That's not it at all," Katerina countered at once. Her unwavering composure only put the two senior officers more on edge. They couldn't take their eyes off the helmet, no doubt suspecting she could remotely order an airstrike at any second, or worse, use a nuclear device, if the rumors were true. But what came from Katerina's lips was the last thing they anticipated.

"I intend to rebuild the Sanc Kingdom, and in so doing, join forces with you, form a military alliance, if you will, to stand against the arrogant United Earth Sphere Alliance. In short, I want us to rise together."

"Come again?" the commander blurted.

She gave a mild, confident smile, but her eyes shone with fierce conviction.

"If my kingdom is to be restored, I propose a partnership with the rebel forces. Let us raise a standard of defiance against the tyrannical Alliance."

AC-146 JANUARY

From late in the year onward, a fierce cold front had swept across northern Europe, returning the climate to what it should have been for winter. The Baltic Sea lay under snowfall, its surface sheeting over at night. Because this inland sea connects to the open ocean (the North Sea) only via the Kattegat Strait, it has a lower salinity and remains frigid. At dusk, it became an immense, ghostly expanse of ice, though not nearly thick enough to immobilize an entire fleet.

Thanks to Katerina's negotiations, King and Queen Peacecraft, who had been confined to the brig aboard the flagship Robin Hood, were finally set free. At first, they mistook Katerina for her older sister, Sabrina, but quickly realized their error and apologized profusely.

"We're so sorry, Katerina..."

"There's no need to concern yourselves. I've done only what any Peacecraft would do."

A long imprisonment had left the king and queen visibly aged. Upon hearing that Sabrina was safe, living among the L-1 colony cluster, relief overwhelmed them and they began to weep aloud, unable to contain their emotions. Yet Katerina saw they were in no condition to take charge of the Sanc Kingdom's fate. She resolved to formally assume the throne and build a nation founded on freedom and peace. To achieve that, she had to shake off the yoke of the United Earth Sphere Alliance.

Such was the motive for forging her new military alliance with the rebels.

Ironically, it was the rebel forces that now found themselves on the losing side. Once they discovered Katerina's Wyvern carried no nuclear warheads, the rebel leaders briefly considered revoking and

nullifying their treaty. Yet they recognized the rare brilliance in Katerina.

She had singlehandedly flown through a raging storm, slicing open the fleet's defensive formation with breathtaking skill. She had boarded their flagship unflinchingly. She had displayed subtle diplomatic acumen, negotiating an alliance. Already she was formulating strategies and tactics to face off against the Alliance encircling the Sanc Kingdom.

In all these respects, she far surpassed the rebels themselves.

What's more, the rank and file adored her. Among the lower officers and common soldiers, Katerina was idolized, almost a celebrity. Even the women fighters showed no hint of jealousy, welcoming her into their ranks as a comrade who yearned for peace. In just a few days since landing on Earth, Katerina Peacecraft had become a symbol of hope among the rebels, acclaimed as the "Jeanne D'arc of the AC-Era."

Her "Banner of Freedom" drew the citizens of the Sanc Kingdom, then piqued the interest of people in neighboring nations who had once fought the rebels through resistance movements. Many of them now sided with Katerina's ideals and lined up to enlist. From this standpoint, the alliance was indisputably fruitful, and the rebels concluded they needed Katerina for any chance of resisting the Alliance.

Still, the fact that she had no nuclear arsenal, and that the rebel forces had let the Peacecraft royals go, clearly weakened the rebels' position. Once the surrounding Alliance units learned of it, they could assemble their entire force for a decisive assault on Sanc Kingdom at any time.

*

On the other hand, the United Earth Sphere Alliance Navy, their marina fleet, remained at ease, perhaps too much so. They knew perfectly well Katerina Peacecraft had returned. Even after receiving intelligence on the Wyvern (codenamed "Sam") and its impressive performance, they were unperturbed. True, the Alliance acknowledged the sabotage of their military satellites, but that was a case of combating unmanned assets, not a victory against the Alliance's actual aerial forces. Without nuclear weapons, Katerina's Wyvern was merely "one new fighter."

Unlike the rebels, who had nearly panicked, the Alliance's calm was absolute. And it was precisely this disparity in emotional response that showed the vast gulf in their relative power.

The Alliance's Third Fleet had the waters near the Sanc Kingdom under blockade in the Baltic Sea. Confident in their carrier-based fighter squadrons, they saw no reason to fear a single new craft. The large Clover-class twin-hulled carriers carried three types of advanced high-performance Gunship Armors. G-Force (high-speed fighter model), G-Fighter (maneuver-type combat craft). G-Bomber (heavy bomber).

These were organized into thirty, five-ship squadrons; alongside reconnaissance planes, support craft, attack helicopters, and transports, they neared two hundred aircraft in total, roughly twice what the rebels could muster.

Furthermore, the Alliance had stationed its Fourth and Fifth Fleets across the Kattegat Strait, centering on another Clover-class carrier group, forming a double-layered blockade. Should the rebels ever break out of Sanc Kingdom waters to wage a naval battle on the open sea, the Alliance's six-to-one advantage in firepower and resources would guarantee them a decisive victory.

Until now, the Third Fleet had hesitated to assault the rebel fleet that lay hidden in the Sanc Kingdom bay. One reason was the presence of the Peacecraft royals as hostages. But with Katerina Peacecraft's return and the king and queen seemingly freed, the Alliance no longer saw any need to hold back. This was the same faction who had once tried to nuke the Sanc Kingdom. They were preparing, confident they would launch a grand offensive by spring, once the Baltic's ice began to melt.

*

Though allied in name, the rebel leadership still didn't fully trust Katerina. Lieutenant Martix Rex, an aide to the chief of staff, was assigned to her side under the guise of "personal adjutant" but effectively acted as a watchdog. He volunteered gladly, happy to remain near her at all times.

"This way, Princess Katerina," said Martix, escorting her to the hangar where the Wyvern was being refitted. Rebel technicians claimed they could boost the thrusters' output and upgrade the stealth system.

Despite the dead of winter, a man in a flamboyant aloha shirt and dark sunglasses (even at night) ran the main engine refit.

"S&A's combined propulsion system is getting scrapped! We're swapping in the pure 'A' model, no need for space combat anymore. That alone ups output by twenty percent. Retrofit the side thrusters accordingly!"

"Then the pilot's gonna face intense G-forces, Mike!"

"Let Sam worry about that. We're giving her triple the mobility and tuning her for high-speed combat. She'll fly fine without wings!"

Another specialist, a hawk-nosed scientist with a sour expression and distinctive long hair, climbed into the cockpit to modify the ECM devices. He gave only the initials "D.D." when asked his name, apparently a true eccentric.

Chuckling grimly, he talked at the AI cat Sam.

"Bah! The old stealth system was worthless. A half-baked cloak that big? Useless. I've got a 'Super Jammer' to install right here."

"Meow," Sam chirped.

"This'll reinforce the entire frame, too. Congratulations, you'll go from 'fighter craft' to 'work of art!'"

It was as though an army of children had found a new toy and were thrilled to kit it out.

"The modifications seem to be going well, Princess Katerina."

"Please, just call me Katerina, Lieutenant Rex."

"Then allow me to drop the rank and go with Martix," he said.

"Why not 'Rex?'" asked Katerina.

He gave an awkward smile. "'Rex' feels far too grand for someone like me."

Rex in Latin meant "king."

"All right, Martix it is," she agreed, plucking a stray dog hair from his uniform. "Do you keep a dog somewhere?"

His face colored slightly.

"In... my room."

"You poor thing. You'll need to take him for regular walks."

"I do, at midnight, though it's a secret. He's already, ah, left his mark in the chief of staff's office."

She teased gently, "Like master, like pet, I see."

"Seems so," he admitted.

"What's his name?"

"Spade."

"Let me meet him sometime?"

"Yes... though, Katerina—" He hesitated, remembering she had insisted on being addressed by name. "Aren't you more of a cat person?"

"I like all animals, horses, dogs, cats."

"Ah..."

"Well, not so sure about mice, or insects, or reptiles," she added.

"Same here," he said, and both exchanged a smile.

"Was the real Sam doing all right?" Katerina asked.

"Oh, certainly. He's still at Marquis Werridges' estate."

She'd spent a few days at the Werridge estate after landing with the Wyvern, at Sam's suggestion, and because of an urgent communique from the Marquis urging her not to attack the rebels immediately upon reentry.

"He doesn't really warm up to me," Katerina admitted. "Apparently, only Sabrina will do."

Martix shrugged. "I'm sure he'll come around eventually. Spade was like that at first, too."

They both paused, replaying the words in their minds.

"Sam and Spade..."

It sounded vaguely familiar. They spoke in unison.

"Sam Spade!"

"From Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*?" Katerina guessed.

"I saw the Bogart film," Martix nodded.

"So did I," she said, and they both chuckled at the coincidence.

"Looks like we'll get along just fine," she said with a grin.

"Yes," he answered, warmth in his eyes.

*

Later accounts record that Martix Rex would go on to marry "Katerina Peacecraft's" daughter, becoming King Peacecraft of the Sanc Kingdom and championing absolute pacifism. He would be the father of Milliardo and Relena Peacecraft. There were, of course, countless twists and turns yet to come. But that is another story, one for another time.

AC-146 JANUARY 19

By this time, the United Earth Sphere Alliance's Third Fleet in the Baltic Sea had repeatedly issued ultimatums for the rebel forces to surrender. Yet they received no reply whatsoever.

Early that morning, Third Fleet Commander Shest Onegell, the father of Daigo Onegell, who would later bring the Sanc Kingdom to ruin, was growing impatient. He was tired of waiting for the ice of the Baltic to thaw naturally; he wanted to finish this conflict by striking first.

He moved the Third Fleet forward to a position where he could threaten the rebels at any time. Even if they had to fight within the bay, he believed they could wear down the enemy through attrition.

"With double the forces, we couldn't possibly lose," so he reasoned.

Just then, word arrived: the rebel fleet was emerging from Sanc Kingdom Bay.

"They're actually coming out?"

Commander Onegell laughed.

"Idiots! With our forces fully ready, they won't find so much as a mouse hole to creep through!"

But in fact, one cat, Sam, was already slipping out onto the Baltic Sea in the form of the Wyvern.

*

The Wyvern flew alone, streaking across the cold sky.

"Here we go, Sam!" Katerina said.

"Meow!"

"Clover-class carrier, tally-ho!"

"Meow-meow!"

She guided the Wyvern straight toward the Alliance's Clover-class carrier. Sam, monitoring the radar, picked up a wave of G-Force high-speed fighters launching from the carrier.

Katerina checked the display of enemy fighters.

"Ha! They're rushing out to greet us. Think you can leave them in the dust, Sam?"

"Meow!" came the confident reply.

"Exactly, piece of cake," Katerina grinned.

Dozens of G-Force fighters looped around, preparing to attack from behind according to textbook dogfighting tactics. But the upgraded Wyvern's acceleration outstripped their expectations. The thrusters ignited briefly, and in a blink, the Wyvern soared away at overwhelming speed, executed an abrupt climb, wheeled around behind the G-Force squadron, and fired off repeated beam salvos, effortlessly shooting them down.

Sam controlled the Wyvern's beam trigger.

"Well done, Sam... Thanks for aiming away from the cockpits."

"Meow," he chirped.

All the enemy pilots managed to bail out and parachute down before their fighters crashed.

Next came the G-Fighters, a mobile combat type that opened fire head-on with homing missiles, an enormous barrage that filled Katerina's alert monitor with countless threatening lines.

Sam let out a warning.

"Meow-meow!"

"No worries! These missiles aren't worth using the Super Jammer on!" Katerina said, grabbing the controls and ramming the throttle full forward.

The Wyvern ascended sharply, fleeing vertically upward from the mass of incoming missiles. It soared with such speed and power that it looked ready to exit the atmosphere.

"Ghh...!" Katerina gritted her teeth, bracing against brutal g-forces.

"Meow, meow?" Sam asked, concerned, though only an AI, he possessed genuine emotions.

"I'm fine... just leave it to me," she gasped, wrestling the stick.

"I believe in Mike Howard!" She called out the name of the technician who had powered up the main engine. "We can still make it! We can go even further!"

With courage that could also be called reckless, she continued to accelerate.

The goal was simple: outrun the homing missiles. With distance, the missiles' courses would converge, causing them to collide with each other, exploding in midair. Below and behind the Wyvern, a huge blast swallowed up the majority of them. The few that remained lost their target lock and self-destructed.

"Yes!" Katerina cheered. "Thank you, Mike!"

Still, several homing missiles persisted.

"Sam, go ahead and use D.D.'s Super Jammer!"

"Meow!"

Sam activated jamming waves and stealth fields. The final missiles, confused, spun wildly and detonated harmlessly in midair. Once the Wyvern reached near its safe altitude, Katerina deployed "EMP Device A," a piece of hardware entrusted to her by the scientist "D.D." She then cut the main engine, letting the Wyvern plummet toward the ocean in near-freefall.

Thanks to the Super Jammer, the Third Fleet's radar would struggle mightily to track her during the descent. Only the noise of the rushing wind filled the cockpit. From high above, Katerina gazed down upon the center of the fleet. She spotted the twin-hulled carrier with four

runways, a vast circle of whitish ripples on the frozen sea, resembling a huge four-leaf clover.

"So that's how it got the name Clover-class."

"Meow."

"Hey, Sam, did you know that 'D.D.' stands for 'Diamond Desperado'?" Katerina giggled. "And here we've got Martix with his dog named Spade, plus the Clover carrier, and now a 'Diamond' scientist. All we're missing is a Heart to complete the card suits!"

"Meow-meow."

"Right? Maybe once I become queen, I'll call myself the 'Queen of Hearts!'" Katerina teased.

She never took up that moniker. Instead, she would go down in history as the "Lightning Queen."

And this very battle would cement that title.

Now the Wyvern hovered just above the Clover carrier's bridge, braking with retro-thrusters. Sam estimated the Alliance's next move would be to launch G-Bombers and attack helicopters. Katerina had to prevent that. Once bombing began and the fight turned close-quarters, the Wyvern might survive, but the Alliance would inevitably suffer heavy losses.

Katerina deployed the Wyvern's double-headed manipulator arms and attached "EMP Device B" to the carrier's radar array and communications antenna. Coordinating with the "EMP Device A" scattered high above, it unleashed pulses of electromagnetic waves (developed by D.D.) over a roughly two-kilometer radius.

The Alliance's Third Fleet descended into chaos: their communications network died, the command chain collapsed, and no carrier-based aircraft could launch. In essence, no one but Katerina could move freely in that zone, only the Wyvern, with its isolated servo system "Sam."

Her task complete, Katerina pulled away from the Clover carrier, soared upward, and sped back toward the rebel fleet. Once she exited the EMP effect range, she opened comms with the rebel flagship Robin Hood.

"This is Katerina. Mission complete!"

"Robin Hood here! Understood!"

"Awesome job, Sam!"

"Meow!"

Right as the Wyvern returned to Sanc Kingdom Bay, the rebel fleet sailed out to meet the Third Fleet, and a thunderous naval bombardment began.

In an instant, the Alliance's Third Fleet collapsed..

AC-146 FEBRUARY

The rebel fleet, having seized several battleships and a Clover-class carrier from the Alliance's Third Fleet, had nearly doubled its strength upon entering the Baltic Sea. At this rate, they could press beyond the Kattegat Strait into the North Sea and face off against the Alliance's Fourth and Fifth Fleets in a final showdown.

A few nights before their planned departure, Katerina and Martix slipped out to walk Spade. They paused first at the chief of staff's quarters, letting the pup leave his little "mark" there, and then strolled the deck at a leisurely pace.

The night wind off the sea felt razor-sharp, and flakes of snow fluttered around them. Martix let Spade run free, zipping here and there on the darkened deck.

The Wyvern sat parked, looming in the shadows. The instant Spade trotted near, the craft abruptly flashed its front lights and opened its side thrusters with a loud hiss, almost like a warning growl. Startled, the puppy tucked his tail and dashed away.

Katerina and Martix exchanged a laugh. It amused them that the Wyvern, dominant enough to beat down G-Forces and G-Fighters, seemed so wary of a lone, scruffy pup. When Spade ventured back for another look, the Wyvern extended a manipulator, ready to swat him with a mock "cat punch." This time, Katerina couldn't help scolding the craft.

"Sam, cut it out! Don't take it so seriously!"

Reluctantly, the Wyvern retracted its manipulator. Martix, still chuckling, turned to Katerina.

"You really are an enigma," he said, voice full of quiet admiration.

"Me?" She tilted her head, plainly unaware.

"It's just... even though we're days from a decisive battle, you seem so at ease, as if nothing's changed."

He'd been thinking this for quite some time and now felt emboldened to share it.

"Have you heard," he went on, "of a board game from the Far East called 'shogi'?"

"No, I haven't."

"It's similar to chess in how the pieces move, but the rules are far more complex. My fellow strategists dismiss it, saying real warfare can't be simulated by such a convoluted system."

"Does sound complicated," Katerina admitted.

Martix nodded, warming to his subject.

"In shogi, when you capture an opponent's piece, you can actually redeploy it as your own. Even a mere pawn, if it crosses into enemy lines, gains a dramatic increase in mobility. And, much like rooks or bishops in chess, shogi has its own equivalents, 'hisha' and 'kaku.' Once they penetrate the enemy camp, they can be promoted into 'ryuu,' which moves basically like a queen."

"Interesting..." She didn't look entirely invested, but he pressed on, hoping to share his conclusion.

"Don't you see? In a way, it mirrors what you've done."

A princess astride her two-headed draconic jet, boarding the flagship and ascending to the throne, then turning the entire rebel fleet into her personal "pieces," all to counterattack the Alliance.

She offered him a gentle, if somewhat bewildered, smile.

"I'm not sure I follow... but it sounds like a compliment."

"I mean every word," he replied with firm sincerity.

In Martix's eyes, Katerina Peacecraft might truly prevail against the United Earth Sphere Alliance, perhaps even secure enduring liberty and peace for everyone.

"Keep forging ahead for that endless dream," he thought. Yet he didn't voice it; he had no wish to earn another reproving glare from those vivid blue eyes.

"I can't win against that look of hers," he mused to himself.

*

Around the same time, the Alliance's senior officers were all in a state of despair. The Wyvern, codenamed Sam, was troublesome enough, but what really scared them was the "EMP device" that had effectively sealed off the entire fleet's movements. The remains of the scattered device, which detonated on a timer, offered no clues on how to build a countermeasure. If Katerina unleashed the same tactic in the upcoming naval engagement, even the largest fleet might be picked off one ship at a time.

The only way to stop her was to eliminate Katerina and Sam before they could activate their device. Yet the Wyvern's superior mobility and stealth left them helpless in the last battle; by all indications, sending the Fourth or Fifth Fleets against her would end in a humiliating rout.

"There is still one way," said a lone voice. Stepping forward with a proposal was none other than Onegell, the disgraced commander of

the defeated Third Fleet. After fleeing that debacle, he'd been stripped of rank and relieved of command, and he now nursed a deep hatred for the Peacecrafts and the Sanc Kingdom.

"All we need," he hissed, "is to remove that girl and 'Sam.'"

"And how do you propose we do that?"

Onegell gave a cunning smile.

"We bring in the Romefeller Foundation. Even if the rebels have allied with her, the Peacecraft line remains tied to the Foundation. Diplomatic pressure may be the key."

*

The very next day, the Alliance made its request to the Romefeller Foundation. The Foundation's current representative was Duke Cinquant Khushrenada.

"Understood," said Cinquant. "I'll summon Princess Peacecraft to a Foundation assembly in Luxembourg tomorrow afternoon."

On the monitor, the Alliance generals bowed.

"We appreciate that."

Cinquant gave a cool nod.

"No need to worry. If I recall, the satellite you lost was called... Gemina...?"

"Gemina MW, yes."

He waved a hand dismissively.

"Ah, yes. We still have the matter of reparations. She'll have no choice but to attend."

"You can guarantee that?"

"Upon the honor of the Khushrenada family."

"We're grateful. About that fighter, though..."

"'Sam,' was it?"

"I see word has reached you. Makes the job easier. Of course, we'll see it detained as well."

"She'll almost certainly fly it here from the Sanc Kingdom, correct? Very well, please leave everything to me."

"Most appreciated, sir."

The general gave a sharp salute, and the transmission went dead. Cinquant, still wearing a polite smile, sank back into his chair.

"So, Cinquant," came a voice from across his polished desk. The speaker was Eric Shergold, a mid-thirties man who, though not born a noble, had inherited a colossal fortune and now held a senior position in the Romefeller Foundation. He was a close friend of Cinquant's,

though he was in his forties, both men were unmarried, and they got on famously.

"The Alliance has grown too bloated," Cinquant mused. "We wouldn't mind trimming its wings while we can."

"I agree," Eric said. "But ignoring their request outright is risky... Some generals will be there at the meeting, right?"

"I plan to indulge them." Cinquant allowed himself a slight, knowing grin. "Though I have my methods."

"How?"

"You're on good terms with the Marquis Werridge, aren't you, Eric?"

"Yeah. My old man was close to him."

"I'd like you to reach out to a certain young man staying with him. The name's Heero Yuy..."

*

By the time Katerina and Sam might have swept down upon them, the Alliance's Fourth and Fifth Fleets, amassed in the North Sea, had braced for the worst. They spent the night on high alert. On the Baltic side of the Kattegat Strait, the rebel fleet similarly stood ready for battle, both sides holding grimly to a tense stalemate.

But the Alliance's anxiety far surpassed the rebels'. The enemy could come from any direction: from above, from behind, or even from below the waves. Their commander took heart only in the news from Duke Cinquant Khushrenada.

"Rest assured," Cinquant had said. "They've pledged to 'overcome all obstacles to attend' tomorrow's Foundation meeting."

If Katerina planned to attach another EMP device and still make it on time to Luxembourg, she would have to do so overnight. By daybreak, she'd need to be en route to the conference. Thus, thought the Alliance commander, if they could just survive until dawn, Wyvern would be seized by the Romefeller Foundation.

So, the sleepless Fourth and Fifth Fleets kept vigil through a bitterly cold, grueling night. Dawn finally broke, and sunlight crept over the horizon. The Alliance crews cheered, relieved that the dreaded nighttime assault hadn't come. As the sun rose higher, sailors reveled like survivors of a miracle. It was now midday, pushing toward a crisp early afternoon. In the officers' wardroom, commanders settled for a belated breakfast-lunch, hopeful they had avoided catastrophe.

"Another hour, and the Romefeller Foundation's meeting begins," one mused. "Looks like we barely made it through with our necks intact."

Plates of food lined the table. Suddenly, the communications officer rushed in.

"Commander, emergency!"

"What is it?"

"Strong ECM signals, sir. All communications are jammed!"

"What?!"

There could be no doubt: they had been hit by the EMP device again.

"Impossible!"

*

In Luxembourg, at the Romefeller Foundation's conference hall, Cinquant, Eric, and the Alliance generals waited impatiently for Katerina Peacecraft. Yet at the appointed time, she was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, it seems we've been stood up," Eric quipped in a hushed tone to Cinquant.

Cinquant answered with a faint smile. "Not at all. For a date, it's perfectly natural to make the gentlemen wait a little."

He then stepped onto the dais and addressed the crowd.

"Honored delegates, it's time for us to begin. If everyone would kindly take their seats..."

A hush descended on the assembly.

"Duke Khushrenada!"

One of the older Alliance generals rose, voice ringing loudly.

"The Princess of the Sanc Kingdom was to appear here today! Explain why she has not arrived!"

"I beg your patience..." Cinquant said, just as the heavy double doors at the entrance swung open.

There stood a golden-haired girl with sparkling blue eyes.

"I am of the Peacecraft line," she announced.

Behind her stood a tall, dark-haired young man.

"Welcome, Princess, this way, if you please." Cinquant ushered her in, Eric's grin widening by the second. Poised and regal, the princess advanced slowly on the red carpet, offering a polite nod to those she passed.



Watching her every move, the Alliance generals exchanged uneasy looks.

"Is that the real one?"

"Her face and figure match our intel. She's likely the real deal."

"Didn't they say she had a twin sister, though?"

"Yes, but that sister died in an accident last autumn."

"Then how do we explain that Fifth Fleet report from a few minutes ago? They definitely said 'attacked by Katerina and Sam!'"

None of them realized the girl here was actually Sabrina Peacecraft. Murmurs spread, especially among the Alliance officials.

"Is there a problem, General?" Cinquant asked blandly.

"Well—er, the Sanc Kingdom's princess—ah, are we certain she's—"

Cinquant cut off the old general's halting question.

"I'm happy to clarify. But perhaps you'd rather hear it from the princess herself?" He paused. "One caveat: she's a keen student of Immanuel Kant and believes 'to lie is a sin.' Rest assured she will speak nothing but truth."

"Indeed... that is welcome news."

"Then, Princess, if you would..."

"Yes."

Sabrina ascended the dais, meeting the stares of nobles and generals without flinching. Inwardly, she felt curiously calm.

"I am a daughter of the Peacecraft line," she began.

"Then answer me this!" barked a general. "It's impossible for Sanc Kingdom to ally with these so-called rebels! You always sided with the United Earth Sphere Alliance, did you not?!"

She answered steadily, "The Alliance tried to launch a nuclear attack on our Kingdom."

"That never happened!"

"It seems hardly 'right' to destroy a cooperative country rather than protect it. Therefore, the Sanc Kingdom withdrew from the Alliance and allied with those you call rebels. I apologize for not reporting this sooner." She bowed. "Do forgive me."

The elderly general clenched his jaw.

"But, what of the satellite—"

He nearly blurted out "our satellite" but choked back the words.

"That artificial satellite defending Earth from meteors and debris was cast off into a disposal orbit by someone! You claim no involvement? Then who? This 'Sam,' did it on his own?!"

The princess shook her head.

"I did nothing of the sort."

"So 'Sam' must have done it behind your back?!"

"No, 'Sam' did not do that either," she stated calmly.

Just then, Eric cut in.

"We of the Romefeller Foundation view the satellite's removal as purely accidental. An unfortunate expenditure, but the costs will be shared among the nations—"

"Nonsense!" the general barked. "If the Sanc Kingdom was protecting itself, Peacecraft should pay reparations!"

"So you admit it, General," Sabrina said quietly. "You were planning a nuclear strike against our kingdom."

"Ugh!" The man realized too late how he'd cornered himself with that remark. Still, he couldn't afford to retreat.

"N-no! The princess just admitted 'Sam' exists, so why haven't you brought it here?"

"But I have brought him along."

"You—what?!"

She glanced to the tall young man at the door.

"Heero, if you please."

The youth was Heero Yuy. In his arms was a Norwegian Forest Cat, Sam, the real one.

"Let me introduce you," Sabrina said. "My dear Sam."

Heero held Sam as he walked up the dais, casting a withering look at the generals. Sam let out a "meow," stirring the hall into confused clamor. Heero transferred the cat to Sabrina and then turned to the microphone, head bowed.

"Excuse me... I'd like a moment."

Angered, the old generals shouted over one another.

"Lies!"

"You mock us!"

"Stop making fools of us!"

Heero's voice, though soft, cut like steel.

"Silence, old men."

They fell abruptly quiet.

"Everything she said is true," he told them. Then, in a sharper tone, "And all of you are wrong."

*

That evening, in the North Sea, the Alliance's Fourth and Fifth Fleets finally clashed with the rebel armada, and were roundly defeated, thanks to the intervention of Katerina Peacecraft and the Wyvern. For the first time since its founding in AC-133, the United Earth Sphere

Alliance, long proud of its unbroken winning streak, tasted the bitter fruit of defeat.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

We were only about half an hour away from Elysium Island when Naina glanced over her shoulder.

"Looks like we haven't shaken our tail," she said, switching our high-speed cargo plane to autopilot. "I'd bet anything it's that kid."

"That kid... you mean Duo Maxwell?" Quaterine murmured softly.

I had to admit, the two of them had sharp instincts. Not a blip on our detection radar, no trace of him on any satellite feed, yet Naina, without a moment's hesitation, contacted the 909th Special Autonomous Squadron of the Martian Federation, stationed directly on Elysium Island. Known as the "Merciless Fairies," they scrambled into action at her call.

My mother, face tight with concern, glanced at Naina. "You're going out there yourself?"

"Don't worry," Naina replied lightly, "it's basically just a picnic run." She pulled a lunch box from her bag as though we were headed to a sunny park, not a potential showdown in the sky. "I'm glad I packed sandwiches for Duo, too..."

Keeping one eye on the sub-monitor, I noticed a swirl on the weather display.

"A sandstorm is closing in."

"That's Duo's Warlock," Naina said, her gaze sharpening with tension.

Then she lifted her chin and spoke with firm resolve.

"Queen of Hearts, heading out!"

Afterword

It's practically agony sometimes, watching all those pet videos online. I love dogs to bits, but the cats, ah, those feline clips just knock me flat. There's nothing cuter on the planet. In fact, my own cat at home is the very same breed as Sabrina's: a Norwegian Forest Cat. Maybe it's just the breed's personality, but she meows at me constantly.

How's everyone doing these days? Once again, I bring you my usual random ramblings.

A while back, when my editor asked, "Why isn't your manuscript done yet?" I offered this very legitimate excuse: "Well, my cat's sleeping on my keyboard." Knowing full well how furious *I'd* get if anyone suggested I just move her, my dear editor responded, "Wow, I'm jealous! In that case, let's do an entire piece about your kitty." That's the kind of wit an editor needs to survive in this business. Anyone can nag about deadlines, but it takes real finesse to turn it around like that.

And so, enter "Sam," the very first official mascot character in Gundam W. I even sent photos of my own cat to Sakura Asagi, the illustrator, saying, "This is basically what I want him to look like, thanks!" That's how cat-crazy I am.

And now, in typical fashion, I'm going to switch gears and talk about voice actors (yes, yes, there's no obvious link, I know).

Whenever I see Takehito Koyasu, who played Zechs Merquise, he always wants to chat about Gundam W. Once, I asked him why the show stuck so firmly in his memory. He just gave me this baffled look, like it was obvious, and said, "Because I was the lead, of course!" I was so taken aback I just stammered, "Well, uh, about that," and Koyasu immediately went, "It's Milliardo and Relena's story, everyone else is just window dressing, end of discussion!" Flustered, I tried to say, "R-right, sure, but, uh, the title—" only for him to chime in, "Exactly! That's the only flaw! It should have been New Mobile Report Tallgeese, or at worst New Mobile Report Gundam Epyon!" The way he said it, I almost believed it was true.

But that's what an actor's spirit can do. They need to bring that kind of confidence, dedication, and fierce pride to their roles, or the soul of the character won't shine through.

So here I am, imagining the day when Koyasu picks up Frozen Teardrop and goes, "When's the Zechs backstory starting? If the main character isn't here, what's the point?!" The thought terrifies me. Hence, I put the Tallgeese on the cover of this volume. May it earn me his

forgiveness, though for all I know, he'd say, "I never said a word of that!" Right. He didn't. It's just my overly active imagination, scripting his lines.

Truth is, I can't wait to delve deeper into the Mars storyline, to wrap up the flashbacks for good. But the plot has to unfold in a certain order, so, well... here we are. Forgive me, please.

On that note, the next volume, Volume 6, dives full speed ahead into the Mars arc. Zechs? He won't be making an appearance.

Sorry, hahaha!

Catch you next time.

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.05 Nocturn in Mourning (Part.01)

Written by: Katsuyuki Sumizawa

Illustrations by: Asagi Sakura [Character]
MORUGA [Mechanical]

Mechanical Design: Hajime Katoki
Junya Ishigaki

Original Story: Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino

Cooperation: Koji Nakajima [Sunrise]
Tetsuko Takahashi [Sunrise]

Advertising Support: Bandai Hobby Division

Supervisor: Hideyuki Tomioka

Cover Design: Hajime Katoki

Text Design: Atsushi Doi [Tendo noPolicy]

Editing: Kadokawa Shoten
Tsuyoshi Ishiwaki
Tomohiro Zaizen
Yasue Nagashima
Miwa Matsumoto