

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP

新機動戦記ガンダムW
フローズンティアドロップ

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6 NOCTURNE IN MOURNING (Part.2)



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Nocturn in Mourning

MC File 4 (Part.01)

"Who are you?"

The Caterpillar asked, lazily puffing smoke from his hookah.

Alice had no answer. The person she had been this morning and the person she had become moments ago were utterly different beings.

"I'm not myself, you see?"

"I don't see," replied the Caterpillar indifferently.

Yet Alice knew that soon enough this Caterpillar would transform into a chrysalis and emerge as a butterfly. And then, surely, he would struggle just as much as she did now to say who he truly was.

"It's the same for you, isn't it?" Alice thought, irritated by his nonchalance.

"Who are you?" The Caterpillar asked again, as if nothing had been said.

Growing more vexed, Alice suggested rather sharply that perhaps he should introduce himself first before questioning others.

The Caterpillar, unbothered, merely puffed on his hookah, bubbles softly popping, and asked.

"Why?"

—Lewis Carol's "Alice in Wonderland"—
The Caterpillar and Alice

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

I've been fighting for as long as I can remember. Every single time, I've had to kill a part of my own heart. Now there's nothing left inside; it's been hollow for ages. Maybe that means I'm not worth much as a human being. From my past to whatever future lies ahead, I've always been a meaningless existence.

If someone were to ask who I am, I'd tell them this: I'm a tool for battle, a weapon. Nothing more, nothing less. A weapon holds no value unless it's used. It's just like a stone lying on the side of the road. But pick up that stone and hurl it at an enemy, and it becomes humanity's very first weapon: the thrown stone. Of course, that stone never set out to become a weapon.

Then one day, out of nowhere, warriors showed up in this so-called "peaceful wasteland," turned it into a battlefield, and started using us, those of us who were just lying around like stones, as instruments of war. We couldn't refuse. We had no other choice. So, like the stone, all

I could do was accept it. All I could do was keep playing the fool on this blood-drenched stage they insist on calling a battlefield.

With every enemy I killed, I felt another piece of whatever hid beneath my mask slipping away, laughter, joy, anger, kindness, sorrow, even fear. One by one, they all vanished. In truth, I've never been anyone at all, not since I was a child. I had no name to call my own, and wearing a mask simply became second nature.

As for what you can call me these days, well... let's go with "Doktor T."

I first came to Mars with Catherine in the early summer of MC-0014. Our reasoning back then was downright casual, we thought it would be fun to run a circus in only one-third of Earth's gravity. Honestly, I don't think she really gave it that much thought when she first suggested it.

Mars is full of people who are earnest to a fault. I don't hold it against them, but mishandling them can lead to disaster. Around MC-0016, the Martian Federation government began equipping its military with what they called MS, or Mars Suits. The moment they did, an unsettling whiff of conflict spread across the skies, seas, and land. It felt like a bloodthirsty infant had just been handed a brand-new toy, except that toy was a deadly weapon.

I could have ignored it, but I couldn't stand the idea of anyone else ending up as hollow as I was. I had no choice but to act. I urged her to return to Earth, there was no way I could drag her into what I was about to do.

"I've always hated war," she said softly, "and that hasn't changed."

"All the more reason you should go back," I replied.

"But remember what Relena Darlian once said: Peace isn't something others can hand to you."

Catherine gave me a gentle smile.

"Even if we run away or pretend not to see it, there will only be more people like us, people who suffer because of war."

"I've never really felt 'unfortunate,'" I mumbled.

"If I leave," she warned, "you'll lose the home you can return to."

"..."

In the end, she and I decided to start volunteering together in the hopes of eradicating war. We knew that if Mars Suits existed, we'd need our own mobile suits as a deterrent. As a way to counter the Federation Forces, I even considered getting hold of mobile dolls, though that was never my preference. Unfortunately, the orbital auto

factory Vulcanus, circling Mars, was firmly locked down by the Neuenheim Konzern. There was no way for us to intervene there.

That left us with one path: build new mobile suits from scratch. And not just any mobile suits, a small, elite group. If we could manage it, we wanted them to be made of Gundanium alloy: in other words, Gundams. These would be our ultimate weapons, our symbols of resistance.

It turned out the so-called "firefighters," or Preventers, dispatched by the Earth Sphere Unified Nation, had been thinking the same thing. One day, we got a request for cooperation from Chang WuFei: he'd heard about our efforts. He summoned us to the Preventers' base in the northern polar region of Mars.

"The weak are getting spooked and deciding to fight," he said. "If this planet turns into a battlefield, the flames of war will eventually reach the Earth Sphere too." His tone was as curt as ever.

"If that's the way things are heading, maybe we just have to accept it," I answered, not revealing how I really felt. Of course, he saw right through me.

"Only soldiers who've steeled themselves can stand against this," he said.

"And... we'll need a Gundam, too," I added.

So we joined forces. But building a new Gundam was a steep, punishing road. Every scrap of the old data was gone, completely erased by the Preventers after Mariemaia's uprising. I'd even helped wipe it myself, so I had no right to complain.

Using whatever modern computer analysis we had and racking our brains for every detail we could remember, we managed to cobble together enough information to devise the most basic hardware specs. But once we ran it through the simulator, we discovered that without the essential software, we couldn't even make the manipulators twitch. Hardware alone was an empty shell, a pilot's coffin. That's how advanced the core software for a Gundam was.

Maybe it was because my own heart was empty, but in any case, refining Gundanium alloy was about the limit of what our skills, technology, and willpower could handle. It felt like we'd slammed into a wall too big to climb. The five scientists who originally built the Gundams had near-miraculous flashes of genius, from computer architecture to engineering. Their perfection was beyond anything we could reproduce.

Model number: XXXG-00W0

Code name: Wing Gundam Zero

Model number: XXXG-01W
Code name: Wing Gundam

Model number: XXXG-01D
Code name: Gundam Deathscythe

Model number: XXXG-01H
Code name: Gundam Heavyarms

Model number: XXXG-01SR
Code name: Gundam Sandrock

Model number: XXXG-01S
Code name: Shenlong Gundam

They were dazzlingly brilliant, the highest and most flawless machines one could imagine.

We thought maybe the Mercurius and Vayeate, successors to those original Gundams designed by those same scientists, would be more feasible and gave it a try. But, as expected, though part of me had hoped otherwise, we stumbled right away. The CAD simulator said they'd malfunction or self-destruct within five minutes. I felt utterly lost, unable to accept it.

At times like that, a change of mood helps. So I took to a busy street corner and pretended to be a street performer. I placed a small hat on the ground, silently playing the clown. My pantomime was simple: I acted like I was trying to move a tiny, invisible suitcase. It wouldn't budge at all, and gradually, that suitcase grew larger and larger. No matter how I pushed or pulled, it wouldn't move. In the end, it crushed me under its weight. Even with that meager show, I managed to earn a little spare change, coins rattled against the hat with each drop.

A few days later, a man walked up to me.

"Impressive," he said, flashing a familiar smile.

"Long time no see, Trowa."

"You haven't changed a bit," I replied.

"Same goes for you... If you don't mind, let me buy you a drink, some real distilled spirits."

It was so very Quatre to call it "distilled spirits" instead of just "booze," "brandy," or "whiskey." Fermented drinks like wine or beer were never enough for him. We slipped into a café on the main road and took seats at the counter. Quatre ordered rum; I got a single cask.

After we toasted our reunion, he took one sip, cheeks already flushing, and started venting his frustrations.

"Life is complicated... especially trying to live it as a normal person."

I nodded. "Yeah, it is."

"Every year I get older," he said, "it's like my guilt just piles up. I can't shake that feeling."

"Living means fighting on and on," I told him. "Pacifism alone won't help you survive."

He fell silent for a moment.

"To reach your goal, you've got to keep walking," I went on. "Be it storms or scorching heat, you don't stop."

"You're right," he murmured. "That's exactly it."

His cheeks still rosy, Quatre brought up the pantomime I'd done.

"Hey, Trowa... what did that invisible suitcase symbolize?"

"Who knows?" I shrugged.

I'd never really given it serious thought. In my mind, it was just a bag full of stones in terms of weight. If I were to force a meaning onto it, maybe it was stuffed with "fate," or maybe "life." Either way, I had no intention of letting it crush me underfoot.

"To me," Quatre said, "that suitcase looked like a Gundam."

He'd always had this habit of saying things that felt like they arrived from another dimension.

"When I was a kid, I built a Gundam," he went on.

Quatre had once completed the Wing Gundam Zero.

"But that wasn't really me building it," he said. "It was hatred and vengeance, working through my hands."

Like trying to let a god of creation and a devil of destruction coexist in your heart.

"It was the product of madness and miracles," he said. "No one could ask me to build that again... It's impossible."

From the course of his words, I could guess the real meaning.

"You've met with WuFei, haven't you?" I asked.

"Yes," he admitted, "and I intend to help however I can."

Summing up what Quatre had to say:

A few months ago, on one of the Winner family's resource satellites, an old hangar was discovered. Inside were disassembled mobile suits fashioned from Gundanium alloy. Those suits turned out to be the ones known as Snow White, Warlock, Prometheus, and Scheherazade. They had been used during the Second Lunar War, a chapter of history buried so deeply it never made it into the Earth Sphere's

official archives or the Lanagreene Republic's libraries. Naturally, the ones who built them were those same five brilliant scientists.

Once the Preventers learned of this discovery, they contacted Quatre. Chang WuFei then asked him to complete those mobile suits. Quatre, already feeling more guilt than any of us, entrusted the management of the Winner family's affairs to his sisters and took on the job. As one might expect, progress was slow and filled with obstacles. Quatre felt a deep sense of responsibility about it, and I really did want to help him, though my own heart is hollow.

"I'm starting to think I never truly understood what 'software' even means," I told him.

"Well, we're pilots," he replied.

Quatre lifted his half-full glass of rum to eye level and murmured, "You can't make distilled spirits without a blender."

"A blender?" I repeated.

"Imagine we've got some top-shelf Irish whiskey," he said, face flushed but eyes as calm as ever. "No matter how perfectly you follow the recipe, even if you gather identical ingredients, barley, water, and use the exact same tools, peat and the same barrels, you still won't replicate that same taste."

That made intuitive sense. There are countless varieties of distilled spirits, and no two taste exactly alike. Even the same label can vary drastically by vintage or bottle size.

"That's why you need a master blender," Quatre went on, "someone who oversees the raw spirits, watches over every step from mashing to distillation, experiments with various blends, refines the flavor and aroma, and carefully stores it, predicting how it'll taste decades into the future. Only then can they release a proper product to the world."

It clicked. Those scientists were master blenders on a level beyond genius. This metaphor did more for my understanding than any academic paper on software engineering could.

"So maybe we're just the bartenders," I said. "All we can do is pour the finest whiskey, whatever good that does us as 'weapons.' Trying to 'create' might just be beyond us."

"That's one way to put it," Quatre said, not disputing it in the least, despite my self-deprecating intention. He took one more small sip of his rum.

"Though the best whiskey can only shine in the hands of someone who knows how to serve it."

For a man who clearly can't handle liquor, he sure could wax poetic about it.

"You have to choose the right glass, carve the ice just so, pour it properly, stir it the perfect number of times and at the perfect speed. And if you're mixing a cocktail, that demands a far wider range of knowledge and technique. In that sense, yeah... we're not so different."

The more Quatre flexed his esoteric knowledge, the more uneasy I felt, like we might not reach our goal anytime soon.

"Quatre," I said, "let me help you with this."

"Good. I'd been meaning to bring it up anyway, Trowa."

"I've already thrown away the name 'Trowa Barton.'"

"Same for me!" he said. "These days, I go by 'Professor W', the W stands for Winner, or Wing."

"Then call me 'Doktor T.'"

"All right..."

From there, Professor W and I worked side by side in an underground factory in Chryse, dividing tasks to assemble and upgrade these suits with the best modern tech we had. I took charge of Prometheus and Scheherazade, while Professor W devoted himself to creating custom software. Six years later, MC-0022, which translates to a good twelve-plus Earth years, he finally finished Snow White and Warlock. My Prometheus and Scheherazade, on the other hand, were still stuck at eighty-percent completion by that point.

WuFei, "Master Chang" to the Preventers, sometimes complained that a single suit shouldn't take so long to produce. But when you compare us to those brilliant scientists, there's no helping it. Any one of them, working alone, could finish a new machine in just four years, barely a third of our time.

In AC-186, the prototype Wing Gundam Zero had been designed, but the decision was made to shelve it due to excessive combat potential and skyrocketing production costs. Then, by AC-190, they had prototypes like Snow White finished. Four years later, in AC-194, they built the very first XXXG-01 units and set Operation Meteor into motion the following year. They were on a different level. Even after OZ captured them a few months later, they managed to create Mercurius and Vayeate in under two months. Genius barely begins to describe it.

Then, in early winter of MC-0021, after Milliardo, the first president of the Mars Federation, had been assassinated, a surviving Gundam finally turned up: the Gundam Epyon. It had been hidden in secret by the Lanagreene Republic on Mars. Its basic design data were still locked inside the ZERO System's memory. The Preventers managed to

hack it, and Master Chang used that data to build Nataku. He completed it in just about a year. It was enough to leave me stunned.

Of course, Treize Khushrenada's designs meant the software was its own beast. Even so, the gap between us was painfully obvious, especially when I realized that WuFei, too, was once a Gundam pilot. Thinking back to AC195–196, he spent far more time working solo than the rest of us. Between battles, he maintained Shenlong Gundam and later Altron Gundam (both of which he called "Nataku") all on his own, painstakingly polishing each part. And now, driven by sheer determination, he'd built a new version of Epyon, the "Gundam Epyon Pi," though he still called it "Nataku." That single-minded intensity alone is enough to command respect.

Meanwhile, Professor W and I had another task: finding pilots to wield these new suits. We managed to recruit Quaterine Oud Winner, Professor W's sister, and a nameless individual, who now goes by Trowa Phobos. Father Maxwell also got in touch to say he'd begun training his son, Duo. And from Master Chang, we learned the so-called "Princess Aurora," still in cryogenic sleep, "Sleeping Beauty," in other words, had been moved to the Preventers' base at the northern polar cap. So we had our pilots. All that was left was to finish the suits and carry out Operation Mythos.

We'd never planned to pilot them ourselves. No matter how many improvements we made, the suits required reaction speeds none of us possessed anymore. Even if we retrained from scratch, we wouldn't last long enough in the cockpit. We needed people with the same raw physical and mental ability as Princess Aurora.

Truth be told, it stung when Quaterine took the unfinished Prometheus and ran. I sent Phobos, my stand-in for Trowa, to chase after her. Considering all possibilities, we also asked Heero Yuy and Duo Maxwell, stationed at the northern polar cap base, to intercept her if it came to that. Then Professor W, Catherine, and I climbed aboard the submarine carrier Shawhook II and left Chryse. Our plan was to corner her between that ship and the fast hovercraft Voyage, which had launched from the polar base.

Quaterine and Trowa Phobos ended up clashing at the base of Olympus Mons. She was ready with forty Maganacs to stave off pursuit.

We'd anticipated that the Martian Federation might be holding RMD's (replica mobile dolls) of the Maganac Corps, Quatre's old support unit, so we'd armed ourselves with Snow White and Warlock. Even so, Quaterine managed to escape in a large hover transport with

Prometheus onboard. Apparently, her sense of battle tactics outstrips mine. She'd predicted Phobos would chase her and that Heero and Duo would show up too. I don't know the specifics, but it's remarkable that she outmaneuvered Phobos, whom Catherine herself had helped train.

Well, it's no shock she's Professor W's sister.

Not that I'd give up chasing her so easily. My resolve isn't that weak.

It looked at first like the Martian Federation's large hover transport was heading from Olympus Mons straight toward Elysium Island, but it veered off, taking a roundabout route toward the northern polar region instead.

The move made no sense.

We couldn't get a clear read on what was happening, so we continued pursuit, only to learn that the Lanagreen Republic's Major General Zechs Merquise had deployed the Gundam Epyon and several Virgo IV suits. Almost simultaneously, we got word that Master Chang was heading out in Nataku to intercept Zechs.

That would have been enough of a surprise, but then Heero and Duo jumped into the fray as well, each piloting Snow White and Warlock. To make matters worse, a full airborne division of the Martian Federation's army showed up over Olympus Mons, five hundred unmanned flying Mars Suits, scattered like metal hornets in the sky. With that kind of firepower mobilized against Chang, Zechs, and the other two, we had no choice but to move in to support them. Maybe this aerial assault was a diversion tactic meant to block our pursuit, or a two-pronged operation to seize every last suit. If that was the plan, it implied a serious underestimation of Quaterine. Then again, maybe someone working behind the scenes, Naina or Mille, was playing a deeper strategic game?

But no... that didn't track, either.

Quaterine's actions and the deployment of that airborne division felt like they were heading in different directions entirely. The timing was off, as if the Federation was improvising. If they'd planned on using such a large-scale force from the start, they would've stationed them around Olympus Mons from the beginning, guaranteeing a proper blockade. Either they had one hell of a strategist, or a complete fool. More likely they saw the Gundam Epyon launch from the Lanagreen Republic via their surveillance satellites and rushed in without much forethought.

For one split second, I considered giving up on recapturing Prometheus, but it turned out that wasn't necessary. By the time we

arrived on the battlefield, the appearance of Tallgeese Heaven had swept aside every last unmanned Mars Suit. A man calling himself "Cyrene Wind," Milliardo, had used something called a "nano-defenser" to wipe them out. As ever, he fought without pledging allegiance to anyone. I'd more or less expected that, so naturally, Snow White and Warlock made it through unharmed and were able to rendezvous with our team. We sent Master Chang in Natak, along with Trowa Phobos, back to the Voyage. They wouldn't be joining our pursuit, both men had pushed themselves well beyond the breaking point, physically and mentally.

To be fair, Duo and Heero were just as exhausted, but if we cut them loose, we had no idea what they'd get up to on their own. So we brought those two aboard.

A few minutes later, the brash loudmouth and the unnervingly quiet troublemaker showed up on the bridge.

"Hey, you must know where Quaterine's headed, right?" Duo yelled the second he arrived, loud enough for the entire craft to hear. "And what the hell are we doin' chasin' her in this rusty bucket? The Voyage is way faster!"

Like father, like son, complaints aplenty. Ignoring the kid, I stepped over in front of Heero, whom I hadn't seen in ages.

"Glad you made it, Heero Yuy."

He narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Trowa...?"

He spoke the name I'd used so long ago. I thought I'd long since taken off that old mask, but maybe I was harder to recognize than I realized.

"Wow, Heero," Professor W said, smiling in surprise as he offered his hand. "It's been ages. You haven't changed a bit, huh?"

"Quatre?" Heero answered, not returning the handshake, just blinking a couple times. He looked dead on his feet.

"Haha... well, we've changed a lot in other ways. Oh, right, you never were the handshake type."

"Hey, old man!" Duo's voice rose again. "Stop ignoring me!" He stomped around, clearly agitated. "Seriously, are we even really chasing her in this pile of junk?!"

"Hey." Heero pressed his fingers to his brow as if staving off a migraine. He looked at Professor W and me. "Would you two do something about that defective noise machine over there? His voice is giving me a headache."

"Couldn't agree more," I said. Then I glanced behind me to where Catherine stood, arms folded. "Mind handling it, Sis?"

She gave a brief sigh.

"Not exactly what I want to do..." Narrowing her eyes at Duo, she added, "And this isn't discipline so much as borderline abuse, you know."

"As long as there's love, it's not a problem."

"I'll try to go easy on him, but no promises."

Duo must have picked up on the lethal gleam in her gaze.

"H-Hey, come on, la--"

Before he could even finish, her fist connected squarely with his cheek, a brutally clean shot that sent him flying back a good few meters. But her motion didn't stop there, she pivoted gracefully behind Heero and gave the back of his neck a sharp, flat-handed tap.

"Urgh..."

Heero went limp on the spot, collapsing to the floor.

Just as I suspected. Both of them were basically fighting to stay upright.

"Did you at least hold back?" Professor W asked as he hurried to prop Heero up.

"I did on him," she said, pointing at Heero's unconscious form. "But that brat went and said the forbidden word."

He didn't actually get it all out, which made it more a drubbing than a scolding.

"D-damn that hurt!" Duo struggled to his feet, a dark bruise already blossoming on his cheek. "I let my guard down 'cause she's a woman."

I stared. Even after taking a direct hit like that, he stayed conscious. Impressive.

"What the hell, lady?! You just haul off and punch people like that?" He stormed over in huge strides, but Catherine glared back without missing a beat.

"Watch your mouth! You either call me 'Catherine, ma'am' or 'Miss Catherine.' Got it?"

Duo's eyes went wide.

"If you use that forbidden word again," she warned, "you can kiss that puffed-up cheek goodbye, it'll be a perfect round next time."

"Uh... yeah, got it..." Clearly picking up on how serious she was, he grumbled, shoulders slumping in reluctant surrender.

"Try using polite language, too. 'Got it' isn't quite good enough," she pressed.

"S... sure. I... understand." He cast his eyes down, stumbling a bit over the words. I was surprised at how quickly he fell in line.



"Yeah, well, I don't cross older women anyway," he muttered.

"Oh?" I said, making a mild jab at him. "So that includes any Peacecraft women, too?"

"Are you crazy? If they're the enemy, they're the enemy!"

"Alright then... you pass," Professor W said, locking Heero into the medical capsule and giving Duo an analytical once-over. "We'll send Duo, then."

"Agreed," I replied. "If he can last that long in the Warlock and still be this energetic, he'll do fine."

"?"

Whether it was from real battlefield experience or Father Maxwell's grueling training, Duo had clearly mastered the art of pacing himself. And since he'd just taken Catherine's punch head-on yet come out relatively okay, it meant he'd managed to shift his weight and minimize the impact. Maybe he was born with that innate fighter's reflex and dynamic vision. A natural warrior, if you will, but nothing like me, or Professor W, or even Catherine. Nor did he resemble his father all that much. Something is missing... or maybe he's got something extra. I'm still not sure what it is.

"What about your pal over there?" Duo asked. "Gonna leave him knocked out like that?"

"He thinks he's regained all the strength he had in his prime," I said, "but he hasn't. Not nearly."

If the real Heero Yuy were at full capacity, he never would've gone down from one half-strength chop, even if Catherine did distract him by slamming Duo first. He'd have dodged and counterattacked before she even got in range.

"Lock's engaged," Professor W said, stepping back from the capsule. "Heero never used to get this drained from a single run with the ZERO System. Looks like his long cryo-sleep really took a toll on him."

If we hurled him into a battlefield right now, a small slipup might push him to self-destruct, just as he once did in the past. Of all our potential pieces, Heero Yuy is the most critical. We need to take care of him.

Duo's eyes flashed.

"So you won't get on my case if I blow away Relena Peacecraft, right?"

"You don't need to worry about that," I replied. "You couldn't kill that woman if you tried."

President Relena isn't someone who goes down easily.

The large hover transport carrying Prometheus continued south from the Borealis Sea, heading into the Arcadia Sea. If it kept on its western course, it would emerge into the Elysium Sea near the Freklaf Islands. I ordered Duo to prepare for launch and brought the Shawhook II to the surface. Standing on the deck was the Warlock, a mobile suit draped in a black cape.

"Warlock, check!"

Duo's voice, brimming with an energy that made you wonder where he got it from, crackled over the comm the moment he finished launch prep.

Professor W relayed the latest intel through the monitor.

"Duo, twelve Mars Suits have launched from Elysium Island. All of them are piloted... I'm betting you'll be up against--"

"Naina's 'Merciless Fairies,' right?"

"That's what I suspect."

"Awesome... sounds like they'll make worthy opponents!"

He grinned like some Cheshire Cat straight out of a storybook. Even with the odds at twelve to one, he showed not the slightest trace of fear. All the same, I felt compelled to warn this cocky kid before he got carried away.

"Listen up. The currents in this area are what we call the 'Jet Streams.' They're swift and powerful. Don't even think about trying any underwater maneuvers."

"Warlock, roger!"

"I'm about to generate a magnetic sandstorm."

"Roger!"

"Warlock, you're clear for launch."

"Let's do this!"

Amid the gale of magnetized sand, the black-caped mobile suit took flight. From behind, it looked like a bat spreading its pitch-black wings against the sky.

I submerged the Shawhook II. On the bridge, Professor W handled the battle analysis while Catherine took over as operator. As for me, the pilot, once I switched the vessel to autopilot, there wasn't much left to do. I sank down into the command chair, arms folded, feeling almost like a ship's captain. Professor W wouldn't sit; he'd once said it was easier to read the ebb and flow of combat while standing.

Before long, Catherine picked up a blip on the radar.

"One unit's broken formation from those so-called Merciless Fairies. It's heading straight for Duo."

On the main monitor, sand whirled relentlessly across the screen, this was footage from a flying camera eye we'd released just before diving. Meanwhile, the radar data came from hacking a weather satellite and running the feed through ZERO's predictive calculations. Professor W, standing beside me, murmured quietly,

"They've got the sandstorm completely figured out."

"Maybe we overrated the kid," I said.

"Possibly," he admitted. "In this situation, it gives Naina Peacecraft the upper hand."

Catherine's eyes flicked to a separate readout.

"Enemy unit identified: Queen of Hearts!"

That lined up with Professor W's guess.

"Given Duo's personality," he went on, "I doubt he'll use the sandstorm for cover."

"Right. He'll gleefully charge straight in," I said.

"Exactly. I can confirm it now, Warlock just shot out of the MSS!" Catherine added.

The main monitor switched from swirling sand to a clear visual of the soon-to-be meeting between the queen and the sorcerer.

"Hey, long time no see, Naina!" Duo's voice crackled through the speakers as the Warlock's beam scythe came slashing down.

But the Queen of Hearts deftly caught it on her beam sword, a larger, higher-output weapon than a typical beam saber.

"Indeed! It's been a while, Duo!"

Sparks crackled in the air around them. Their clash set them down on a tiny volcanic isle among the Freklaf archipelago. Warlock recoiled just enough to send the queen's blade flying off course and took a step back to where the scythe could swing in a full arc.

"I stopped by on a little errand," Duo said.

Raising a sturdy shield to eye level, the Queen of Hearts kept her guard up.

"Well, look at that," Naina replied. "The storm's cleared and now it's a gorgeous day."

No doubt she'd calculated just how close she could let him get before making her move.

"A perfect day for a picnic," she teased.

To counter a beam scythe's spinning slash, the best tactic is to dodge the first swing, then dart inside the orbit of the second strike, landing a quick blow before the scythe can come around again. Naina was waiting for that exact moment.

"Sounds great!" Duo barreled forward.

Naina, in turn, rocketed straight back with her shoulder thrusters, neatly evading the scythe's first slice.

"I've even got sandwiches," she said.

Slamming the thrusters to maximum, Naina shot around inside the scythe's arc.

"Wanna split them with me?"

She drove her large beam sword in a stabbing thrust. Part of the Warlock's black cape was shorn away, but Duo's mobile suit managed to dodge, leaving only a flickering silhouette behind.

"Sandwiches, huh?"

That was some impressive evasive work, especially the smooth movement that got Warlock behind her. He was using his auto-balancer brilliantly; a normal pilot would've blacked out under that level of acceleration.

"Yep, homemade," Naina called over her shoulder, "with a recipe Sister Hilde taught me!"

Leaping to avoid his next attack, the Queen soared into the sky. Warlock followed. With only a third of Earth's gravity, both suits' jumps were massive.

"You're kidding! Really?" Duo exclaimed.

"Have I ever lied to you?"

The queen fired her built-in Vulcans, a direct hit wouldn't do much damage, but it was perfect for blinding the target's sensors.

"Of course I put tomato in them," she said, capitalizing on the split second to slash downward again with her beam sword.

"And mustard and mayo!"

Amping the sword's output to maximum, she extended it like a long spear and unleashed a flurry of precise thrusts. Her linear close-range style effectively neutralized Warlock's circular scythe attacks. Even if her custom Mars Suit didn't match Warlock's specs, her sheer piloting skill let her match him move for move. I shuddered to imagine Naina piloting Prometheus. And yet Duo, now evading every blow, was no slouch himself.

"Aww, man, I'm starving to death out here!" he groaned.

Without that mid-battle banter, his performance might have seemed more polished. But listening to them felt like eavesdropping on a couple of old friends on a picnic.

"I've got chicken and ham, too. Your favs!" Naina said.

"Livin' the high life, huh?" Duo shot back. "Hey, it's not my birthday or anything!"

"It's special because it's been so long."

If they could banter like this in the midst of such furious combat, maybe I should be rating both their skills even higher. The two suits touched down again on the same volcanic island, and Warlock took the initiative right away.

"All right, all right... I give up," Duo said.

His actions, however, were anything but surrender, he lunged at breakneck speed.

"Then how about we find a nice spot to lay out a blanket?" Naina countered.

She easily read the pace of Warlock's attack, dodging with minimal wasted motion. By now, any chance of a surprise hit was basically gone.

"Anywhere's good for me... as long as there's food!"

"I don't want to sit on jagged rocks."

Switching tactics on a dime, the Queen turned the linear momentum of her sword into a circular spin, mirroring Warlock's own swirling scythe. When Warlock's beam scythe traced a figure eight, her sword cut an infinity symbol.

"Back at the orphanage, you'd eat just about anywhere," she teased.

"You always used to sneak out during prayer time!"

At the point where the two arcs intersected, the Queen focused her power, batting Warlock's beam scythe halfway across the island.

"Haha, yeah... Sister was pretty mad at us for that!" Duo laughed.

I couldn't see his face, but he must have been grinning like the Cheshire Cat again. Rather than fret, he pulled a second beam scythe from beneath Warlock's cape. Naina had to be surprised, though her voice stayed breezy.

"I still remember Sister's special finishing hold," Duo said, sounding half amused and half nostalgic.

"Hurt like hell, no lie!"

He pressed the attack once again, and the Queen parried.

"How about her, have you seen Sister Hilde since then?" she asked.

"Nope, my old man's had me chained down."

Their blades wove arcs in the air, faster and faster.

"Oh, right, how's he doing?" Naina said. "Working hard? Is he well?"

"Way too healthy, if you ask me! Wish he'd drop dead!"

Naina burst into laughter. "That's just like him!"

The speed of their swordplay peaked, and the Queen's strike sent the beam scythe flying again. In a straightforward blade-to-blade contest, Naina's Queen of Hearts was overpowering Duo's Warlock.

"Hey, you remember that Christmas?" she began.

To the naked eye, her beam sword looked like it had run Warlock clean through, but it was only an afterimage.

"You mean the time we wore those goofy costumes?" Duo's voice came from a spot dozens of meters behind where he'd been. He'd teleported backward, or as good as, in that split second, retrieving both beam scythes she'd knocked aside.

"That was hilarious," she said.

"My stomach hurts just thinkin' about it," Duo replied.

Now dual-wielding scythes, he drew twin figure-eight arcs in the air.

"No, that's just your empty stomach," Naina teased.

I'd been wondering from the start why he hadn't just used that trick. Maybe he was saving it for a last resort. Warlock zigzagged unpredictably, inching closer. With two scythes swirling in overlapping orbits, there was no safe way to slip inside without getting torn to pieces.

Still, the Queen refused to back down. She charged with a thunderous thrust, her fastest yet. But Duo caught the beam sword between both scythes in a perfect cross, sending her sword flying away this time.

"Man, I'm starving!" Duo shouted. "I just realized I haven't eaten anything since morning!"

"Then maybe you really should give up," Naina countered.

To my surprise, she pulled a physical bazooka off her shoulder and took aim at Warlock. At such close range, illusions and afterimages wouldn't help him at all.

"Time out!" Duo suddenly broadcast over comms.

Unbelievable. By opening communications, he was basically giving away Shawhook II's position.

"Doktor T, this is Warlock!"

Catherine's eyes flew to the radar.

"There are eleven suits headed straight for this submarine!" she exclaimed.

"Duo really does have a flair for the dramatic," Professor W said, chuckling.

"I'm picking up two closing in fast," Catherine went on. "Their signatures read: Ace of Spades and Jack of Spades!"

Ace and Jack of Spades, some of the best "cards" the Merciless Fairies have. In card game terms, that's a high-stakes duo indeed.

Blackjack.

I had a bad feeling.

"Hey, Dok T! Come in already," Duo insisted over the line.

"What?" I said.

"Me 'n Naina here wanna cut a little 'ceasefire deal."

"Denied," I replied flatly.

Almost immediately, Catherine cried out again, "The four units behind them have been identified too: Eight of Hearts, Eight of Diamonds, Eight of Spades, and Eight of Clubs!"

"The fabled 'four of a kind' of eights," I muttered.

Professor W shook his head. "In the card game Daifugō, 'Eight Enders' can flip the advantage. Or maybe they're aiming for a 'Revolution.'"

Daifugō, I'd heard the name but never really played it.

"In a 'Revolution,' the strongest cards become the weakest," he went on. "Right now, maybe they're implying the Joker's about to drop to the bottom of the heap."

I let out a long sigh.

"I have to wonder which Joker they mean."

"Hmm?"

"Which card gets the Joker's illustration, Warlock? Or maybe the Pierrot?"

Professor W paused, thinking, then spoke with quiet certainty.

"Most likely... it's both."

Nocturn in Mourning

MC File 4 (Part.02)

I have to keep my cool.

I need to view the battlefield from above, gauge every shift in the surroundings with precision.

Right now, the cards we have on our side are two Jokers: the "Warlock" and the "Pierrot." Meanwhile, the Merciless Fairies have twelve cards in total: the Queen of Hearts, the Ace and Jack of Spades, a four-of-a-kind in eights, plus another five whose identities remain unknown. At present, the Warlock and the Queen of Hearts are locked in a dead heat, an absolute stalemate.

Meanwhile, two transformable flight-type Mars Suits, code-named Blackjack, are closing in at high speed on our submarine carrier, the Shawhook II. And though still at a distance, four transformable underwater Mars Suits, calling themselves Revolution, are also on the move, heading straight for us beneath the waves.

"So in the end, the one pulling the strings here is young Duo, huh?"

A few minutes earlier, Professor W had commented, "He really does have a flair for the dramatic." Apparently, this is what he was talking about.

"He timed that transmission on purpose," the professor went on. "It was a ploy to split Blackjack and Revolution between us, so he could lessen his own load."

So that kid was the dealer, handing out the cards. In other words, after discovering that the Queen of Hearts he's facing is stronger than expected, he decided to halve the number of additional enemies he'd have to contend with down the line. I could nod and say, "Makes sense," in response to Professor W, but from our side, who's stuck cleaning up after him, it's flat-out annoying.

"Professor, you didn't set up some kind of contingency plan?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"Nothing at all," he replied. "Didn't you have this much factored in, Doktor?"

He tossed me a question I had no way of answering. I fell silent for a moment. Honestly, I hadn't foreseen any of this. Our only true objective is retrieving Prometheus, not achieving victory over the Merciless Fairies. Still, I can't deny that this fight is part of the process of reaching that goal. If that's the case, sending a single Warlock to take on twelve Mars Suits is excessive in purely tactical terms, it means my initial judgment was too optimistic.

That brat Duo basically said, "Your prediction was off!" and foisted the consequences of my slip-up onto me. Apparently, he's taken me rather lightly. Right now, I can practically hear him grinning in his cockpit.

"C'mon, old man, let's sweat this out together!"

Take Heero Yuy, for instance, he'd never pull this kind of stunt. It's in his nature to shoulder everything by himself. Once he decides something is his mission, he charges in straight on, with the clean resolve of a warrior. He's never without that firm sense of purpose. Duo, on the other hand, forces teamwork on us, all so we'll take care of half the enemies, six suits, whether we like it or not. He's being awfully chummy with people he's barely even met.

But he's got none of the charm that might come with that sort of friendliness. Actually, "cheeky" might be more like it. And just imagining him smirking like the Cheshire Cat inside his cockpit, well, it stirs a long-forgotten anger in me.

That said, I wasn't about to cobble together some makeshift fix just to get through the moment.

"Understood."

I stood, took hold of the submarine carrier's controls, and spoke in a calm, measured voice.

"From here on out, everything in this operation is going into my calculations."

I'd show them what kind of performance the Pierrot, the worst card in our hand, could deliver.

"Now that's the Doktor T I know!"

Catherine clasped her hands together with a delighted smile.

First, how to shake off Blackjack. If I consider what kind of backup that so-called dealer and game-maker, Duo, wants from us, the answer becomes clear: turn the enemy's attention our way. Now that they've found the Shawhook II, there's no doubt the Ace and Jack of Spades will mount a depth-charge attack. If we try a rapid dive to evade the first strike, we'll lose speed and inevitably be cornered by that four-of-a-kind of eights lurking below. Those transformable underwater Mars Suits are far more maneuverable than this submarine carrier, so they'd box us in on all sides and rob us of any chance to fight back.

In that case, We may as well surface and engage Blackjack; we can keep up the Pierrot act a lot longer that way. Quite likely, this fight will play out like a seesaw game. We're at a disadvantage now, but sooner or later, the tide will shift. All we can do is maintain this precarious balance, like walking a tightrope, until our opening appears. I don't love it, but in this particular scenario, a purely defensive strategy is our only choice. And we're stuck without even the balancing pole. All of it is thanks to that brazen kid who snatched away the initiative.

Only a few more seconds until our close encounter with Blackjack.

"Up trim, forty! Shawhook II, begin surfacing!"

I was planning to break the surface and immediately launch every anti-air missile. I didn't actually think we'd sink them with that alone, but it would at least be a first strike while I waited to gauge their response. However, when we were still a few dozen meters below the surface, Blackjack dropped a huge spread of depth charges. Their aim was devastatingly precise, and we took several hits in the resulting shockwave. Inside the submarine, rocked violently, I kept my grip on the control stick. But focusing on maintaining our stability slowed us down for just a second, shallowing our angle of ascent and increasing our odds of taking direct hits.

I don't regret it. That's simply part of my code. On the monitor, red lights flashed for each new site of damage. It was all on me.

"Did you just slip up?" Professor W asked, noting my momentary lag in piloting.

I kept my tone composed.

"That's what happens when you walk a tightrope."

No excuses, that, too, is my pride. Fortunately, the propulsion unit, the missile storage, and the bow torpedo tubes were intact. We'd taken hits in multiple places, but we pressed on, determined to breach the surface. I found myself thinking about my age. I don't have many opportunities left to make up for my mistakes with some feat of heroism; I'm not the man I used to be.

At last, the Shawhook II burst through the waves into a war zone marked by colossal geysers of water from lingering explosions. The furious swells battered the hull, but I kept the vessel steady enough to fire off the missiles stored under the deck. There was no time to aim. Two of the missiles at the front never launched because their hatches, damaged by the barrage, refused to open. As a result, ten anti-air missiles flew wild across the crimson sky, tracing multiple erratic arcs. I held out a faint hope at least one would land by sheer luck.

But the Ace and Jack of Spades proved worthy of their names, they dodged every single missile.

"Huh, close call," Professor W commented in a level voice, clearly having expected no hits from the start.

"Maybe I should've cheered louder," he added.

I said nothing. Under normal circumstances, I might have admired the enemy's skill. But I kept my thoughts to myself.

The real question was Blackjack's next move. I was preparing to dive again when Catherine, eyes locked on the radar monitor, reported, "The Ace and Jack of Spades have pulled an about-face and are leaving the combat zone."

"So... the next wave is from below," I muttered. If their intent was to sink us outright, they'd have continued the bombardment a bit longer. The sudden end to that first strike was almost anticlimactic. Then again, it might just be shrewd tactics.

Watching the radar on a smaller sub-screen, I confirmed for myself that the two Blackjack units had reversed course and flown off. Tactically, their move is to keep the Shawhook II pinned down and force an underwater conclusion.

"So we were hooked after all?" Professor W said. Indeed, Blackjack was probably the bait to force us to surface.

"No, this actually suits us just fine," I replied. Everything was still within my calculations. From the start, the real target on my mind has been that four-of-a-kind of eights. Whether you call it an "eight cut" or a "Revolution," I'd rather take out those transformable underwater suits first.

"Full speed ahead."

Instead of switching to a rapid dive, I opted to stay on the surface at maximum velocity, forging straight ahead toward whatever awaited us next.

A small sun was sinking along the southwestern horizon. Ahead lay the unnamed volcanic island where Duo and the others were holed up, and beyond that, farther still, was Elysium Island, just coming into view.

"Sis, keep me posted on any sonar contacts," I said.

"Got it! Leave it to me," Catherine replied sharply, pressing a headphone over her right ear.

Professor W remained utterly calm.

"You really plan to just barrel in?"

"Yes..." I answered quietly. He could already see right through me.

"That's a risky move," he pointed out.

"No battle worth fighting comes without risk."

"You really don't change, do you?"

"If we sit around waiting, this tightrope act isn't going to get any easier."

If I try submerging this large carrier and forge ahead underwater, we'd be slowed drastically by currents. And underwater combat brings the added danger of sudden, unpredictable jet streams. The only other possibility I've considered is that the Ace and Jack of Spades might double back for another pass. But I'm guessing they won't do that,

they risk catching their own side, that four-of-a-kind in eights, in the crossfire.

So where did they go instead? Possibly after the other Joker, the Warlock. In that case, it's basically a killer pass from me to them. Maybe they'll regret ordering around their older comrades like that. I moved to ready my next move.

"Torpedoes in tubes one and two, load!"

Catherine listened carefully through the sonar, then spoke up with brisk confidence. "Four-of-a-kind in eights moving in from the front, spreading out and charging."

"Professor," I asked, "how do you think they're reading our next move?"

"Hmm. Most pilots would look at what we're doing and call it a foolhardy suicide run," he said.

"..."

"But a levelheaded pilot would see you're calmly timing your torpedo launch."

"These are people who call themselves 'Revolution,'" I said, "so I'm betting on the latter."

"Exactly... They've decided we're the weakest 'Joker,' and that's where our opening lies."

"The first strike is the real key," I said. "We have to avoid it at all costs."

"Here's hoping they don't land a shot," the professor muttered.

"Don't worry," I replied. "I'm at the helm..."

He gave a quiet, knowing chuckle.

"Oh, I trust you. Still, there's always that slim chance..."

He was clearly referencing my slip-up when we surfaced earlier. I let it pass. The older he gets, the sharper his tongue becomes. Back in his youth, he'd at least have spared me some courtesy.

The four-of-a-kind spread out across our front, side by side, rushing us head-on.

"Sonar contact!" Catherine called. "They've fired eight torpedoes!"

Her report sounded almost casual. All eight had come from the arms of those four underwater suits. That was enough to pinpoint their positions and distance.

"Understood."

I weaved the Shawhook II in a maneuver we call a Tornado, dodging the eight incoming torpedoes by a hair's breadth, then immediately launched two bow torpedoes of my own.

"Now that was perfect... Not bad, Doktor," Professor W said.

Coordinating the Tornado turn with the exact moment of firing was incredibly tricky, but he could've chosen better words than that faint praise. I had no time to bicker over semantics, though.

"Sis!" I snapped, and Catherine quickly took off her headphones.

A moment later, the two torpedoes exploded right in front of the Revolution units. They were wired electronic acoustic torpedoes, a weapon that unleashes high-frequency sonic waves and a vast plume of bubbles across a broad area, robbing enemy pilots of sight and hearing. On a standard submarine, the pilot can swap out the sonar officer immediately. But a transformable underwater Mars Suit doesn't have that luxury. While they're nimble, they have no way to respond to this type of situation.

By now, chaos must be erupting under the waves in that part of the sea. Ordinarily, a Mars Suit pilot would surface to escape, but clearly, Revolution predicted we'd snipe them if they popped up. Instead, they've gone deeper, likely waiting for their "eyes" and "ears" to return. That buys us a few precious seconds of breathing room.

"They're good," I muttered. "I half expected at least one to shoot to the surface."

"Your initial full salvo was a perfect bluff," the professor said. "It all went according to your calculations."

I decided to let his barbs drift past for now. Either way, it worked. We now had a clear shot to pierce straight through the middle.

I jettisoned the wires controlling the acoustic torpedoes and pushed the Shawhook II's engines even harder. The area we'd just cleared was riddled with fierce, rapidly flowing jet currents. It'll probably be a good few minutes before the enemy can pin down our position and catch up.

Far off along the horizon, the sun dipped lower, burnishing the sky with gold. Professor W narrowed his eyes at the last gleam of light and asked, "That's all for your defensive maneuver?"

"Yes," I replied. "Now it's our turn to take the offensive."

"In that case, I take it you've already mounted the Seven Zwarg on Snow White?"

"Naturally. They're ready."

I paused, then asked, "Are you planning to pilot Snow White yourself, Professor?"

"I can unlock Heero's biometric lock. I figure I can at least go prone on the deck and shoot accurately enough."

In some decks of playing cards, besides the two Jokers, there's an extra blank "white card." This ultimate outlier, an entirely blank slate, is what we call Snow White. There's also another card we have in

reserve, which might just become a "Jackpot." Or it might fold on us entirely, for all we know. We won't be cueing up Maurice Ravel's "Pavane for a Dead Princess" just yet.

"Sis, got any sign of Duo?"

"Well... about that..."

Following Catherine's gaze to the monitor, I couldn't help but be taken aback. The Warlock and the Queen of Hearts weren't even fighting. Duo and Naina had climbed out of their respective cockpits and spread out a picnic blanket at their mechs' feet. The two of them, apparently quite content, were munching away on sandwiches.

"Maybe they were about to expire," Professor W offered with a small smile.

"I'd never pull a stunt like that," I muttered.

"I'm guessing it's how Duo stays focused," he replied.

"Explains why he's so good at managing his stamina," I said, though it made me want to tell him to quit fooling around already.

Catherine's disapproval was obvious.

"Seriously? Aren't those two supposed to be enemies?"

I felt the same, but I kept my composure.

"They grew up together in the same orphanage, apparently."

"They're smiling over their meal, but it's a smile that doesn't quite reach their eyes. I'd say Duo's just waiting for the right 'moment.'"

"A moment?"

"The sun's almost set..." I answered.

That must be the reason. Professor W spelled it out clearly for Catherine.

"A Warlock comes into his own once night falls."

"But wouldn't Naina Peacecraft be expecting something like that?" she asked.

"That's precisely the trick of Duo's style," the professor said. "For him, 'connections between people' come first. Without even realizing it, everyone ends up dancing to his rhythm."

"Then tell me, Professor..." I said. Connections alone don't explain that look on his face. "How am I supposed to interpret that kind of relationship?"

"I'm not entirely sure myself," he admitted, thinking it over. "But I'd guess it's something people call 'bonds.'"

So that was it, this intangible something he possesses and we do not. Even when faced with an enemy on a battlefield, somehow he refuses to let their underlying relationship vanish. In our past, we made a point

of severing such ties. Yet here he stands, forging them anew in the thick of conflict.

Duo and Naina seemed to be talking about something. I magnified the feed on them as much as possible, splitting the display into two side-by-side panels on the monitor.

"What are they saying?"

"Let's see... Duo's just finishing off his sandwich, saying, 'Man, that really hit the spot. Totally delicious.'"

Professor W was fluent in the art of lipreading.

"'Mayonnaise and mustard together are the best,' 'It was good, right?' 'Chicken and ham... a dynamic duo. Thanks for the meal.' 'So, shall we pick up where we left off?'"

He kept rattling off lines in a dry, monotone voice.

"'Hold on, can't let myself owe you one,' Duo's saying. 'Owe me? What do you mean?' 'C'mon, Naina, you're my big sis. I've got something to show you.'"

On-screen, we watched as Duo produced a black Stetson from who knows where, turning it inside-out, then right-side-out, letting Naina inspect it to confirm there was nothing hidden inside.

"'All right, as you can see, there's no trick here,'" Professor W continued, narrating.

Then, as if performing for an audience, Duo seemingly multiplied the number of Stetsons one after another. Before long, there were six, no, seven of them, arranged in a neat row, like a street peddler hawking hats.

"'Remember that Christmas?'" Duo was saying. "'You stuck those bunny stickers on my present, right? Well, guess what, I've still got 'em.'"

He spread out the very picnic sheet they'd been sitting on, draping it over the hats in a theatrical flourish.

"'Munya, munya, munya...'" Professor W muttered uncertainly. "Hard to read the rest, probably some nonsense incantation."

Evidently, Duo was all set on delivering a grand little magic show.

"'So, Naina, which of these does Alice want to see, this one, or that one?' 'Alice? Who's that?' 'Don't play dumb. You know it's that young lady from the Winner family.'"

I blinked in surprise. Of all people, Quaterine Winner's name had come up. The Cheshire Cat was playing the Mad Hatter, and now we had a Queen of Hearts, and an Alice, too? I felt an edge of unease creep over me, worried that I wasn't fully grasping something crucial.



"Ah, to hell with it. Let's just show them both at once."

As Duo lifted the sheet with a snap, out popped two sets of long-eared plush rabbits from each of the hats, one set white, the other brown. At first there were maybe fourteen or fifteen total, but the numbers rose so quickly it became impossible to count, particularly the brown ones. Before I knew it, at least twenty brown rabbits had appeared.

"Is Alice pining for the White Rabbit with the pocket watch, or does she prefer the March Hare?" Professor W quoted from Duo's lips.

"The March Hare?" I spluttered. "Professor, fire up Snow White, now! That kid's about to kick things off without any signal!"

"Got it."

He darted away toward the hangar. Right now, I just had to trust this maddeningly flippant colleague to handle it. I'd meant to be the one taking the initiative, but here I was again, shifting back into damage-control mode. Worse yet, I needed to reassess the battlefield situation in a hurry.

"Sis! What about those five remaining Mars Suits heading our way?"

"They're still unidentified, but... actually, they're not heading toward us anymore!"

All of Duo's moves were so off-the-wall. The entire time, I'd been planning around the notion of keeping everything in my calculations, but this brat always does the unexpected. He's started the Prometheus retrieval operation at this stage, apparently.

He's one hell of a loose cannon.

The "March Hare" is an allusion to the rabbit's frenzied mating season, and sure enough, the brown rabbits he'd conjured were multiplying twofold, threefold, endlessly. Meanwhile, the seven white rabbits, though not multiplying themselves, raced straight off to the east over the water and vanished from sight. We were being thoroughly fooled, not just Naina, but me as well, caught squarely in Duo's illusion.

By now, the sun had sunk below the western horizon, and nightfall cloaked the volcanic island. Catherine cried out in something close to a shriek.

"Trowa! Look, the eastern sky!"

So unnerved was she that she used my old name. "The moon, it's full..."

There in the eastern sky above Mars, right where the white rabbits had disappeared, rose not Phobos or Deimos but the Earth's very own Moon, slowly climbing, enormous and mesmerizing. A full moon

glowing bright above the Martian night... I had no words for such an impossible sight.

"Calm down, Sis," I said. "That's just the Warlock's trick, an illusion."

"But, but..."

A rolling bank of clouds slid past, momentarily dimming that uncanny orb. It looked so real you could almost reach out and touch it. Was this mere theatrics? I felt a surge of hatred well up, beyond mere anger.

"This is Doktor T," I radioed over to Duo in the Warlock's cockpit. "Don't tell me you're planning to double-cross us."

And it wasn't just the illusions. He'd gone so far as to hijack our own aerial camera feeds with some kind of nanomachine infiltration. A few things clicked into place in my head as I thought back over the events so far.

"What's your game?"

A sly grin flickered in the darkness, reminiscent of a Cheshire Cat.

"Aw, come on. You liked my little performance, didn't you?"

For a split second, that face looked to me like it was mocking me, reveling in some wicked scheme of his own.

"Don't answer my question with another question. I'll ask you again, what are you trying to pull?"

"You know, my washed-up old jackass of a Dad always said a full moon suits my partner best!"

Ah, so that's his old man talking. Inherited the same worthless genes. As if I'd let him blow out our camera feeds just for that. Even I, usually so composed, wanted to bark at him to knock it off. But on the volcano's summit, silhouetted by the moon, the Warlock cut a hauntingly beautiful figure in a sweeping black cape. Twin beam scythes crossed above his head, gleaming with a menacing glow reminiscent of a vampire's crimson glare.

As for the Queen of Hearts, she wasn't moving. Maybe Naina Peacecraft, halfway drunk on the illusions, had been whisked out of harm's way by that crafty brat. Duo's eyes gleamed impishly as he declared.

"Look, giant humanoid weapons are all about who's crazier, right? Nightfall's our time to shine!"

He wasn't wrong. I remembered a time when I shared that cracked worldview. To master a deranged machine, you had to give up your rational mind. That might look different from the outside, but calmly killing on a battlefield, that's its own brand of madness, too. In another sense, emptying your heart is also as deranged as it gets.

"Still," I began, trying to say something to him. But five Mars Suits were already closing in around the Warlock. The five unknown cards.

"Toodles! Sounds like the Worst Night Dance is about to kick off!"

Catherine, hacking into the weather satellite data, confirmed their signatures and relayed the intel.

"I have IDs on the five Mars Suits! There's the Ace of Diamonds and Ace of Clubs!"

Another Ace pair.

"And the Six of Spades, Six of Diamonds, and Six of Clubs!"

A three-of-a-kind in sixes. Together with the pair of Aces, that made a full house, though "666" might also mean something else. A so-called Smith number, or even the Beast's digits from Revelations, or some kind of sneaky house-takes-all scenario. Not something most people know about, but it crossed my mind.

Catherine kept going.

"Jack and Ace of Spades incoming from above! Blackjack is back!"

Just as that Cheshire Cat–Mad Hatter had suggested, we had the makings of a disastrous night's masquerade. A grotesque ball of one-eyed jacks and monstrous suits in the moonlit sky, or so it felt. In any case, things clearly weren't going well for the Warlock. I wasn't about to let Duo fight this alone.

"Professor! Is Snow White ready to launch yet?"

No reply. Likely he was still struggling to undo Heero's biometric lock. For all I knew, Heero had coded it in such a way that even the Professor couldn't crack it. I realized, belatedly, that this was exactly the sort of thing Heero Yuy might pull.

The triple-Ace formation and the Jack of Spades plunged down from above, launching an aerial assault. That pair of Aces, one specialized for speed, the other for heavy bombing, was joined by Blackjack, forming a four-suit squad. Yet Duo didn't seem to care which specialty they had.

"Alright, then," he hollered, his voice brimming with exuberance. "Let's get this show on the road!"

In the next instant, countless bats flapped out from beneath the Warlock's cloak. Thousands, tens of thousands of them, in a nightmarish swarm perfectly suited to this night's grotesque festivities. Their dark mass swallowed even the bright, unnatural full moon hanging over Mars, eclipsing its glow as they surged upward. The living shadow of wings tore into the triple-Ace formation and the Jack of Spades. Naturally, there are no wild bats on Mars, nor were these grown in a lab; they were nanomachine constructs, intangible illusions



that no amount of counterfire could truly destroy. It was a dazzling display of sorcery, revealing that brat's frightening talents. Clearly, he'd decided it was time to get serious.

Amid the moonlight, the four mobile suits looked as if a sentient velvet blanket of darkness had wrapped them up mid-flight. Swarmed by those countless bats, any pilot would lose all control, engines would stall, and they'd have to eject before crashing. Sure enough, within moments, all four suits were effectively out of the fray, chased from the night's festivities.

"Alrighty, next up!" Duo hollered.

Before he could fully finish, the three heavy-armored ground-type Mars Suits that formed the Sixes, the "6-6-6" three-of-a-kind, unleashed a barrage of beams from three directions. The Warlock's black cloak was lit up by the blasts, and the mech itself seemed to collapse in a flash of brilliant energy. The cloak crackled and sparked, sagging heavily onto the rocky mountainside with a whump. For a second, all that remained was the tattered, smoldering fabric, no sign of any mobile suit frame beneath it.

The three suits in that six-of-a-kind formation scanned frantically for the vanished Warlock. With the full moon shining this brightly, they shouldn't be able to lose sight of anything, or so they must have thought. But in truth, that moonlight was all fake, and the sky was far darker than it appeared. Out there, in the hidden depths of a darkness that belonged solely to the Warlock, lay the doorway to "Wonderland."

"Over here! This way!"

Duo's voice drew them in before each attack, same as he'd done when fighting the Queen of Hearts. Maybe that first battle had all been a lead-up to this moment.

"Hey, where're you looking? I'm right here!"

His voice overlapped itself as if coming from several places at once. The three suits whirled to face it, only to discover nearly fifty Warlocks standing in their path, each draped in a hooded cloak.

"Hey, no whining about being outnumbered," they all jeered in perfect unison. "You guys started it when you teamed up on me!"

Of course, these were illusions crafted by Duo's nanomachines. The scattered March Hare illusions had simply shifted to replicate the Warlock's form. There was no telling which was the real one, Duo wouldn't be naive enough to leave the genuine article without its cloak. And in a battlefield thick with nanomachine particles, going without a hooded mantle was unthinkable. Those specialized cloaks boasted stealth features and could shield pilots from micro-scale tech. Likely, Duo had been cloaked beneath yet another cloak. If you looked

closely, even the cape that had seemed draped across the rocky slope had vanished. Possibly, the Warlock had never been in that spot at all. He was a smug, irreverent showman through and through, yet equipped with extraordinary skills, like a masterful con artist.

"Here I come!"

It sounded as if fifty Duo voices shouted in unison. The three heavy-armored suits tried desperately to fire back with beam weapons, and each nanomachine Warlock would erupt in a dramatic explosion, complete with over-the-top flashes of light, every time a beam struck home. Yet the instant one illusion vanished, a new copy coalesced somewhere else. Their numbers never really dropped. They weren't mere phantoms, either; these copies could mount token attacks. The "6-6-6" trio had no chance of halting that kind of relentless advance. After all, a Joker's power is "infinite." It can become any card it wants. The beam cannons of the Sixes quickly ran dry, leaving the demon-like suits of the three-of-a-kind immobilized atop the mountain. By that point, they'd lost all will to fight.

Suddenly, one Warlock stepped out from near the volcano's rim.

"Gotcha!"

In a single, fluid stroke, he slashed the six-of-a-kind suits diagonally across the torso with twin beam scythes, each scythe carving a perfect orbit in the night air. The blow severed power cores and cockpits with pinpoint accuracy. Then again, that precise of a strike wouldn't have been possible had the enemy not been dazed and unmoving. Clearly, Duo had waited for exactly this opportunity. He also demonstrated an intimate familiarity with the flow of battle. In other words, the true Warlock had hidden behind the rocky slope the whole time. Even though it had looked like the three beams from earlier had annihilated him, he'd merely lain in wait for them to burn through their energy reserves and lose their nerve. Such tactics proved he was a pilot of considerable skill, deception, and yes, madness. In a way, he was perfect.

Yet even so, a nagging feeling I couldn't shake kept gnawing at me. The three "beast-like" suits toppled over, one by one.

"Sorry, but you lot aren't my real target," Duo taunted them.

At those offhand words, the uneasy suspicion hidden in the depths of my mind suddenly crystallized into certainty. So that was it.

Right then, a transmission came in on an open channel.

"This is Mille Peacecraft. can anyone hear me?"

A massive hover transport belonging to the Mars Federation approached. We had been chasing that vessel all along, though I had no intention of replying.

"Heh. Finally decided to show up," Duo, in the Warlock, muttered. The main monitor shifted, revealing the face of Mille, son of Zechs (once known as Milliardo) and Noin. A reserved young man sat in the hovercraft's cockpit.

"I'll now perform 'Clair de lune' from Claude Achille Debussy's Suite bergamasque," Mille said, his tone calm. "Listen well, or rather, feel it."

Without another word, he rested his fingers on a virtual keyboard and began a slow, gentle piano piece.

Soft as a whisper in the night, Clair de lune spread across the battlefield. There was no shutting it off, even if I tried, the warship's speakers were hacked.

"What on earth are they playing at?" Catherine asked quietly, though I had no answer. All I knew was that Mille Peacecraft's performance resonated deep in my chest. I'd thought my heart was empty, but something about that melody stirred it anyway. The keys wove a tapestry of vibrant color that shimmered like a rainbow ring around the illusory full moon. The high, melancholy notes rang like crystal, a hush of transparency floating through the night. It wasn't a perfect performance, small dissonances in the chords, minute shifts in tempo, a subtle drift in rhythm, and somehow, those very flaws made it more hauntingly beautiful, as though it turned the false moonlit sky into an even more enchanting vista.

A new voice came over a separate line.

"Quaterine here... it's been a while since we met, hasn't it? Well, I suppose it's only been since last night, actually."

The monitor switched to show the young girl Quaterine wearing goggles, smiling with an innocent charm.

"I've been thinking about everyone ever since I left last night. Honestly, I don't want to fight. But there's something I need you all to understand."

All the while, Clair de lune carried on, delicate and mesmerizing. Perhaps the masquerade had reached its pinnacle.

"Even someone like me has the right to wish for peace!"

I was far from calm.

A mounting dread grew inside me, even though this was still within my predictions, things I'd already suspected. It was all coming to life in front of me, unstoppable.

"Doktor T," Catherine said, "I'm going to make use of the suit you built. I hope you won't mind."



From the massive hover transport, a single mobile suit descended. It cleaved the luminous full moon in two as it touched down. Instantly, fifty-two Warlock illusions surrounded it.

"I've been waiting for you, Little Missy Winner!" Duo exclaimed.

"So have I," she replied softly.

No doubt about it, my worst hunch had just come true.

"But don't come too close," Quaterine warned.

She was piloting Prometheus, an unfinished machine I'd never managed to complete. Somehow, it now wore a dark green, hooded cloak. From beneath that hood, two eyes glinted ominously. A massive cross was fixed across its back, on the longer crossbeam was a gatling gun, and on the shorter, a machine cannon. I instantly opened a channel to the young woman.

"Quaterine! I never supplied that cloak for Prometheus. Where did you get it?"

"Why, from all of you, of course," she said calmly.

"What?"

As impossible as it sounded, she insisted we had a traitor in our midst.

"You must have figured it out by now... Someone among you is a turncoat, just like me."

I couldn't help thinking of a certain someone, but I had no proof.

Suddenly, the fifty-two Warlocks rushed forward, swarming the towering Prometheus.

"Quit fooling around!" they roared. "I'm not letting you!"

"I told you, don't come any closer," Quaterine said.

Prometheus's gatling gun spat fire, sending raw, ferocious bullets tearing through the black-cloaked illusions. The dark green cloak spun in a full 360° arc, faster than a ticking second hand.

"I've got no business with cannon fodder."

In the blink of an eye, the nanomachine Warlocks were obliterated. Gone without a trace.

"So you want no part of cannon fodder, huh?"

One real Warlock remained, standing before Prometheus.

"Then I guess you can deal with me instead!" Duo barked.

"It's pointless, Duo," Quaterine said. "Your nanomachine tricks won't work on me. And my Prometheus has heavier firepower than anything you can throw at it."

"Yeah, well... guess we'll find out!"

The Warlock surged forward, twin beam scythes slashing through the air. Prometheus instantly darted back, firing the gatling again. The

Warlock wove two scythes in interlocking figure eights, somehow evading the storm of shells.

"See? No matter how big your guns, they're worthless against me--"

Prometheus abruptly swung its towering cross the other way. Within that elongated bazooka barrel lay a massive homing missile, locked and ready.

"Sorry," Quaterine said quietly. "But I will make it count."

The Warlock, lured close, had no room to dodge. At that instant, there was a violent detonation. And in the same breath that the explosion died, Clair de lune ended as well.

"Thank you, Mille," spoke a girl from that Wonderland realm, her voice resonating oddly in the aftermath. "That fake full moon almost seemed real."

And with that, the moon vanished from the sky, dissolving into nothingness. The Warlock, too, had dropped out of this wild masquerade, leaving the genuine darkness to reclaim the battlefield.

But the Worst Night Dance was only beginning.

Nocturn in Mourning
MC File 4 (Part.03)

Our assigned mission, Operation Mythos, aims to bring an end to the persistent wars and conflicts on Mars. Back in the AC era, when we were still within Earth's sphere, calling for "total pacifism" might have carried some weight. But here on Mars in MC times, no amount of peaceful appeal will make a dent. If anything, it only stirs up more chaos, bringing misery to countless nameless souls.

The second President of the Martian Federation, Relena Peacecraft, and the system known as "PPP," the Perfect Peace Program, are what perpetuate this turmoil. The real trouble with "total pacifism" is not so much its stance of non-violence and disarmament; rather, it's that it trumpets freedom and independence while recognizing no exceptions whatsoever. If it weren't for the Preventers, there would be no such thing as "peace" in the Earth Sphere. Only war can truly end war. And once it's over, the only way to maintain peace is to rule through overwhelming power or else secretly confiscate weapons to reign in any uprising. Preventer's achievements lie squarely in that second category.

While Relena Peacecraft's wishes for peace might be her own affair, the truth is that, right now, her ideals rob the common people of their freedom and independence. Unarmed civilians wind up being slaughtered. And in the worst possible scenario, if PPP were ever to be activated, half the population of Mars, roughly one billion out of its two billion inhabitants, would perish on the spot.

This is because the required "vaccinations" for Martian immigration included several nanomachines designed to interface with PPP. Nobody knows exactly who created and finished this program, or when, or why. But we do know who spread the nanomachines: the first President of the Martian Federation, a man calling himself Milliardo, Dixneuf Neuenheim. Keeping Relena in cryogenic sleep at his side, he planned to seize total control by threatening to trigger PPP at any time.

The mechanism of PPP is shockingly simple. Thanks to widespread computer networks, any electronic device, be it a monitor, phone, or otherwise, can transmit the PPP command to the nanomachines. These commands might be carried by light, high-frequency sound waves, or even just vibrations. The directive is a single word: "Assemble."

Once that order is given, the nanomachines inside a person's body converge at a single point in the bloodstream. That simple act, through magnetic interference, causes arteriosclerosis and forms clots within the blood vessels. As blood flow is cut off in various parts of the body, strokes, hemorrhages, heart attacks, lethal blockages, occur. What's

worse is this reaction resonates with other types of medical nanomachines, meaning it's not limited to Mars alone. Plenty of individuals in the Earth Sphere have had medical nanomachines administered as well. Within a matter of hours, this chain reaction would kill innocent people on space colonies and Earth alike, before anyone even realized what was happening. Rough estimates put the total casualties near three billion across humanity.

We first discovered this threat on April 9th, AC-197, the day after Relena Peacecraft's seventeenth birthday. A militant group calling itself, Epyon de Telos, or "the next government," occupied the castle at the Sanc Kingdom, where the program was unearthed. I won't describe that day here, because at the time, I had no position from which to reveal everything I knew. From that day onward to the present moment, the system has been programmed so that if Relena Peacecraft should ever die, PPP will activate, issuing its deadly "assemble" command. Not even suicide or accidental death is permitted. She has no choice but to live on, forever. There is no method to disable it, thanks to an absurdly difficult password lock. The only potential loophole (though not fully confirmed) is if Relena were to experience a "peaceful death," one she truly desires and drifts into willingly. Possibly, if she died in a state of absolute serenity, the "assemble" signal might be averted. The mere idea comes from how she once existed in a kind of suspended animation inside the "Little Prince" cryo-pod. Even then, it isn't guaranteed. The odds are likely in the single digits, maybe even lower.

Given that Relena longs so fervently for total peace, she would never knowingly choose her own death. That's why, back in AC-197, she went into that cryogenic capsule of her own volition, hoping that while she slept, someone would find a way to disable this accursed program. Not long after, Heero Yuy followed in her footsteps, slipping into his own cryo-pod, "Sleeping Beauty," as Princess Aurora. Perhaps he anticipated something, or maybe Relena asked. Either way, it was too convenient to be a coincidence.

Several decades later, early in spring of MC-0022, Relena awakened. Nobody knows who roused her. But there was no denying it was a crisis. Dorothy Catalonia of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation decided to move forward with it.

Operation Mythos.

This plan does not shy away from genocide. Unseal Heero Yuy and have him kill Relena Peacecraft. Relena herself consents. The odds that this will count as a "peaceful" end for her may be slim, but it's a gamble worth taking. Even if her death is anything but peaceful, that doesn't

really matter. In the end, the aim is to halve Mars's population, then bring the survivors, another billion or so, under Earth Sphere control once again.

We have no "justice" to speak of.

We harbor no ambitions of conquering Mars.

We don't have the kindness to make people happy.

Our hearts are empty; we have no tears to shed.

We know that even victory will bring us nothing.

Yet we have no choice but to fight,

Right now, the battle still isn't over. The worst night's masquerade continues. We have surfaced the Shawhook II in the midnight sea and begun a slow patrol around the volcanic island that serves as this battlefield. At last, we stop, positioning ourselves directly in front of Prometheus. Our submarine carrier is practically defenseless. We've two missiles left, but the launch hatch remains jammed; we can't fire them.

"So what now?" Catherine asks from behind me.

I don't reply immediately. Arms folded, I decide to bide my time, just a little longer.

At the center of the volcanic island stands Prometheus, shouldering a massive cruciform heavy cannon on its right, towering above it all with an almost smug composure. Quaterine seemed to be waiting for something, too.

A few dozen minutes earlier, Duo's Warlock had plunged into the sea, dragged down alongside the homing missile fired by Prometheus. There wasn't even an explosion, nor has the suit resurfaced. That's as good as proof he's alive. But the Revolution four-of-a-kind is still beneath the waves. By now, Duo is probably fighting for his life in the treacherous jet currents. A beam scythe works underwater, too. If he can read the currents, anticipate enemy movements, and wield his abilities without flinching, victory is his. Those are valuable skills for subaquatic warfare, assuming he has any experience.

If not... well, so be it.

Flailing, struggling, clinging to life, that's the sort of ugly-cool that suits that brat. He's got that same reckless style as his old man, a rough-edged charm that's just about right for him.

Meanwhile, Prometheus hasn't budged. Presumably, Quaterine is searching for her "Heart of Space." You could call it her weak spot. If we hope to slip through an opening, that's it, and right now, it's working brilliantly. Mythologically speaking, Prometheus is a symbol of "betrayal," at least to the gods. But to humankind, he's the "culture hero," a thinker chasing freedom. He bestowed fire upon humanity.

And in that moment, civilization flourished. Zeus, ruler of Olympus, was outraged by the betrayal and rebellion, chaining Prometheus to Mount Caucasus and sending an eagle (or a condor, in some accounts) to devour his innards.

Yet was gifting fire to humanity truly the right move?

And was the serpent in the Garden of Eden, guiding Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, truly so wicked?

Prometheus, our enemy now standing before us, was it a traitor from Earth's side, or a savior come to liberate Mars? Or perhaps a beautiful yet ephemeral female knight born from a laboratory flask?

The machine made its move. Quaterine's image popped up on the monitor.

"This is Quaterine Oud Winner. Doktor T, are you ready?"

She spoke as she leveled the cross-shaped heavy cannon at our ship.

"I'm never ready for this."

Thinking back, maybe I'd decided that from the start. Part of me just thought, "Here we go again."

"Because, in the end, we're the ones who've already lost," I added.

That single word, loser, has always fit me far too well.

"Go on, then. Fire away. Catherine and I won't run or hide."

"You're surrendering?"

A flicker of disbelief crossed Quaterine's face on the monitor.

"That's what I'm saying."

"All right... then disarm and surrender. I've no interest in taking your lives."

"I refuse."

My response was immediate.

"What?"

"I said we surrender, but we won't hand anything over."

"I don't understand."

"I'll say it again for you: we surrender. But I'm not giving you Snow White or Scheherazade."

"What are you planning?"

I let out a small, mocking snort.

"That's it? That's the extent of your so-called 'heart of space'?"

Quaterine's expression wavered. Right on cue, Professor W's voice, calm as ever, echoed through the ship.

"Seven Zwarg, Rot. Full draw... Release!"

The moment he spoke, a searing red bolt shot off the deck of the Shawhook II, wreathed in flames. Mid-flight, it morphed into a great Firebird, wings beating as it hurtled toward Prometheus.

Startled, Quaterine unleashed a hail of gatling shells. The Firebird dissolved in midair, scattering embers wide across Prometheus's dark-green cloak. Tiny spots of glowing ash seeped into the fabric.

"Seven Zward, Blau. Nocking... Setup... Drawing..."

From somewhere inside Snow White's cockpit, I heard him preparing the next arrow. Looks like he managed to launch after all, which meant Professor W must have undone Heero's biometric lock and was now piloting Snow White himself. A wave of relief washed through me, and a twinge of regret that I'd ever doubted him, even for a heartbeat. Then again, the mind games he'd been playing were thorough enough to fool even me and Quaterine's "Heart of Space." That deep-green cloak must have been his doing from the start. Without it, we'd never have pulled off this deception.

"Are you piloting Snow White, Brother? Brother Quatre?"

Quaterine asked as if she couldn't possibly believe it. Someone she'd apparently counted on as a fellow "traitor" had attacked her. Of course she'd want to confirm.

Professor W, however, chose to answer from another angle.

"I asked you once before, are you living true to yourself?"

At his words, Quaterine's resolve seemed to drain.

"I am..."

A faint sorrow flickered in those blue-green eyes behind her goggles.

"...And you told me back then, Brother, that maybe you'd spend your whole life chasing that answer until it killed you."

I recall being there when they talked about that, back at a little wooden facility called Winner Hospital, which was more like a birdhouse than a standard clinic. A female doctor named Iria had been running it.

Professor W's voice turned cold.

"I also said, if you live, you'll eventually find that answer."

He sounded more unyielding than usual. He wasn't angry because of Snow White's ZERO System; rather, his own guilt was strangling the usual "family love" and "tenderness" in his heart. He now denied even "crying, apologizing, and asking for forgiveness." The tears he might have shed had frozen long ago.

Quaterine cried out, her voice raw with desperation.

"But I... I just want everyone else to be happy, even more than I want that for myself!"

That was the conclusion she'd come to, gentle soul that she was. And "everyone," apparently, included even us, her former comrades, the ones she'd betrayed. In her own way, she still wanted us to find



happiness, too. Perhaps her tears had frozen over as well. How impossibly sad.

The professor seemed to accept her resolve. And he acted on it, mercilessly.

"Full draw... Release!"

Another dazzling arrow streaked from our deck, a Bluebird clad in frigid, sub-zero wings. Partway to its target, it split in four directions, forming a cross like the constellation Cygnus. In some myths, that constellation is actually Zeus in disguise. Truly, it seemed the king of the gods intended no forgiveness for this titan who'd defied him.

Sparkling like starlight, the cross-shaped brilliance spread above Prometheus's head, delivering a cold close to absolute zero. Instantly, the red embers clinging to the green cloak reacted, sparking a chemical chain that flared into a pale, bluish-white blaze. The nano-defensive mantle caught fire, a pillar of ghostly flame dancing upward. In its heart stood Prometheus, suffused in a painful mixture of guilt and defeat. The parts of its armor I'd left unfinished were still painfully exposed, an unguarded structure, halfway complete. A mad machine indeed. A clown mask was slapped on haphazardly, covering half its face.

If someone wants to call that mobile suit a Gundam, I won't argue. I have no attachments to its name. Right now, it's immobilized, malfunctioning from the scorching difference in temperature caused by that "red bird" and "blue bird" combo.

"This is Snow White," Professor W reported tonelessly. "Mission accomplished."

He delivered the words with stark, emotionless finality. We'd forced him into a cruel task. It was time for him to come back, to be the gentle Quatre we all knew.

"Understood. I'll handle the rest," I replied.

But there was no answer from him. I picked up faint sounds of breathing on the comm, he might have passed out in the cockpit. After all, he'd shut himself off since last night, severing any mental connection with Quaterine, cutting off his "Heart of Space" to keep from slipping into her quantum thoughts the moment he let his guard down. They'd been matching wits like a pair of ZERO Systems, locked in a duel for almost a full day. And he'd come out on top with an overwhelming victory. Fainting after all that is only natural.

I turned to Catherine and said, "I'm sending out Scheherazade."

With its nano-defensive cloak burned away, taking out Prometheus should be possible now. Even in its unfinished state, Scheherazade should manage.

"You plan to pilot it?" she asked.

"Yes. Like it or not, I belong on the battlefield. That's where this Jester is meant to perform."

Right then, a somber violin melody rose in the air, Maurice Ravel's Pavane pour une infante défunte. Its simple motifs shifted from major to minor keys, an unstable, ephemeral, yet beautiful melody. The bowing technique was distinctive, unmistakable. I'd heard it once before, when it played a gypsy-flavored waltz titled "Endless Waltz."

"This is Scheherazade... launching now," announced another figure on our monitor, someone wearing a tattered knit cap like a rag, playing the violin. Another version of me, in some sense.

That violin once belonged to Professor W, who'd later passed it on to Quaterine. Perhaps Phobos was dedicating this piece to her. How impossibly earnest he is.

"Phobos?" Catherine gasped. "How... when did you get on board?"

"I've been here all along," he replied.

So he hadn't traveled with Master Chang on the Voyage... All these people ignoring my orders.

"No! Get out of Scheherazade right now!"

"Miss Catherine, your training will be a great help," he said quietly. "This suit relies on flexible movement."

He wasn't wrong. Scheherazade was equipped with a short Arabian dagger, known as a jambiya, designed for close-quarters combat with a fluid, almost belly-dance style, a rhythmic swirl of motion. Initially, I'd planned to give it a separate, longer scimitar called a shamshir, but the software controlling the grip pressure kept malfunctioning, so I never managed to equip it. Thus it remains a dancing assassin, specialized for short-range madness. Phobos, who spent years training under nine times Mars's gravity, could handle it better than I ever could. That intimate, almost claustrophobic fighting range, "knife distance", is nothing short of crazy. Catherine's lessons also honed his blade skills far beyond my own. I was always better at being the target, after all. Maybe, just this once, I could trust him. Still, I felt a pang of unease, he has no real "reason to fight."

I spoke directly to that ragged figure in Scheherazade's cockpit, still playing the violin.

"Trowa Phobos... I'm not giving you permission to launch."

He cut off his performance and said, "You've got the wrong guy. I'm no longer Trowa Phobos."

A breath of silence, and then, "I'm Nameless. And I'm done with wavering."



So he's decided life's sanctity is just an obstacle? Retreating into that battered existence again?

"A woman named Kathy Po told me once," he went on, "old folks and women are far more fragile than I am."

Ah, that woman from the polar cap base. She never was one for helpful advice.

"And so, Doktor T, I'm taking Scheherazade."

Being called "old" was bad enough, but more than that, I believe my own mind is stronger than his. Yet his gaze, empty of a name, held a resolute clarity.

"You're going to put an end to this nocturne?" I asked.

"I'm returning this violin, and whatever debts I owe, directly to the young lady."

"Debts?" I still wasn't sure what he meant.

Before I could say more, Scheherazade sprang from the Shawhook II's deck in a flourish of rainbow-tinted light, reminiscent of an aurora. Its transparent hijab-veil, a nano-defense doubling as optical camouflage, cast glimmering prisms around it. In truth, the suit was still unfinished; many areas lacked plating and remained exposed. If not for the active camouflage, the machine's raw innards would look painfully vulnerable. But that precarious exterior only proved it concealed enough hidden might to repel arrogant displays of power. Of course, it was as mad and unhinged as any of us. As that cocky punk Duo once said, in the end, giant humanoid weapons win by being crazier than anyone else.

Yes... it suits him. Both of them incomplete. Both a perfect match for a final dance in this endless night.

I am, when it comes down to it, every bit as unpolished as the nameless boy who flew off to battle. I haven't achieved enlightenment, nor have I made peace with the world; I fumble about as poorly as he does, clumsy to a fault. And so I choose to fight, fighting in place of those who can't. I don't cling to hope for tomorrow, nor do I despair over yesterday. Making it through this single moment in time, here and now, is all I can manage. My heart is empty. I can't find the right words. If I had normal human emotions, maybe I could be gentler. But I'm not good at it. I am a clown, and if that makes even one person smile, well, that's enough for me.

Maybe that nameless boy feels the same. By now, he's probably killed his own heart, fighting alone for the sake of someone else's happiness. He left for the battlefield in my stead, and I let him go without a single piece of advice or a word of comfort. Even though

he's an echo of me. Even though I knew exactly what was going on in his head. He needed somewhere to come home to, yet I did nothing. My failure shames me.

"Forgive me, Nameless..." I murmured under my breath, quietly enough that Catherine wouldn't hear.

Prometheus still couldn't move, pinned in place on the volcanic island. Encircling it, the rainbow aura of Scheherazade danced, a graceful, resplendent performance set to the silent refrain of that Pavane still echoing in my mind. Sparks arced along the enormous cruciform cannon on Prometheus's right shoulder, where Scheherazade's janbiya blades were patiently disabling its most powerful weapon at point-blank range. Anyone could smash a gun outright, but the finesse to slice through the joints and cut off internal mechanisms while preserving the outer frame? That takes mastery. In that condition, I could repair it afterward here on the ship. It was as though Nameless had me and my maintenance work in mind the whole time.

Now, little flares of light flickered where Scheherazade's blade touched Prometheus itself. The rainbow dance closed in, coiling like a sinuous serpent, moving with a swift, fluid grace, like wind twining around its partner. In all my experience, I've never seen a mobile suit fight in so unorthodox a manner. It was sheer madness. In a last, desperate attempt, Quaterine Winner launched a volley of exposed chest missiles, but they never stood a chance of hitting Scheherazade. Soon, Prometheus's left foot slowed, and then stopped altogether; its right foot and both arms followed suit. The drive circuits were severed.

The fight was over.

"Quaterine, you've likely gone without sleep since last night. You must be exhausted. You tried alone to see into the 'heart of space,' fending off Snow White, the Warlock, and Scheherazade, three miracles of madness. You surpassed the limits of mind and body. So please, just rest now. You're a tender-hearted girl, too kind for this world, like your brother. Nameless is dancing this lullaby for you so you can slip into a dream. It's all right to give in and sleep. Morning will come soon enough, and then you can join us again, doing good wherever we go. So sleep, Quaterine. We will always accept you back. Close your eyes in Nameless's arms. Goodnight, Quaterine. Take care of yourself."

I recalled something Iria once said to me: "Look after your health... because there's only one Quaterine Oud Winner in this whole wide world." My quiet murmur carried all the kindness I could muster.

Meanwhile, I couldn't stop worrying about Duo, who was still fighting underwater.

"He'd better not have lost..." I muttered.

"That brat?" Catherine asked, then let out a small laugh and pressed a headphone to one ear. "From the sounds on sonar, it wasn't easy, but he won."

"So he made it, then. All right, we'll leave the rest to Nameless and retrieve the Warlock."

Right at that moment, Duo's voice crackled over the wired comm from the ocean:

"This is Duo! 'Four of a Kind' in 8's is down. They were tough, but I got 'em!"

"Nicely done. Can you make it back to the ship?"

"Back to the--Wait, what about the Winner girl? Don't tell me you let Prometheus get away!"

"No, Nameless took care of it just now."

"Oh, you mean that Phobos guy, or whoever he is... Didn't think he was that damn good, "

Suddenly the transmission cut out. A bad feeling slithered through me. Then the monitor lit up with Mille Peacecraft's face.

"I won't hand over Quaterine," he said flatly.

My expression didn't change. "Well, well. Fine performance back there."

Mille stayed silent.

"That was Clair de lune, wasn't it?"

His eyes were cold as ice.

"Shut your mouth, old man."

"Watch your words," I replied, checking the control yoke. It wouldn't respond, and the screws had stopped turning. At some point, we'd been hacked, everything aboard the main computer was offline. The lights died, monitors went dark, and the entire bridge plunged into blackness. Only Mille's voice filtered in from the speakers.

"None of you understand anything. You're all wrong."

We'd been had, drawn into the Federation's massive hover transport. A faint light glimmered through a window. It seemed the Shawhook II and everyone aboard were being captured. That piano piece, Clair de lune, must have been the start of his hacking assault. We never even saw it coming. Once more, we'd been outmaneuvered.

"Duo, Nameless, get out of here!" I shouted, though I wasn't sure if my transmission was even working. I could only hope they heard it.

"Sis, you should bail out too!"

"I won't!" she snapped. "I'm done being left behind!"

She must have realized exactly what I planned to do. There's only one mechanism aboard this vessel we can still operate by hand: the self-destruct switch. Enough explosives to destroy this bridge, and we still have those two missiles stuck in their bays. If I can set off a chain reaction, it'll send Snow White and this entire ship to the bottom of the ocean. The Professor alone, in Snow White, might find a way out of all this. He'd recover our medical capsule and eventually save Nameless and the others.

I could almost hear his voice in my mind.

"All right, if that's what you've decided, I'll respect it."

Catherine and I aren't necessarily doomed. If we time our escape at the moment of detonation, we might survive, though it'll hurt like hell. Still, it's a gamble any way you look at it. I can only apologize to Catherine for dragging her into this.

We have no justice on our side. No ambition to conquer Mars. No kindness that brings happiness to others. Our hearts are empty, and our tears have long run dry. We know full well there's nothing beyond victory. Yet even so,

I steeled myself.

"All right, let's begin... our final act."

I pressed my finger harder against the self-destruct switch. But someone grabbed my wrist.

"Don't," came a low voice.

It was Heero Yuy, the man who should've been asleep inside the medical capsule.

"Don't offer any more resistance," he said.

"You're telling me to hand myself over?" I demanded, trying to make out the lines of his face in the faint light streaming through the window.

"No problem," he answered, unblinking. "We'll let them capture us and head for Elysium Island."

For some reason, I thought I saw tears in his eyes.

"...that way, I can get closer to Relena."

Catherine spoke up softly.

"Are you really capable... of killing Relena Peacecraft?"

Heero's voice was as steady as ever.

"That's my mission."

And for a fleeting instant, I thought I saw a single tear slide down his cheek.

"I will kill Relena," he said. "I have to."

It must have been a trick of the dim light. The Heero Yuy I know would never cry. Still, it reminded me that he, at least, truly has a

heart. He isn't acting on pure emotion, yet unlike the rest of us, his tears haven't completely frozen over.

Entr'acte of the Heart's Depths

Preventer 5 (Part.01)

AC-196 DECEMBER 26th

A gunshot rang out, sharp and absolute.

It happened in an instant.

DeKim Barton crumpled to the floor, the back of his skull blown open.

Behind him stood his own adjutant, arm still extended.

"I have executed the traitor. Let this be my atonement for betraying His Excellency Treize."

He spoke somberly as he saluted.

"Mariemaia, stay with me!"

Relena Darlian cradled the young girl's limp body.

"I... I was wrong," Mariemaia Kushrenada whispered through the white-hot agony burning in her chest, a fragile smile trembling on her lips. "I'm sorry... so sorry..."

Somewhere in the ruins, a tiny music box began to play.

As her vision tunneled, Mariemaia realized the melody, soft as a lullaby, was cradling her like a mother's voice.

"So that's what the tune really sounds like... as gentle as Mama humming me to sleep."

It was Heero Yuy who brought the music box, bruised, bloodied, barely standing.

"I'll relieve you of your pain."

"Heero!"

Relena gasped, calling out the name of the Wing Gundam Zero's pilot, thought lost with its wreckage only moments earlier.

He stood before them, one hand clutching the delicate box playing "Endless Waltz," the other holding a pistol, finger already tightening on the trigger.

Marimeia closed her eyes, her voice calm.

"I thank you."

Heero raised the barrel.

The music box slowed, gears rasping as the notes of "Endless Waltz" drooped into a mournful hush.

When the last chime died, like a signal agreed upon in silence, Heero squeezed the trigger without hesitation.

Click.

The scene was stunning.

But Marimeia remained unharmed.

The gun had no bullets.

Her breath caught once, and then she collapsed unconscious.

Heero lowered the pistol slowly.

"I've killed Mariemaia."

His voice was quiet, though the words cracked in his throat. But they weren't mournful, but declarative.

"I... I will never kill anyone ever again..."

Each phrase fell like the last beats of a fading drum.

"I don't have to anymore."

The pistol slipped from limp fingers; the boy who had worn the mask of a weapon folded, spent. Relena caught him at the last second.

"Heero."

She held him tight against her chest. The broken and bloody boy's eyes were closed, his expression at peace, as if relieved at last. He wore a childlike look, asleep in innocent slumber, one he had likely never shown anyone before.

Lady Une and several soldiers rushed in, lifting Mariemaia away.

"There's still hope! Get her to the medical ward, now!"

Relena gently took the silent music box from Heero's limp hand. Stroking his hair softly, she murmured.

"It's over... finally."

Tears spilled from her eyes, falling onto the music box.

AC-197 JANUARY

Peace, at last, returned to the people.

Mariemaia now lived quietly under Lady Une's guardianship. And from this point on in history, weapons called mobile suits, including the Gundams, were never seen again.

"Well, it's good-bye for real, buddy."

Duo said with satisfaction. He gripped the Gundam's self-destruct device. He truly felt they no longer needed Gundams in the wake of this battle. Trowa and Quatre nodded in agreement. Then, in unison, the three pressed the switch.

Gundam Deathscythe Hell, Gundam Heavyarms Custom, and Gundam Sandrock Custom exploded one after the other. Watching the smoke billow, Trowa murmured.

"I've once again become nameless."

Quatre promptly refuted him.

"Trowa sounds fine to me. Why not keep it?"

"Names are things other people give ya. There's no point wasting time worrying about it."

Duo added, flashing a thumbs-up at both Trowa and Quatre.

"What's important is having a place we can call home. Right?"

"Yeah, you're right..."

There was a circus colony where Catherine awaited, and surely Trowa would again be known as Trowa Barton there. He wouldn't be nameless.

"Maybe I'll start calling Catherine "Sis" once I'm back at the tent," he thought.

If Quatre returned to space, he'd resume his duties as the heir to the Winner family, with plenty of work to occupy him.

"Though first I need to welcome back the Maganac Corps, returning from Venus..."

He didn't much care for his position as the Winner head.

"Maybe I'll run away again..." he toyed with the thought.

Duo would go back to junker work, living day by day, yet still harboring that wish to do something good for someone else's sake.

"How about I open some kind of shop, like a handyman service? Might actually turn a profit..."

Though hardly driven by money, he joked this way to hide a bit of embarrassment.

With those individual hopes in their hearts, the three returned to space.

"The mad era has ended, Nataku..."

WuFei pressed his mobile suit's self-destruct switch, standing in the Long Clan's homeland.

"May you rest in peace..."

He pictured his smiling wife, Meilan Long, or just Meilan, in his mind. Now, perhaps, she could find some serenity. The Altron Gundam vanished in a flash of detonation. WuFei lingered, eyes fixed on the burst of flame and smoke.

"Now, where do I go from here?"

That thought flickered through his mind as Sally Po approached from behind.

"Hey, WuFei..."

He turned.

"It seems Noin and Zechs have disappeared somewhere. So, what do you say? Wanna come and work with me?"

"Do you mean work as a Preventer?"

WuFei let out a small, scoffing laugh before replying, "Why not?"

He sounded almost dismissive.

AC-197 FEBRUARY

An interplanetary shuttle purred through the void, its prow angled toward the ocher disk of Mars.

Inside the passenger cabin sat Noin and Zechs.

"Are you sure? The terraforming project hasn't even officially started yet."

Ten years earlier, in AC-187, the resource satellite MO-VII had slammed into Mars's southern hemisphere. In its wake, a bloom of so-called Europan algae had begun spinning a facsimile of Earth's atmosphere. Even so, breathable air remained confined to a handful of para-terraforming domes; step outside without a helmet and your lungs would still flash-freeze.

Colonization schedules, city blueprints, government oversight, every timetable had slipped, far worse than during the old space colony boom. In truth, Mars was nowhere near ready for human life.

"Relena's been working on it, and it won't be easy," Zechs murmured, thinking of the sister who forever chased ideals most people could barely imagine.

"That's why a dead person would be perfect for the job," he thought, the familiar words rising to his lips. "Noin, are you sure--"

He started to say his usual line, but before he could finish, Noin pressed a finger gently to his mouth and whispered, "Zechs, please don't make me repeat myself, again."

He fell silent.

Yet her calm masked a tangle of emotions. Noin's father, Nove Neuenheim, had been the original champion of the Mars Terraforming Initiative, an opportunist who prized profit over principle. Disgusted, she had fled to Earth long ago, leaving only bitter memories behind.

Even so, following Zechs here cost her no hesitation. This was a homecoming she had already made peace with, and it was a Preventer assignment besides. They could not stand by while Nove Neuenheim bent Mars to his own designs; the Earth Sphere would never permit it.

For Zechs, another worry loomed: the dormant Gundam Epyon he had hidden on Mars. The suit was still in the keeping of his old comrade, Major Eleve Onegell. Zechs had never summoned the will to destroy it, though, like the other Gundam pilots, he knew he probably should have.

Words had become unnecessary between them. Whatever harsh trials Mars held, their shared resolve could yet turn this raw, red wilderness into a paradise.

"No," Zechs corrected himself. "We will make it so."

AC-197 MARCH

Relena Darlian had relinquished her post as Vice Foreign Minister and, instead of jockeying for influence at the core of the Unified Nation's government, was living peacefully as an ordinary citizen of the Earth Sphere.

At the same time she sheltered Heero, nursing him with quiet devotion until the last of his injuries mended.

It may have been the only season in their turbulent lives when true happiness flowed between them.

Months vanished in the blink of an eye.

Yet they did anything but drift.

Relena had already declared her candidacy for the next presidential election.

The sitting president still had three years left in his term; by then Relena would be twenty. She intended to master both politics and economics before that birthday, and to untangle every problem burdening the people of the Earth Sphere.

Accusations that she was too young scarcely grazed her confidence.

"Don't let it bother you," Heero told her. "Those gray-haired politicians, despite all that 'experience' never once managed to honor the people's will."

"You're right... They didn't," Relena agreed.

The docket awaiting any administration was formidable: war reparations, employment reform, economic revival, technological innovation, the Mars Terraforming Project, and, above all, the forging of a lasting peace. A near-feverish urgency drove her to tackle them all.

Heero, laconic as ever, nonetheless supported her.

"So long as you run as a Darlian, not a Peacecraft," he added.

Perhaps he felt the name Peacecraft, laden with symbolism for pacifism, ill suited a working politician. With Heero, nuance often lay two steps beneath the words.

"I'm going to do it," Relena vowed.

By the time that resolve crystallized, Heero had already slipped away. Left alone, she turned to the teddy bear he had given her on her last birthday and confided in the plush guardian.

"Please... watch over me."



Beyond ideals and integrity, a statesperson needs two particular talents: the talent to become a politician, and the talent to remain one. Ironically, those were the only gifts Relena lacked on her path to the presidency.

To cultivate them she would have to mount a series of public events. Listening solely to her supporters would be meaningless; she needed to hear the values of a much wider world.

Thus she chose to hold her coming birthday celebration in her former home, Sanc Kingdom Castle.

It would be no glittering society gala, but rather a forum, workshops, and a symposium on the very idea of peace.

The “party” was set for an unprecedented three days: from April 7, the eve of her birthday, through April 9.

Incidentally, April 7 marks two historic moments: the assassination of the legendary colonial pacifist Heero Yuy in AC-175, and, twenty years later, the descent of the five Gundams to Earth in Operation Meteor (AC-195).

AC-197 APRIL 7

The Earth itself seemed to be holding its breath.

Preventer, the “fire brigade,” patrolled quietly, and nowhere was the calm more apparent than here in far northern reaches of Europe’s Sanc Kingdom. All signs pointed to an uneventful finish for Relena’s seventeenth-birthday reception.

“Everyone, thank you so much for gathering here today on my behalf.”

Relena, radiant in a snow-white gown, offered a perfect curtsy to nearly two hundred assembled guests. For the former monarch of the World Nation, the affair was deliberately modest.

Heero Yuy was conspicuously absent. So, too, was her brother, Millardo. Among the attendees were intimate friends, potential political rivals, and one-time officers of the old Alliance.

Relena’s circle from Saint Gabriel’s Academy mingled with her adoptive mother Marlene Darlian, the unwavering pacifist Dorothy Catalonia, Preventer chief Lady Une, and wheelchair-bound Mariemaia, all faces lit by quiet relief, as though permanent peace were already a given. Spring sunlight slanted through high windows, wrapping the ballroom in gold.

Then the doors exploded inward.

Twenty soldiers in camouflage stormed the hall, boots thudding across marble. Each carried a sub-machine gun; mirrored shades and scarves masked their faces. Several women screamed. Some of the men stepped forward to shield them, one or two even braced to fight.

A gunman hoisted his weapon overhead and stitched the chandelier to glittering shards. Glass rained down like ice, and the chaos congealed into shocked silence.

Their intent was unambiguous.

"What is the meaning of this? Who are you people?!" Relena demanded, her voice clear as crystal.

No reply. In this company, silence was statement enough: We will not negotiate.

The leader, a tall figure with long blond hair, stared at Relena through his lenses. For an instant she thought he resembled Millardo; the aura told her otherwise, yet she never guessed the likeness was deliberate.

Hours later their communiqué reached the presidential residence in in Brussels.

"We, the Epyon de Teros, the next government, have taken Sanc Castle. Our demands are as follows:

Release our imprisoned comrades.

Declassify Secret File 203-51 and dissolve the government agency implicated within.

As ransom, pay us an amount equal to that agency's budgets for FY 196 and 197.

Fail to comply within seventy-two hours, and we will detonate the leftover legacy of the Alliance military, namely, a nuclear bomb. That is all."

Secret File 203-51 documented the founding and operations of a covert conflict-prevention unit, none other than Preventer itself. Funding for the agency was, of course, top-secret. To expose it and dismantle Preventer would strip the Earth Sphere of its chief peacekeeping tool, and paying the "ransom" was unthinkable.

Brussels rejected the demands outright and issued Preventer a single order.

"Seize the nuke. Rescue the hostages."

Analysis soon confirmed the device was real: a narrow-yield asteroid-mining charge, designed for minimal residual radiation. Even so, detonation on Earth, even with a limited blast radius, would reduce the Sanc Kingdom to a blazing ruin in an instant.

"It's no Alliance relic," Sally Po concluded. "Political theater, nothing more."

WuFei nodded, remarkably composed. "A classic mantian-guohai, achieve one's aim by underhanded means. Their goal lies elsewhere."

"That still doesn't clarify anything."

WuFei simply pressed on, uninterested in elaborate explanations. "Their true objective is to buy time. While we're busy chasing our tails over these impossible demands, they'll be free to pursue whatever they really want."

"And what exactly is that?" she asked.

"Taking over the entire Earth Sphere, I'd wager."

At the time, WuFei was flying a mission around the L-4 colony cluster, while Sally was patrolling the area near the Moon. With Lady Une among the hostages, they were the only Preventer agents still free to move about.

"They're calling themselves 'The Next Government,' but it's obviously some sort of false-flag operation. We don't need to bother meeting their demands, we don't need to turn ourselves in, and we sure don't need to come up with the money," he said firmly.

"But the fact remains that twenty armed men are holding two hundred hostages inside the castle," Sally countered.

"If we didn't care about the hostages, I could wrap this up by myself in no time."

"No. I absolutely won't sign off on any reckless maneuvers."

"In that case, maybe we should just team up with them and conquer the Earth Sphere ourselves?"

To Sally's surprise, WuFei actually managed a straight-faced quip.

"That's one hell of a joke," she said. "Any other plan?"

"We go in by force." He said it almost too calmly, and Sally couldn't think of a better alternative.

"Right... I guess that's our only choice," she agreed.

"Then let's round up some backup."

"You mean assemble a strike team?"

Sally mentally calculated how many she could rally.

"How many people do you need? With forty-eight hours, I could probably get around a thousand."

"If we wait that long, we'll be watching the mushroom cloud rise over the Sanc Kingdom," he said flatly.

"Five hundred in twenty-four?"

"We don't need that many to retake a castle," WuFei insisted.

He could picture precisely the men he wanted, comrades he trusted above all others.

"With me included," he said, "five will be enough."

Even Sally was taken aback. "Five? That's it?"

"It'll take some time to gather them, but I'll give you their locations now."

At that, Sally realized exactly whom he meant.

"All right," she murmured. "We'll make direct contact with each of them and request their help, face-to-face."

"That's the only way they'll move," he replied.

*

Several hours later, Sally traveled to L-2 to seek out one of the people WuFei had specified: Duo Maxwell. Her first stop was a junk shop, but she was quickly disappointed.

"He's not here," said a young woman named Hilde Schbeiker, her gaze downcast with a touch of sadness. "He took off on one of his usual, spur-of-the-moment trips. No telling when he'll be back...."

Sally offered no consolation.

"The boy you love carries a hole in his heart."

Saying so would be cruel when she had come to drag him back into battle. She left without another word.

But as a Preventer about to request his assistance, telling Hilde such a thing seemed heartless, even cruel. In the end, she said nothing and turned to go.

She then headed to the other spot WuFei had mentioned. "If he's not there," WuFei had said, "the only other place he might be is wherever you can see the Moon."

Viewed from a colony, the surface of the Moon looked like a stark and unfeeling realm of death. Somehow, that sight appealed to the so-called "God of Death."

Sure enough, near the colony's spaceport, seated against an outer wall in a standard astro-suit, Sally found Duo, perched by himself, gazing up at the Moon's barren expanse. His small silhouette seemed utterly alone. It reminded her of all the times she had glimpsed him drifting about aboard Peacemillion.

“Well, would ya look at that, it’s been a while,” he said in a hollow voice, never taking his eyes off the Moon. Three months had passed since Sally and Duo had last met.

“I’ve got a job for you, Mr. Jack-of-All-Trades,” Sally said.

Still gazing upward, Duo replied in a measured monotone.

“Sorry, lady, trouble’s not on my menu.”

Sally gave him a playful smile. “I’m prepared to pay you handsomely, ”

She knew the truth: the only thing Duo needed was that excuse, the notion of “payment,” to do what his conscience told him anyway.

*

Meanwhile, in the highest executive suite of the Winner Trading Company in L-4, Quatre Raberba Winner was drowning in corporate work. He stamped his approval on the latest round of financial documents, struggling to work through one stack after another. He was exceptionally competent at just about everything, except running a business. For him, these tasks were pure agony.

It was perhaps a fatal flaw for the heir to the Winner family empire.

"If someone else can do it, why must it be me?"

Yet abandonment ran counter to his nature.

Suddenly the door to his office opened without so much as a knock.

“Close that, please,” he snapped, startling even himself as a gust of air scattered his documents across the desk. “I’ve already spent three days reading all this!”

“Busy, I see,” came a familiar voice from the doorway, which closed again with a quiet click.

“W-WuFei!” Quatre sprang up, delighted.

Arms folded, WuFei stared out the panoramic window. “A difficult situation’s come up. I’d ask for your help.”

WuFei walked over to the window, arms folded, looking out at the impressive colony skyline from the top floor. “There’s trouble brewing. I’ve come to ask for your help.”

“Trouble?” Quatre repeated.

“It’s a good view,” WuFei commented, staring beyond the glass.

“Anyway, I can’t force you, and I don’t have time to argue my case.”

“You need me, right?”

Turning to meet Quatre’s eyes, WuFei simply nodded. “More than anyone.”

“Then I’ll go,” Quatre said without a second’s hesitation. “I’ll do whatever’s needed. Lately, I’ve felt like I’m not really me anymore...just going through the motions.”

When a secretary came in later with yet another mountain of documents awaiting the president’s approval, both Quatre and WuFei had vanished without a trace. Papers were left piled in precarious heaps, some cascading to the floor where they remained.

*

Thanks to updated intelligence, WuFei and Quatre deduced that the traveling circus troupe, where they expected to find Trowa Barton, had shifted to the L-3 colony cluster. It was good luck they discovered it in time, or they would have wasted hours flying out to L-5, the farthest location from L-4.

They arrived at Trowa’s circus trailer without delay.

“Got it,” Trowa said almost instantly, the moment he saw them. “Let’s go.”

He barely needed an explanation. Even with so little detail, he was ready to move, no second thoughts.

“Hey, Trowa! You’re on in just a minute, where do you think you’re going?!”

Catherine Bloom, sounding frantic, tried to stop him.

WuFei took a moment to greet her. “Thank you for that soup you made me once. I owe you.”

A year earlier, WuFei wouldn’t have bothered. But Trowa was a special case. At one point aboard Peacemillion, Trowa had said to WuFei, “At least say hello. Women are more fragile than you.” Perhaps WuFei remembered, or perhaps this was his subtle way of needling Trowa. Catherine’s intuition for such emotional undercurrents was razor-sharp.

“Hold it right there!” she called after them. “If Trowa gets hurt again, I’ll make you drink another round of my special soup!”

WuFei smirked.

“So she knew it was awful...”

Quatre glanced at his watch.

“We’re cutting it close. The deadline they gave us is in less than fifty hours now.”

“Right,” WuFei said, then turned to Trowa for confirmation. “Are you sure about this?”

“Don’t worry,” Trowa replied softly.

As the three departed, Catherine watched them go until they were completely out of sight.

"She's just looking out for me."

*

Relena's birthday, April 8, slipped by with scarcely a ripple. Most of the day had been consumed by the time it took for the former Gundam pilots to make their way back to Earth.

And yet, in some circles, there were those who referred to this quiet return as the third "Operation Meteor."

They had journeyed between Earth and the colonies more than once before, but this marked only the third time they had all descended together.

The first, of course, was the infamous debut.

The second: the fierce battle in Brussels.

AC-197 APRIL 9

A small shuttle pierced the Earth's atmosphere, carrying Sally and Duo back to the surface. Despite their best efforts, they'd found no sign of Heero. Sally had reported this setback to Quatre just before atmospheric re-entry, but the boy had responded cheerfully, unfazed.

"Come on now, do you really think Heero would stay quiet at a time like this?" Quatre had laughed reassuringly. "He'll show up, no doubt about it. Please hurry to the rendezvous point."

Sally chose to trust Quatre's calm judgment.

"Well, now that you mention it..." Duo muttered from the seat beside her, his face a comical mix of annoyance and grudging agreement.

"He's totally obsessed with Relena, after all. Can't believe we busted our butts all this time for nothing. Talk about chasing your tail."

Sally chuckled softly, warmed by Duo's playful complaints.

"Oh, but you know," he added hastily, "I'm totally charging for overtime pay on this wild goose chase."

"Yes, yes," Sally replied gently, amused.

In these dark, difficult days, Duo's relentless optimism brought unexpected solace. Somehow, his laughter made hope seem possible again, courage attainable.

*

Only eight hours remained until the deadline set by the self-proclaimed "next government."

In Sanc Kingdom Bay, a luxurious cruise liner had been transformed into Preventer's makeshift operations command center. From the deck, one had a perfect view of the stately towers of Sanc Kingdom Castle. Around them, civilian vessels and yachts crowded the harbor, anchored quietly, unaware of the looming threat.

"If this mission fails, it won't just be the people inside the castle who suffer. Everyone in the bay will be caught in the disaster as well..." WuFei murmured grimly, eyes fixed on the distant spires.

"Which makes our responsibility that much heavier..." Quatre admitted soberly.

Nearby, Trowa returned silently from his reconnaissance, delivering his report to Quatre in his usual composed voice.

"I managed to make my way fairly deep inside, but I still don't know where the two hundred hostages are being held," Trowa explained calmly. "Surveillance cameras are everywhere, and armed patrols, about twenty soldiers in total, cover almost every angle."

"Thank you, Trowa," Quatre replied quietly, already calculating possibilities and adjusting strategies to save the hostages amidst the shifting scenario.

"We'd need heavy artillery or tanks if we plan on forcing our way in," Trowa noted dryly, ever practical, accustomed to battles more overt.

"This time we prioritize human life," Quatre said firmly. "We won't lose even a single person. And no nuclear bomb will go off on our watch."

*

Within Sanc Kingdom Castle, the hostages had been split evenly across four rooms, fifty frightened souls huddled together in each. Two guards stood vigil outside every door, machine guns ready, their cold threats chilling the prisoners to their bones.

"Move an inch, and you die."

Separately, three others had been escorted to an underground nuclear shelter: Relena Darlian, her foster mother Marlene Darlian, and Pargan, the steadfast butler. Pargan knew deep in his heart that safeguarding these two women would be his final act of devotion.

"Please trust my skill," Pargan whispered earnestly, determined, his aged eyes sharp and resolute. Despite his advanced years, he knew he

could still disarm the guards behind him and lead Relena and Marlene to safety. "I may be old, but I'm far from rusty."

"No, Pargan," Relena insisted softly but firmly, her voice betraying no panic, only calm dignity. "We mustn't risk endangering others through reckless action."

"But, Miss Relena—"

They reached the shelter at last, where a man with flowing blonde hair stood waiting in the dimly lit chamber. From the start, Relena recognized his uncanny resemblance to Milliardo.

"Welcome... Relena Peacecraft."

The man slowly removed his sunglasses and mask, revealing a refined face with a straight nose, thin lips, and striking blue eyes, every detail an eerie reflection of her brother.

"Master Milliardo..." Pargan murmured involuntarily, momentarily overwhelmed by disbelief.

"Quite the resemblance to your brother, wouldn't you say" the man mocked gently.

"What do you want from us? Who are you?" Relena questioned steadily, not allowing fear or confusion to touch her voice.

"Ah, forgive my manners. My name is Dixneuf Neuenheim." His lips curled in a self-deprecating smile. "I am someone dedicated to bringing total peace to the Earth Sphere and Mars."

"And what could you possibly need from us?" Relena pressed sharply.

"I need you to activate a certain program," Dixneuf explained smoothly, handing her an old-fashioned notebook computer. "The password is 'PEACECRAFT×2 HEERO YUY.'"

The small screen displayed an image of a Norwegian Forest kitten, its fluffy fur capturing every detail in crisp clarity. It mewed gently, soft, plaintive, almost heartbreaking.

"Sam..." Pargan's heart clenched painfully at the sight, dread filling him completely.

*

Back on the luxury liner, a VTOL craft touched down, bringing Duo and Sally aboard. As they stepped onto the deck, Duo immediately questioned the assembled team, impatient and anxious.

"Hey, has Heero shown up yet?"

"He just arrived," Quatre assured with a relieved smile.

Suddenly, the calm sea swelled violently, and a sleek red mobile suit burst dramatically through the water's surface.

"What the—no way!" Duo groaned incredulously.

"An OZ-08MMS Cancer," Trowa calmly identified, unflustered.

The cockpit hatch swung open smoothly, and Heero Yuy stepped out, clad impeccably in a Preventer uniform of unknown origin. Spray from the waves gently caressed his cheek as he surveyed the team.

"Am I late?" Heero asked tersely, swiping at the seawater on his face with the back of one gloved hand, a gesture oddly shy, as though shielding himself from scrutiny.

"No, you made it with plenty of time," Quatre reassured warmly.

"Good to see you, Heero."

"Hey, wait a sec!" Duo shouted, pointing dramatically at the mobile suit. "Isn't that cheating?!"

"That suit shouldn't even officially exist," Sally added, bewildered but smiling despite herself.

"Seriously, Preventer, you guys slacking off or what? Letting illegal hardware slip right past you—"

"Quit whining!" WuFei barked, arms folded tightly, deliberately turning away from Duo's complaints. "Knowing him, he salvaged that scrap from the ocean floor and built it himself. Our job's not that sloppy."

"You gotta enforce the rules, man!" Duo's whining persisted stubbornly.

"You sound like a kid who just had his toys confiscated," Sally teased, gently elbowing Duo.

"Yeah, well, excuuuse me!" Duo huffed indignantly. "But still--!"

Before he could launch into another tirade, Heero loosed a wire launcher, its magnetized tip slicing inches past Duo's startled face and attaching neatly to the VTOL hull behind him. Startled into silence, Duo reflexively clamped his mouth shut.

Heero reeled the cable in and nimbly hopped down to the deck. His agility was as inhumanly impressive as ever.

"Stinkin' show-off..." Duo bit down, grinding his teeth.

Ignoring Duo's bruised pride entirely, Heero's eyes locked onto Quatre with cool intensity.

"Fill me in on the current situation," he demanded, voice cold, calm, and utterly focused.

Afterword

While rewatching the TV series I noticed something curious: there are surprisingly few shots that show Trowa Barton from behind. It's almost as if, whenever the storyboard or the key animation tried to place the camera at his back, he warned, "Stand there if you like, but I won't be responsible for your safety." Even without ever seeing that angle, I could feel the tension in those unseen shoulder blades, an unspoken wall that shut everyone out.

Trowa spends each episode walking a tightrope right beside madness, yet inside he's all quiet kindness and steel resolve. That paradox exists thanks to his actor, Shigeru Nakahara. In person Nakahara is the very picture of courtesy, a soft-spoken gentleman, but somewhere in the cool register of his performance you always sense unwavering sincerity moving forward.

I ended up at the post-recording party after Episode 35, and there Nakahara, so icy and composed in the booth, burst into a beaming grin and said, "I'm so glad I made it back! After Episode 25 I was sure Trowa was dead for good." The gap between voice and smile nearly knocked me over.

That was when another actor chuckled, "Still, Episode 35's title card 'The Return of WuFei' is a riot, isn't it? He's a regular cast member; you don't slap 'returns' on a regular!" The moment I heard that, alarm bells rang. I did my best not to meet Ryuzo Ishino's gaze, poor Ishino, had gone more than ten episodes without so much as a grunt of dialogue himself.

But that, dear reader, is a story for the afterword in Volume Seven....

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.06 Nocturn in Mourning (Part.02)

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