

# 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

Written by  
**Katsuyuki Sumizawa**

Cover Art by **Sakura Asagi**  
**Hajime Katoki**

Original Work by  
**Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino**

**7 Rhapsody of Quiet Despair (Part.1)**



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# **Entr'acte of the Heart's Depths**

Preventer 5 (Part.02)

*"Unless we stop this process now, more soldiers like ourselves will become necessary. If that happens, a history of tragedy will keep repeating itself. How many more people must we kill? How many more times must I kill that girl and her dog?"*

—AC-197 December 27, Re-Entry—  
Heero Yuy

## **AC-197 APRIL 09**

### **Sanc Kingdom Airspace, Preventer VTOL 06:47pm**

Only five hours remained until the deadline issued by the group calling itself Epyon de Telos.

The Preventers' VTOL skimmed toward the jagged ridgeline guarding the Sanc Kingdom. At the controls, Sally Po kept to the upper atmosphere, banking in a wide arc so the craft would slip past the castle's early-warning net.

At the same time, she hailed the one comm-line the terrorists had left open.

"Preventer Water here. Epyon de Telos, please respond."

A man wearing dark sunglasses and a muffler filled the screen.

"Have you got our ransom ready?"

From what Sally could see in the background, he was in the castle's great hall.

"Sure do, pure gold ingots," Sally answered breezily. "We'll be delivering them in ten separate drops. That work for you?"

"You like making things difficult, don't you?"

"We're talking about a massive sum here. You can't expect this to be easy. Unless of course you'd rather wait until we've got it all in one place? But we're showing you good faith."

"What are you implying?"

"Well, look at it this way. Doing multiple drops lets you check each delivery's authenticity in peace, and it's a lot safer than handing it over face-to-face. Everyone wins, right?"

"Hmph. But try anything stupid, and our nuclear device—"

"Sally cut him off at once.

"I'm well aware of your threats! The first drop is happening at exactly seven o'clock tonight, by parachute. After that, we'll drop another load every thirty minutes. That way, you'll get the full amount before the deadline. Oh, and one more thing: if you see any jet approaching those windows, you are not to shoot them down. Do I make myself clear?"

He answered in a disgruntled grumble. "Fine..."

"We won't go public with the Preventers until after every hostage is safely released. That's all I have to say."

In a normal negotiation, cutting the line first would have been unthinkable, dragging the talk out was the classic way to gather intel. But right now, they were too pressed for time.

"But we've got our own agenda to handle," Sally muttered.

Of the ten "shipments" she'd promised, only three containers actually held gold, two courtesy of the Winner family and one supplied by the Earth Sphere Unified Nation government. The rest were a bluff, but it guaranteed the VTOL could approach the castle at least three times.

Behind her, four Preventers were methodically checking their gear. Working in two-man cells, they would each parachute out during the first two low passes. Heero Yuy was not among them; he had already launched in a Cancer mobile suit.

Quatre Raberba Winner finished loading his rifle and spoke in a measured tone.

"History shows that a military organization claiming 'peace' is often the most dangerous force on Earth. The Alliance Forces fought 'for justice and peace,' but the enemy they fought had long since ceased to exist. To keep themselves alive, they built new weapons, fabricated rebellions, and eventually branded the Sanc Kingdom and the colonies as foes."

Duo Maxwell, tightening the thruster crutch on his leg, offered a blunt rejoinder.

"So they were corrupt. What's your point?"

"My point is this: what guarantee do we have that the Preventers won't rot the same way? How can we swear we'll never lose control?"

His words, born of hard experience, hung in the cargobay.

"Fortunately, Preventer has no opposing forces at the moment," Quatre continued. "The organization is still small, and we can monitor each other. We keep ourselves in check. But if one day it grows too big, we risk forgetting our founding ideals, and we'll start preying on the weak, just like any other corrupt military group."

"Hmph. As long as my eyes remain open, I'll never let us fall to corruption," retorted Chang Wufei, the only full-time Preventer agent in

the bay, and openly annoyed that the Winner estate had provided any gold at all.

Duo caught Quatre's meaning at once: even Wufei was no embodiment of absolute justice. In these chaotic times, no one could truly claim the authority to define right and wrong, certainly not after the uprising of Mariemaia's Army, at least. Wufei's bravado masked a tangle of guilt, self-reproach, and penance that still stirred beneath the warrior's calm.

With a heavy sigh, Quatre went on. "Unfortunately, human beings are tragically adept at pursuing self-interest. During the era of space development, that trait worked in our favor, more or less. But once people realized they could profit from war or peace, countless profiteers swarmed us like crows. That's when we'll see a second or a third Alliance Army take shape, perhaps breeding a new OZ within their ranks."

Duo exhaled sharply.

"But why hide it at all? If what we're doing is right, why not be open about it?"

Trowa Barton, who was monitoring the external pressure gauge, snorted. "You never change. Always so straightforward, aren't you?"

"Huh?" Duo grunted, unsure what Trowa meant.

"Did you forget how 'Gundam' once stood as a symbol of rebellion?"

That shut Duo up fast, his expression sour. He vividly recalled how OZ, back in the early days of AC-195, had used cunning propaganda to drag the five Gundams into the limelight and into a trap. And there was a real chance the enemy was trying the same strategy now by demanding the Preventers go public.

*"Tch... Great reminder, Trowa."*

After all, it was none other than Trowa who had once publicly "executed" Duo's Gundam Deathscythe. Later, even when Duo had upgraded to the Gundam Deathscythe Hell and hidden away on a colony, there were people who tried to make him a revolutionary hero.

They wanted him to join White Fang, believing Gundams were indispensable to their main combat force.

*"Maybe I could've handled that better..."*

Of course, Duo had refused. At the time, Hilde had told him, "If you join White Fang, they'll treat you like a hero."

He had answered her in all honesty: "That's not my style. I'll stay the God of Death, thanks."

He'd truly meant it. Even if it meant waging a lonely, miserable fight, it was still the path he chose. Typically, once you step onto any grand stage, your personal intentions get lost in the noise. To avoid that fate, he and the other former Gundam pilots had always fought alone, never

pledging themselves to any large faction. And still, they'd been used over and over, pulled in by other people's agendas. That, in a nutshell, was AC-195 for them.

It was why they had tried to cast their Gundams into the sun the next year, and then recently destroyed them for good measure. They wanted a world that didn't need Gundams, and a Preventer unit that never had to step out from the shadows.

The four men shared those beliefs.

Several minutes later, at exactly seven o'clock, as the first of the ransom containers fell toward the castle grounds, two figures dropped just ahead of it, Quatre and Trowa, descending into Sanc Kingdom Castle's airspace.

## **Sanc Kingdom Bay, Seafloor**

### **07:11pm**

Model number OZ-08MMS Cancer, the underwater mobile suit, knifed its way beneath the waves. Carefully scanning the complex seabed, it used the swift current of high tide to speed toward the coastline beneath the Sanc Kingdom Castle.

Its pilot: Heero Yuy.

His self-imposed mission: Rescue Relena Darlian and disarm the castle's nuclear device.

Among the Preventers, Heero was considered the most capable, an assessment owed to his remarkable ability to keep challenging his own failures without ever abandoning his pride. His unflappable focus, his willingness to push forward with no fear of mistakes, these qualities had earned him the respect of all his comrades.

He steered the Cancer away from the river flowing from Lake Lernaean and set a course northwest, toward the towering cliffs. Rumor had it an underwater passage connected the castle's basement to the open sea, leading through a submerged cave beneath that same craggy coastline.

There was an old record from AC-145 describing how rebel forces had infiltrated the castle through that very passage, managing to take members of the Peacecraft royal family hostage.

\*

Just half an hour earlier, on the luxury cruise liner that was serving as Preventer's operations base, Quatre had laid out the situation for Heero and shown him an ancient map.

"Heero, use this route to sneak into Sanc Kingdom Castle."

"Understood."

"We'll be entering from our own points of infiltration. The timing is a bit tricky, so once everything begins, please leave your comm channel open."

Quatre proceeded to give him all the key details with practiced calm. It was clear how much he trusted Heero's abilities. As usual, Heero didn't show any tension or say more than necessary. When Quatre finished with a serious look and added, "Please, don't do anything reckless," Heero merely replied in a flat, detached tone.

"Mission accepted."

And, without another word, he slipped beneath the waves in silence, the Cancer's thrusters flaring in the darkening sea.

\*

The Cancer bearing Heero slid into the shadow of the headland that marked his objective.

No cave mouth greeted him. He had expected as much. Half a century of silt, dead plankton, sand, pulverized rock, had packed itself into every hollow. Add to that the naval battles that had raged here throughout the Sanc Kingdom's turbulent history, most famously the autumn clash of Gundam Epyon and Wing Gundam Zero in AC-195, and it would have been a miracle if the opening still yawned where the records said it should.

Heero studied the nautical chart on a secondary monitor and remembered fighting right above this cliff. His opponent that day had been Milliardo Peacecraft, Relena's brother. Zero System against Zero System, the first duel of its kind, and it had ended in the absurd: each pilot abandoning his own machine and seizing the other's. Heero had never fully acclimated with Epyon's Zero System.

"So this is the cliff," he muttered, letting the words drift in the cockpit. Then, in his mind's eye, he pictured an hourglass, one with a hole at the bottom, so that silver grains of sand poured endlessly into a dark, empty void. Like plankton sinking into the black depths, or stardust scattering in space, every memory dissolved into darkness.

During his training as a "living weapon," Heero had devised this technique to delete unwanted memories. He forced himself to believe

that if he was a high-performance tool of war, it must be possible. That harsh mental discipline had kept his psyche from shattering, though it came with hidden costs.

He had no idea why he always envisioned sand to represent time. But counting each second mechanically or watching a digital timer tick away felt less true to life than the simple, relentless flow of sand.

If he was going to keep moving forward, he had to let the past slip through his fingers. Or so he told himself. In truth, he had endured far too many moments of tragedy, regret, and loss, everything he wished never to see again.

"The past means nothing... I don't need it."

Regaining his steely calm, Heero deployed the submarine communication buoy from the Cancer's top hatch, a piece of equipment once developed by OZ. Nicknamed the "OZ line," it emitted and received specialized pulses at the water's surface, enabling communication from the depths even under heavy jamming. The one drawback was that its operational radius was only about a kilometer.

Heero wasn't one to waste time. While the comm buoy rose to the surface, he fired ultrasonic probes at the rock face, mapping out the internal structure of the cliff. It quickly pinpointed the approximate location of the submerged tunnel. Four torpedo tubes were mounted on the Cancer, enough to blast open the blocked entrance.

However, the resulting explosion could alert those inside the castle. Even underwater, the vibrations and disturbance on the surface might be too large to hide.

"Red One Cancer here," Heero said at last, his voice steady. "OZ line is secure."

From beneath the waves, he called up to the Preventer VTOL flying high above.

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Underground Shelter**

### **07:32pm**

Dixneuf Neuenheim glanced down at his wristwatch and clicked his tongue in silent frustration.

"Four and a half hours left..."

He had just received word a few minutes earlier that the second container of gold had been dropped. The first batch of ingots, all of which turned out to be genuine, had apparently convinced him that the Earth Sphere government was conceding to their demands. Yet, the ransom itself meant almost nothing to the man. His real goal was to activate the Perfect Peace Program.

Displayed on the screen of his antiquated laptop was a tiny kitten named Sam, which had already identified Relena as a "Peacecraft." All that remained was for the woman to input a single password: PEACECRAFT×2 HEERO YUY.

That was it.

And yet...

\*

A few years prior, acting on orders from his father and superior, Nove Neuenheim, the CEO of the Neuenheim Konzern, Dixneuf had been handed a piece of software developed by one Thomas Currant, called the Prototype Perfect Peace Program. He was told to repair it, improve it, and bring it online. To his astonishment, it was constructed from an entirely unique codebase and, so far as he could tell, had never been successfully activated.

Still, Nove had insisted, "With this, we can achieve total control over the Martian Sphere." The plan, as Dixneuf was told, involved administering a certain drug to the majority of the population, one that would let them trigger a system to kill anyone who disobeyed. At his father's command, Dixneuf began the repair process without question.

They were able to extract some mathematical data from the software, but vast portions of it remained unreadable. Even with a team of top programmers, it took a tremendous amount of time to reconstruct something created over half a century ago and strip out all its bugs. After all that, it still wouldn't boot. The software was clearly locked behind an extremely complex password.

Later on, it was discovered that newly developed nanomachine technology could integrate with computer networks, and so a fresh project team was formed in AC-195, two years ago. Yet even then, they couldn't resolve the biggest problem: the startup conditions were too unusual.

Eventually, they decoded the requirement for unlocking the password: It needed both a member of the Peacecraft family and an AI called "Sam." The AI had to confirm the presence of a Peacecraft and then input a specific string, PEACECRAFT×2 HEERO YUY, to trigger the software.

This "Sam" was no ordinary AI but a quantum-computer-level intelligence. Even the latest technology of the day was nowhere near perfecting that. Gundams' Zero System was allegedly the closest thing to

a quantum computer, but its propensity to “run wild” meant it too fell short of “finished.”

After the Eve Wars, Milliardo Peacecraft had reportedly appeared on Mars with the Gundam Epyon. Hearing that rumor, Dixneuf made his decision.

“The Epyon has the Zero System. If I can get it and become Milliardo myself, I can activate the program.”

When Milliardo left Mars, Dixneuf immediately took the insane step of undergoing reconstructive surgery to make himself look like Milliardo. It wasn't an exaggeration to call it an act of madness. He then assassinated Major Eleve Onegell, who had been entrusted with the Gundam Epyon, then stole the mobile suit. Dixneuf even downloaded traces of Milliardo's consciousness left behind in the Zero System, trying desperately to embody Peacecraft in every way.

Even so, the program refused to activate. According to the Zero System, the software wouldn't operate without “Sam,” the quantum-computer AI that had once been installed in a mobile suit called the Wyvern. Disheartened, Dixneuf almost gave up. Nowhere in the archives was there any sign of that machine from fifty years ago, and given how many times the Sanc Kingdom had been destroyed and rebuilt, the chances of “Sam” surviving there seemed laughably slim.

Then came a new report from one of his underlings on Mars: it seemed the Preventers were attempting to restart the mobile doll factory known as Vulkanus. The Earth Sphere's intelligence agency rarely set foot on Mars. Dixneuf had seized the chance to hack them and acquired several pieces of confidential intel, among them, mention of Wyvern. Apparently, Duke Dermail and Chief Engineer Tsuberov of the Romefeller Foundation had used “Sam” as a software reference when developing mobile dolls.

That meant “Sam” could still exist somewhere on Earth.

Possessed by a near-insane determination, Dixneuf scoured every lead. The full might of Neuenheim Konzern was enlisted to comb the globe. Their efforts revealed the most likely place: the large portrait of King Marticus Peacecraft in the grand hall of Sanc Kingdom Castle. The painting was secured by a special neo-titanium shield, having somehow survived bombings and fires with barely a scratch. It was suspicious, to say the least. After further digging, Dixneuf uncovered intel suggesting “Sam” was hidden within that very portrait.

That was why he hired over a dozen terrorists, stormed the castle, took government VIPs like Relena hostage, and barricaded himself within the castle. His prize was soon discovered inside the portrait: an old mini-

computer. Unfortunately, the onboard AI was just in its infantile state, a far cry from the advanced entity once called "Sam."

In order for it to "mature" and recognize Peacecrafts, the AI needed at least sixty hours of learning and social interaction. It took all that time and effort, but at last he managed to bring it online, or so he thought, only to learn that "Sam" refused to see him as Peacecraft. Defeat once more stared him in the face.

Whether it was some oversight in deciphering the data or an error at a far more fundamental level, Dixneuf couldn't say. Regardless, this far into his madness, he couldn't stop. As his final gamble, he decided to force Relena to cooperate.

But...

\*

For more than an hour, Dixneuf had been coaxing, cajoling, and philosophizing, yet Relena Darlian refused to budge.

"Miss Relena, please consider this carefully. Once our demands are met, Preventer will be gone for good. In its absence, rebellions and conflicts will erupt across the globe, and yet another massive military force will rise to replace Preventer. It will be no different from the old United Earth Sphere Alliance, or even another secret society like OZ."

Relena answered only with silence.

"History's tragedies will keep repeating themselves. We need this program to usher in true peace."

"I don't believe that. Nothing like 'true peace' could ever come from such a monstrous program."

"You're mistaken, it absolutely can. The system manages all of humanity."

"That's impossible! Peace isn't--"

"I know your famous line: 'Peace is not something that is just handed to us; each person must fight for their own.'"

Relena's lips pressed into a thin line.

"But you must understand that humans don't truly need freedom or independence... Only through total subjugation can we achieve the real peace our world deserves."

Behind Dixneuf, the kitten on-screen, Sam, gave a small mew. Relena didn't even turn her head.

Keeping his urgency hidden, Dixneuf continued to act the part of the polite gentleman.

"Now, Miss Relena... It's time to discard 'Darlian' and return to your rightful name: Peacecraft."

Yet she remained unyielding, refusing to nod even once. Dixneuf let out a slow breath.

"I, too, seek peace, just as you do. Our destination, our end goal, it's all the same. So why refuse to help me?"

"Because as things stand, Mr. Dixneuf, you are brandishing nuclear weapons and threatening the Earth Sphere government. Don't pretend we're the same."

"Yes, but it's the surest path to bring about true peace... casting aside this false peace we now cling to."

He was, in effect, playing a deadly game of chicken, each side racing toward a cliff labeled "Peace through Despair." Relena could see it clearly. She felt tested, struggling with how best to respond.

"Peace achieved by these means is no peace at all."

Yet there had to be another option in the time they had left, she had to find it.

"We can't afford to give in now. We have to hold onto hope and face this head-on..."

If "absolute peace" required the total abolition of weaponry, then yes, the Preventers' very existence was an undeniable contradiction. Relena herself had only become aware of their operations at the tail end of last year. Perhaps calling it a "false peace" wasn't entirely wrong. Even so, she couldn't bring herself to condemn Preventer entirely. Without them, the Mariemaia uprising might never have been stopped. Moreover, the sight of Gundams in combat had rallied the public to take responsibility for peace themselves, and that had been a genuine turning point.

On the other hand, she felt pity for those in Preventer, toiling in the shadows even in these "bright" times. If the Earth Sphere government surrendered the entire Preventer budget as ransom and splashed it across every newsfeed to the public, the "peacekeeping system" they had so carefully established would almost certainly topple overnight. The only remaining way to avoid that would be to use Dixneuf's so-called "Perfect Peace" program, an oppressive regime of control that would extinguish war by enslaving everyone. The nuclear device would be disarmed, the hostages freed, and the Sanc Kingdom spared.

"But is that really acceptable?"

Wouldn't that just be running from, shirking from, the responsibility of preserving peace?

The other option: remain silent until the deadline, letting two hundred hostages, and Sanc Kingdom itself, perish in a nuclear blast. She would sacrifice human lives here and now, entrusting everything to Preventer

and leaving the unfinished task of “sustaining peace” for the next generation.

“But that, too is...”

It felt too simple, too unthinking. Caught between these two dismal roads, her mind kept circling back, unable to find a resolution. Both led to outcomes far from the peace she longed for.

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Third Floor Hostage Room**

### **07:55pm**

All of the hostages in this particular room were women. Lady Une, Director of Preventer, felt the compact radio inside her purse begin to vibrate.

“So it’s finally time...”

Leaning toward Dorothy Catalonia, who sat nearby, she whispered, “I need a small distraction. Think you can divert their attention for a bit?”

Dorothy smiled.

“With pleasure. Any preference? An ‘old-fashioned catfight’? A bit of ‘feminine wiles’? Or maybe a ‘molestation scare’?”

“I’d rather keep others out of the line of fire,” Lady Une replied quietly.

“In that case, oration it is.”

With a swift, graceful motion, Dorothy rose and strode straight toward the pair of armed terrorists guarding them. There was something bright, almost gallant, in the way she carried herself, unmistakably Dorothy.

The two men brandished their submachine guns.

“What do you think you’re doing? Stay seated!”

“If you need the bathroom, you all go together!”

Dorothy’s lips curled into a sly smile.

“Tell me, gentlemen, have you two ever killed a woman? I’ve heard it’s an especially nasty business...”

She lets out a tiny, soft chuckle.

“Some people say the faces of the ones you’ve murdered stay burned into your eyelids, making it impossible to sleep. Your dear mothers, I’m sure, raised you better than that.”

“Shut it!”

“We’re not here to listen to your--”

Ignoring them, Dorothy turned to address the other hostages.

“Ladies, may I have your attention? I have a proposal.”

“Stop it, damn you!”

“You really want to die?!”

The men barked threats, but Dorothy began her “speech” in dramatic style.

“Friends, I’m thinking of giving these two fine gentlemen a break from this grueling task. How about we take it upon ourselves to, oh, I don’t know, end it all? Because continuing to burden them and the rest of the Earth Sphere just seems so impolite, doesn’t it? Why don’t we all rush them, force them to open fire, and see ourselves shot to bits?”

The other hostages stared, slack-jawed.

“Nobody move!” one man yelled. “Try anything, and we really will open fire!”

They switched their guns from semi-auto to full-auto. Dorothy glanced over her shoulder in a moment of theatrical delight.

“Come now, let’s all get drenched in a rain of bullets together. Imagine how beautiful we’d look, our blood bathing the floor crimson for the gods to witness!”

She cast a sidelong look toward the back of the room. “And wouldn’t that make it easier on you two? Think how quickly you could be on your way home to the ones you love...”

One of the terrorists flipped his weapon back to semi-auto and scoffed.

“Hate to disappoint, but I don’t have a family, or a mom, to go home to.”

He aimed at Dorothy’s long, golden hair. Nearby, Lady Une quietly snapped her compact mirror shut. Catching that cue, Dorothy spoke again, her back still turned to the men.

“Ah, so you’re going to shoot me? Feel free. I can keep cursing you for a hundred or two hundred years, however long you like.”

His finger slipped over the trigger. At that exact moment, Lady Une suddenly got to her feet and began applauding. Their heads whipped around, both rifles aimed at her now.

“Marvelous... that was simply marvelous.”

Her voice was calm and refined.

“I’m moved, Miss Dorothy, by your speech.”

But then Lady Une’s tone shifted to a stern command, sharp as a whip.

“However, enough of this nuisance. Sit down! At once!”

“Oh dear,” Dorothy said with mocking regret, “and I was just getting started...”

She returned to her seat, and in that fleeting moment, the two women exchanged a knowing look.

“Do you still have more to do?” Dorothy murmured so only Lady Une could hear.

“Plenty,” Lady Une replied softly.

Both women shared a conspiratorial smile, thin, fierce, and unafraid.

## **South Side Urban District, Team One**

### **07:55pm**

Trowa and Quatre had climbed onto the rooftop of a thirty-story building overlooking Sanc Kingdom Castle. There, they were setting up a small anti-air bazooka. Half an hour before, on the north side, Wufei and Duo, Team Two, had touched down in the forests, presumably making their way through the woods to approach the castle's rear.

"You think it's time?" Trowa asked.

"Yes," Quatre replied. "Trowa, could you handle comms for me?"

"Not an issue."

Quatre handed over the radio.

"I have a tough time with her."

On the other end was Lady Une, Director of Preventer, who would appear to be "touching up her makeup" in a compact mirror.

"As expected from you, Trowa Barton. You found a way to use the 'OZ line' for communication."

"We begin in 250 seconds. I need you to make your move on your end."

"Wait, Relena Darlian isn't with us. If we do anything rash, it could put her in danger."

Trowa's laugh was a mere exhale.

"My, Preventer has grown cautious."

"Meaning?"

"Only the cunning survive the battlefield, Colonel Une. I assumed you, of all people, understood that."

Their tone had not changed since the days when she was his superior in OZ.

"Leave Relena to me. You see to the other hostages."

"Understood. We'll do what we can. Where do we rendezvous?"

"You can track my location through this channel. Feel free to move as you see fit."

"Copy that."

She snapped the compact shut, cutting the transmission.

Still peering through binoculars, Quatre called to Trowa.

"Our VTOL is inbound."

Trowa silently tossed the radio back to Quatre, then swiftly hoisted the anti-air bazooka onto his shoulder and aligned the sights.

"Let Heero know," he said flatly. "Our mission is a go."

With that, he pulled the trigger.

A deafening roar signaled the shell's launch, streaking straight toward the Preventer VTOL. Mere seconds later, it slammed into the fuselage,

right where Trowa had aimed. A flare of light burst across the sky, followed by the thunder of a massive explosion.

An explosive attack, bold and theatrical, carried out with Trowa's trademark impassive composure.

### **Sanc Kingdom Airspace, Aboard the VTOL** **07:59pm**

Thick black smoke poured from the rear fuselage, and the aircraft was losing stability by the second. Gripping the control stick tightly, Sally Po allowed herself a faint, wry smile. "Well, well... nice shot," she muttered under her breath.

Even as she fought to keep the craft airborne, she shouted into the one open comm line to castle.

"Preventer Water to Epyon de Telos. Come in, now!"

A man wearing sunglasses and a scarf appeared on her monitor.

"What's going on?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing! Why'd you fire on us? Don't you want the ransom?!"

"W-wait—!"

"If you can't control your trigger-happy troops, negotiations are over. Vertical thrusters gone. I'll be making an emergency landing in sixty seconds! You'd better make sure any explosives stay far away from us!"

She cut the transmission abruptly, then, with remarkable composure, swung the VTOL wide out over the bay, then yanked the nose into a banking U-turn straight for the castle. Once she'd set it to autopilot, its path was fixed: it would crash through the castle's outer wall and come down somewhere in the courtyard.

Sally blew the hatch and bailed, parachute blooming in the night wind.

### **Sanc Kingdom Bay, Seafloor** **08:00pm**

The moment Heero received Quatre's signal, he fired four torpedoes at the rock wall. The resulting blasts tore open the collapsed entrance to the underwater cave passage. Even as chunks of rock and debris rained down, the Cancer plunged forward without hesitation, Heero showed no sign of doubt.

"Wait for me, Relena..."

Try as he might to erase all trace of her from his mind, her face remained, and he no longer questioned why it stayed with him.

"Red One Cancer here. Entering the cave passage. I'll keep going until I hit a dead end."

He could easily imagine the chaos above, where the Preventer VTOL was likely hurtling into the castle's exterior as a fiery distraction.

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Rear Grounds, Team Two**

### **08:02pm**

Duo and Wufei descended into the castle's grounds, using their compact thruster rigs like miniature helicopters. Two guards stood watch in a recessed corner of the yard. Their attention was so consumed by the massive blast on the far side of the castle that they failed to notice the intruders.

Seeing the flames reflected on the guard towers, Duo smirked.

"Well, that's one way to make an entrance..."

No doubt Quatre and Trowa had begun their assault through the front walls by now.

"We'd better step it up too."

A quick glance told him Wufei was already on the ground. With a snap of his wrists he swung the still-spinning thruster unit like a quarterstaff and knocked both guards out cold. The improvised weapon bent into a sad crescent after just two strikes, clearly not built for combat.

"Man... everybody around here's a bit too fond of the direct approach. That gadget wasn't cheap."

He decided not to complain out loud. Wufei snatched the camo fatigues from one unconscious man and barked, "Move!"

"Yeah, yeah... Stripping random dudes isn't really my hobby," Duo grumbled under his breath.

Once disguised as terrorists, they planned to slip into the castle unnoticed.

"There should be eighteen more of them," Wufei muttered, rare for him to speak to himself.

Duo shrugged into a camo jacket. "If you count Sally, that's three apiece. Piece of cake."

"Oh?"

"What's that 'oh' for?"

"Surprised you can handle basic division."

"Great. Best partner ever."

Cursing his own bad luck for ending up with Wufei, Duo zipped the uniform and got ready to move.

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Underground Shelter**

**08:15pm**

Irritation flickered across Dixneuf's face as one frantic report after another poured in.

"Utter incompetence..."

They'd had to dispatch extra men to contain the flames engulfing the crashed VTOL. Even the two soldiers stationed in the shelter with him had been pulled away.

He turned back to Relena.

"It would seem your Earth Sphere government has abandoned you, Miss Relena."

"It's a relief, actually," she replied coolly.

"Come again?"

"Now I don't have to hit the brakes."

The cryptic answer only muddled Dixneuf's thoughts.

"I have no desire to hide behind someone else's peace. I want to build a peace I can protect, and that's what it means to be a Peacecraft!"

Suddenly, she lifted the old notebook computer high above her head, and slammed it hard on the floor. It struck with a crack, and the sound of internal components shattering was all too clear.

"You fool..."

Stunned, Dixneuf froze. That was the opening Pargan, the elder butler, had been waiting for. He lunged forward, delivered a swift punch, and wrested Dixneuf's gun from his grasp.

"My apologies, Master Dixneuf," the old butler said politely, training the barrel at him. "But perhaps it's time to accept defeat."

Dixneuf slowly stood, hands in the air. A smirk tugged at his lips.

"Heh... you really don't let your guard down, do you?"

He remained strangely confident. In his raised right hand, he held a small switch. The terrorist group still had a nuclear trump card.

"Hurt me any further and I'll detonate it right now. Surely you don't intend to be the only survivors?"

Pargan hesitated, glancing at Relena and Marlene, who both shook their heads weakly. Defeated, he offered the gun back to the man.

Dixneuf took it, and instantly whipped Pargan's aging face with the pistol grip. Blood and teeth flew, and the butler crumpled unconscious to the floor.

"Nothing person, but in Neuenheim Konzern, insults are repaid doubly."

He stooped to retrieve the computer from the ground.

"Poor little Sam... Such cruelty you've shown him."

Despite the mocking tone, his glare at Relena was cutting. She glared right back, refusing to flinch.

When he opened the device, the screen stayed dark, a fresh spiderweb of cracks across it.

"Restoring this will cost us precious time," he muttered.

Just then, the intercom buzzed.

"Did something happen in there?"

The camera feed outside showed a single "terrorist" standing before the shelter door.

"So you finally came back. You're armed, I trust?"

"Of course."

"Good. Enter."

"Roger that."

The door slid open, and in walked none other than Heero Yuy, disguised as one of the terrorists. Dixneuf instantly realized this was not one of his men.

"Y-you're--!"

"Heero!" Relena cried out, unable to contain herself.

Heero trained the machine gun on Dixneuf.

"Don't move."

Dixneuf's lips curled into a sneer.

"Would you risk a nuclear blast?"

"Go ahead," Heero answered coldly, nodding at Pargan's unconscious form. "I'm not as kind as that old man."

He paid no heed to the rescue-first philosophy that Quatre so often voiced.

"I'm fighting though this. Longer than anyone else in all of outer space."

That was Heero's unshakable vow.

"Relena. Longer than even you," he added. His tone was frosty, yet there was a faint warmth beneath it.

Relena shut her eyes, tears slipping down her cheeks.

"No, Heero... I won't let you do that."

She remembered all too well what he had once told her: "I won't kill anyone anymore." She understood the deeper implication, "as long as I don't have to." That promise assumed a world at peace. As soon as terrorists armed with a nuke threatened that peace, lethal force regained its place in Heero's moral calculations.

Heero could bear it, he was the type of person who could accept the weight of what he had to do. But the thought of him carrying such a burden tore at Relena's heart. She wanted him spared that guilt, no matter how justified it might be to eliminate an armed threat.



Wordless, Heero gently guided her aside, stepped forward, and took aim at Dixneuf on semi-auto. Dixneuf brandished the nuclear detonator in his left hand and pointed a pistol at Heero with his right. Lying on the table nearby was the battered old notebook computer that housed Sam's damaged AI. Meanwhile, Marlene cradled the unconscious Pargan's head on her lap, wiping blood from his mouth.

Never taking his eyes off Heero, Dixneuf said quietly, "I recall now, Heero Yuy. We've met once before."

## **Sanc Kingdom Bay, On the Surface**

**08:20pm**

Night fog blanketed the water, though the chill in the air felt more like winter than spring. Treading water from her parachute drop to the luxury cruiser-turned-Preventer-command-ship had drained Sally Po's stamina.

"I had no idea the bay waters could be this cold."

She was wearing a thermal wetsuit, but the cold had sunk into her bones nonetheless. Making her way into a warm cabin, she poured herself a cup from the coffeepot, luke-warm and rather bland.

She frowned slightly at the taste, remembering she'd brewed it herself before the mission. Not exactly her strong suit. With a heavy sigh, she whispered to the empty room.

"Maybe it's time I think about retiring..."

She had been fighting for more than three years straight, once a major in the Alliance, then a resistance fighter, and now a member of Preventer. The nature of her work hadn't changed one bit. She recalled something Wufei once said to her.

"You're still fighting? Even though you're weak?"

"I consider myself strong of heart."

Or so I thought, she mused. Back then, she'd wanted to encourage Wufei, who had been wrestling with his own doubts. Yet she couldn't ignore the contradiction in herself, especially having once been a military doctor. In theory, she could save lives on the battlefield, but she had also been forced to take them, again and again, when enemies threatened her patients. One could justify it as saving the weak, but what right had she to decide who lived and who died? Whose life was more precious?

That moral dissonance weighed heavily on her, more than she cared to admit. Perhaps, she thought, if ever there was a moment to call it quits, this operation might be it. Even Sally, hailed for her mental fortitude, found herself prey to doubts now and then.

"No," she told herself firmly. "I can't afford to hesitate."

She booted up her computer and began analyzing all the data she'd collected during her three aerial passes over Sanc Kingdom Castle. The location of the nuclear device quickly emerged from radiation scans: the top floor of the west tower spire.

She had to stop that bomb before it could reduce the cool northern spring to a searing summer in a single flash.

While running her scans, she noticed something else: a large unidentified transport flying over the Baltic Sea, just beyond Sanc Kingdom Bay.

"Could it be?"

A dark premonition began spreading through her mind like a creeping mist. Outside, a quiet gust drifted across the water, gently stirring the fog over the bay, an ominous hush.

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Underground Shelter**

**08:22pm**

Heero didn't even flinch at Dixneuf's unexpected remark. Seeing that, the man carried on, unfazed by Heero's silence.

"It was ten years ago, the summer of AC-187."

At the time, Heero had infiltrated a medical facility in the L-1 Colony cluster.

"You were with a man named Odin Lowe. Naturally, I didn't look like this back then, so there's no reason you'd remember me," he added with a hint of self-deprecation, gesturing to the face he'd surgically altered to resemble Milliardo's. Yet his blue eyes were awash in sorrow.

"I lost my beloved Astoria in that hospital. In a single moment, I lost everything, joy, hope, even the capacity to feel."

Heero kept quiet.

"I swore revenge on Sanc's witless doctors, on the colony terrorists, on every last member of the Kushrenada line."

Still no response from Heero.

"This world hasn't changed since then. Everything remains fundamentally wrong, rife with rot and idleness, teeming with the base desires of jealous fools who don't care about anyone but themselves. I've lost all faith in this Earth Sphere, it's vile and worthless. Fit only for annihilation."

At last, Heero broke the silence.

"That all you wanted to say?"

Even before finishing his question, he pulled the trigger. Without a millisecond's hesitation, he put a bullet through both the detonator and Dixneuf's hand, shattering the switch completely.

"I've got better things to do than humor your ramblings."

Another round tore into his thigh.

"Kh--!"

He crumpled to his knees, crippled from escape. Broken pieces of the detonator lay at his feet. Heero pressed the barrel of the machine gun to the back of Dixneuf's head, voice like ice.

"It's over, Dixneuf."

Slowly, the man raised his face. Strangely, he wore no expression of pain.

"Over? You think so? I can still rob you of every scrap of hope."

"Hope?" Heero replied. "I don't have anything like that."

"You and I are the same," he sneered, lifting his injured left hand. Beneath the torn flesh, silver precision machinery shone through. It might not be too far-fetched to say that the man who went so far as to surgically alter his face for the sake of activating the Perfect Peace Program and mechanized his own hand to boost his efficiency shared a certain kinship with Heero, whose entire life had been shaped by relentless training to become the ultimate weapon.

"Whatever you think you've gained is nothing but fragile glass. As easy for me to break as my own worthless dreams."

He gave Heero a defiant smirk.

Suddenly, the shelter's door began to grind open. Two of Dixneuf's men, who had been out fighting the flames, had returned and forced open the entry from outside. Heero instantly pulled back from Dixneuf, threw himself in front of Marlene, and shouted to Relena.

"Relena, get behind cover!"

Then he unleashed a volley of bullets at the door, purely a warning barrage. From behind the half-opened entry, the terrorists fired back. Heero kept his stance, shielding Marlene and the unconscious Pargan. Under normal circumstances, he'd have made Relena his top priority to protect, but with two others in immediate danger, he chose to guard the largest group of noncombatants.

Relena, meanwhile, crouched beneath the shelter's console on the far side of the room, safely outside the crossfire.

The gunfire halted for a heartbeat, then came a grenade. Heero dashed after the rolling explosive and soccer kicked it right back through the doorway. It detonated outside with a thunderous boom, sending a heavy cloud of smoke surging into the room. With visibility cut, Heero could no longer keep an eye on Dixneuf. A nagging dread tore at him.

"Relena!"

He spun around just in time to see something arc through the smoke toward the console where she hid. For an instant, he thought it was some small silver creature, a ferret or a weasel, flying through the air.

But he realized what it truly was.

Dixneuf's mechanical left arm.

"He can detach it?"

Heero shouted, "Run!" but it was too late. The moment that metal arm hit the ground, it flashed bright, and then boom. A ripping explosion of tiny metal fragments burst outward, like lethal needles.

Heero raced to the scene, only to feel his stomach twist at what he found. Relena lay sprawled on the floor, her body peppered with razor-sharp shards.

For the first time, he was at a loss for words. Never had he seen Relena so gravely wounded.

"Heero... I'm sorry..."

"I'm the one who should apologize."

He felt his own mistakes piling up. He'd underestimated Dixneuf; he hadn't anticipated an attack like this. A bitter wave of remorse washed over him.

"Forgive me, Relena."

And still, even in this moment, Relena managed a faint, trembling smile.

"I'm glad... this way, I can... be like you..."

She never finished; her eyelids drooping shut as consciousness slipped away. Blood blossomed across her white dress in vivid red circles.

Automatic gunfire resounded again, but not aimed at Heero or the others. It was likely suppressing fire, meant to cover Dixneuf's escape. Then came an abrupt hush.

Heero realized he'd lost him. Dixneuf was gone, most likely using mechanical legs as well, judging by the speed of his retreat. Heero cursed inwardly; he had made a grave miscalculation.

Checking Relena's pulse and pupils, he applied what little first aid he could before switching on his communicator. Even as he did, he felt a second regret rise within him.

"I don't have nearly enough medical knowledge..."

He could kill with lethal efficiency, but healing demanded skills he lacked. Quatre, Duo, Wufei, Trowa, none of them answered his calls, no doubt in the thick of their own missions. Helplessness and self-loathing bore down on him.

Just then, Marlene Darlian, calm but resolute, placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Please, let me take over. I have some experience in medicine."

Heero stepped aside. Immediately, Sally Po responded over the line from the Preventers' command center aboard the cruise ship. She was en route to help secure the hostages.

"Something happen?"

"It's an emergency... Relena's been hurt."

"Understood! I'm heading your way."

"I'm counting on you. I'm going after the ringleader."

He faced Marlene, who was carefully stemming Relena's bleeding.

"A friend of ours, a doctor, will be here soon."

"She has several severe injuries, but your initial first aid helped. If we can get her to this castle's infirmary, there's a good chance she'll pull through."

"Got it..."

Leaving Relena in Marlene's care, Heero set off in pursuit of Dixneuf. On the way out, he spotted the old notebook computer still on the table. With the program activation software smashed and Dixneuf's left hand gone, it was of no use to him now.

Heero spared it only a glance, then sprinted out, thoughts raging.

"I won't forgive him."

With one swift attack, Dixneuf had trampled on what Heero held most dear.

"Not ever."

Weapon raised, Heero sprinted into the corridors, fury driving every step.

## **Baltic Airspace, Heavy Transport**

### **08:41pm**

Having received Dixneuf's urgent signal, the Neuenheim pilot changed course for Sanc Kingdom at once. If the original negotiations had gone smoothly, the terrorists would have fled aboard this aircraft.

In the cargo bay stood a mobile doll manufactured at the Mars-based Vulkanus facility, a Virgo III customized for Dixneuf. He fondly referred to it as Astoria, and no one thought twice about naming a mobile suit born under the Virgo (Virgin) insignia after its patron goddess.

Though equipped with a standard mobile doll system for automated operation, the suit also had a cockpit for manual piloting.

Dixneuf planned to board Astoria himself. Spare prosthetic limbs and mechanical parts, attachments for his arms and legs, awaited him in the cockpit.

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Western Spire**

### **08:41pm**

A one-meter-wide, three-meter-tall cylindrical nuclear device loomed before Duo's eyes. Peering inside with a borescope, he spotted a ticking timer.

Remaining Time: 03:12:00

The digits were already counting down. Probably, once the detonator in Dixneuf's hand had been destroyed, a failsafe circuit kicked in and handed control over to the timer.

"And, naturally, it's got a vibration sensor,"

Duo muttered. If anyone tried to move it, it would detonate. He'd seen something similar once before, in the Middle East when OZ employed a comparable device.

Only minutes ago, he and Wufei had tricked eight terrorists standing guard over the hostages into hauling crates of gold down to the shelter.

"If they set that nuke off, all that gold gets irradiated too! Let's move it out while we still can!"

Their ruse had succeeded. After capturing one of the men headed for the lower levels, they'd forced him to reveal the bomb's location. It matched Sally's earlier intel. Leaving Wufei to handle the hostage rescue, Duo had come alone to defuse the device. Of everyone on this team, he had the best knack for cracking security systems, but even so, this wasn't going to be easy.

All the wiring was beneath the cylindrical shell, meaning anyone wanting to mechanically cut or disconnect it would have to crawl inside, risking lethal radiation exposure, and the slightest jostle could set it off. An astro-suit might help, but even that wouldn't fully absorb the vibrations from working on it.

The best bet was to hack the bomb's internal computer externally and force an abort sequence on the timer. That meant tapping into the device from outside. None of it promised a high survival rate.

Duo gave a resigned shrug.

"Only three hours left... I must really be the unluckiest guy in the galaxy."

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Third Floor Hostage Room**

### **09:05pm**

Dorothy sprang into action the moment the terrorists standing guard fled to the basement.

By the time Quatre and Trowa arrived, she had already unlocked door after sealed door, freeing the people inside. All that remained was to get everyone onto the prepared passenger ship at the harbor and evacuate them from the castle as fast as possible.

Meanwhile, Lady Une and Wufei had begun corralling the remaining terrorists into the underground shelter.

Quatre greeted Dorothy with a nod.

"Hello there. Quick work, as expected."

"You're the ones who took so long," Dorothy retorted, her familiar sharp tongue in fine form. "If I'd been in charge, we'd have solved this the day it began."

"You might be right," Quatre said with a weary smile.

"You're too soft, you know," she continued.

Wanting to change the subject, Quatre gave a self-conscious laugh and rubbed his side.

"You said the same thing to me a year ago... The wound you gave me still aches when it rains."

He was recalling the time Dorothy had run a fencing saber straight through his side in Libra's mobile doll control room.

"You've probably planned this whole op around that useless 'respect for life' idea of yours," Dorothy said, crossing her arms. "And that's exactly where it all went wrong."

"Is that so?"

"When you focus on 'respect for life,' it's the people executing the operation who wind up in the most danger, followed by the hostages like us. And who ends up safest of all? The terrorists. It flips the natural priority of lives completely upside down."

"No one's life should be ranked above another," Quatre countered.

"That's precisely the kind of kindness I'm saying is dangerous. How many times must I repeat myself?"

"All right, that's enough," Trowa cut in. "I just got word from Lady Une. Seems three emergencies are unfolding."

"Three?" Quatre echoed.

Trowa counted them off on his fingers.

"One: Relena Darlian is in critical condition."

"Miss Relena?" Dorothy said, alarmed.

"Two: Duo Maxwell can't seem to disarm the nuke's timer."

"And the third?"

"Heero Yuy has lost track of Dixneuf Neuenheim, the man he was pursuing. Lady Une says she's leaving the decision making up to you."

Trowa delivered this all in a neutral, matter-of-fact tone. Quatre bit down on his thumbnail and murmured, "It's all my fault..." He tried to glean answers from the quiet "heart of space" he so often relied upon.

"Dorothy, you're right. If I hadn't pushed this whole 'respect for life' policy, Heero would have killed Dixneuf the moment he had the chance... Because of me, the person most important to him ended up hurt."

Dorothy pressed her point mercilessly.

"Yes, your sin is great. You'll have to bear that cross for the rest of your days."

Her words, though harsh, carried a note of compassion beneath the severity.

"Yes... I will," Quatre said softly. Outwardly, he tried to maintain a calm smile, but deep inside, he was consumed by a guilt he could never truly wash away. No one else could rescue him from that darkness. Nor did he wish for anyone to do so. It was a weight that had been on him since the day he was born. Maybe Dorothy alone understood that feeling, she too had lived with a similar burden.

"Dorothy," Quatre said, "I'd like you to guide everyone to the passenger ship docked in the harbor. Can you handle that?"

She sighed but nodded. "Very well."

He gave her detailed instructions on the escape route, contingencies, and how to handle any surprises. Even under such dire circumstances, Dorothy couldn't help but admire Quatre's calm, precise thinking. Yet she saw that too many unknowns still plagued him.

Quatre lifted his gaze decisively.

"I'm turning overall command of this operation back to Lady Une. I'm heading out to assist Duo."

Trowa, noticing Quatre's unease, asked, "Can you stop the nuclear detonation?"

"I'd put our odds at fifty-fifty. Still, I'll do everything I can."

"Is it really safe?"

"That's why I want everyone to evacuate Sanc Kingdom Bay as soon as possible. There's no telling how large the blast radius might be."

"Understood," Dorothy said, agreeing to his plan.

"Trowa, I need you to link up with Wufei and back Heero. Consider my 'respect for life' stance officially revoked... I'm sorry I ever suggested it."

"Don't worry about it," Trowa said. "Heero never really intended to follow that policy in the first place."

"Thank you, Trowa..."

A voice spoke up at the mention of Trowa's name. A wheelchair-bound young woman among the hostages raised her head.

“Trowa? Trowa Barton?”

It was Mariemaia, she had dropped the name Kushrenada and now went by her legal surname, Barton.

Trowa shook his head.

“You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m not your uncle.”

“I know,” Mariemaia said with an easy smile. “But I’m grateful that you use the name Barton. It means so much to me to know someone else shares my mother’s family name.”

“I see,” Trowa murmured, a tangle of feelings swirling inside him.

“So please,” Mariemaia went on, “keep being Trowa Barton, all right?”

He had never been particular about what people called him, but the fact that he’d taken the name of a real, once-living person had long caused him discomfort.

“I’m sorry... that’s not possible.”

Mariemaia’s smile faltered.

“But... why?”

“First, I don’t even like the name ‘Trowa.’ Second, I hate the Barton Foundation. And third... I don’t think I’ll ever use any name again.”

A trace of sadness crossed Mariemaia’s face, but she exhaled and whispered, “I see,” accepting his decision.

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Second Floor Infirmary**

### **09:27pm**

Sally’s surgery was at a standstill. The sterile environment was perfect, and the surgical instruments top-of-the-line. Marlene assisted with practiced skill. Sanc Kingdom, once proud of its medical research during a period of strict pacifism, still boasted well-equipped facilities. Even so, Relena’s operation was proving excruciatingly difficult.

In an era where medical technology had advanced in leaps and bounds, her life was only just being kept tethered. By all rights, her injuries were grievous enough to be fatal. Thanks to Sally’s deft work, the external wounds and countless metal fragments had already been dealt with. The problem now was the internal bleeding scattered throughout her body, which they couldn’t fully treat.

They injected the latest “medical nanomachines,” designed for emergency trauma care, only to discover the nanites weren’t activating for some reason. At first, Sally and Marlene didn’t notice; they were too busy attending to Pargan, who had escaped with a mild concussion. Once they’d stabilized him, they returned to check Relena’s vitals, only to find that her condition hadn’t improved whatsoever.

The advanced nanomachines were doing nothing, none of their clot-dissolving or vascular-healing functions were working at all. They had no clue why. Failure straight out of the package was extraordinarily unlikely, given the rigorous quality control behind medical nanotech.

“Could it be...” Marlene began, thinking back on possible causes, “that some older nanomachines Sanc Kingdom once developed are still inside Relena’s body?”

“That would explain why the new ones can’t do their job,” Sally agreed.

They immediately ran a high-resolution CT scan to locate any remnants of older-generation nanites. Relena had lived with the Peacecraft royal family until she was two, and back then, Marlene had served as Lady Katerina’s maid. Later, after the kingdom fell, she’d helped raise Relena under the Darlian family’s care.

Sure enough, they found the problematic nanomachines. The outdated units were recognizing the newly introduced nanos as foreign objects and systematically destroying them.

“We know the cause, but we don’t have the means to remove these older nanites here,” Sally muttered, glancing around the room’s equipment with a heavy sigh. “Did all the Peacecraft royal family use this stuff?”

“They might have,” Marlene replied. “But I can’t say for sure.”

The only Peacecrafts still alive were Relena herself and Milliardo, who had left for Mars.

“In any event, to treat her properly, we’ll need nanomachines that can synchronize with this older Peacecraft strain,” Sally concluded.

“But that tech is at least fifteen years out of date. I doubt you’ll find it anywhere now.”

“Madam...”

A raspy voice rose from behind them. It was Pargan, propped up on the bed in the corner.

“You must rest,” Marlene urged him, but he persisted.

“When I was younger, I served under Lord Marticus as his adjutant... on the battlefield. Back then, I was in the so-called ‘Pumpkin Tank,’ and, my apologies, I’m a bit hazy, but I was badly wounded by enemy bombardment...”

Sally leaned toward him.

“So you were treated with Sanc Kingdom’s nanotech!”

“Yes... that’s correct...”

If Pargan’s body still housed those older nanites, then transplanting a portion of them into Relena might prevent them from getting obliterated. Since they weren’t the “core” set of nanites, extracting some would be relatively simple, and it might be Relena’s best chance at

survival. Sally, normally not one for religion, felt an overwhelming gratitude like a silent prayer.

### **Sanc Kingdom Bay Airspace, Heavy Transport** **09:42pm**

The pilot released the Virgo III from the cargo hold. No one was inside the cockpit; the mobile doll operated on autopilot, parachute deploying to slow its descent. Dixneuf had told them precisely where to drop it: a coastal area southwest of the city.

All that remained was for the transport to circle down and wait for Dixneuf's next signal. They planned to retrieve the Virgo III after it landed. Then, in an hour or so, they could fly far beyond the Baltic Sea, well out of range of any nuclear blast.

It was supposed to be a simple job, but the pilot never got to see it through. Out of nowhere, an anti-air missile slammed into the transport's engine. Losing thrust, it began to plummet.

### **South Side Urban District, Trowa Barton** **09:45pm**

From the rooftop of a thirty-story high-rise, Trowa had fired the missile that downed the fleeing transport. Holding his transmitter, he made a curt report without identifying himself.

"Confirmed the transport meant for escape. It's been shot down."

Lady Une, on the other end, responded.

"Understood. Thank you."

Trowa continued, "Tell Heero: the transport dropped a Virgo III on the western shore."

"So Dixneuf will be heading straight for it," Lady Une replied, a trace of wry satisfaction in her tone.

"Yeah," Trowa murmured. He switched the comm off with a decisive click.

### **Southwest Coast, Chang WuFei** **09:47pm**

Wufei maintained his vigilant watch through the night-vision scope, its green-tinted view cutting through the darkness like a predator's gaze.

Through the scope's lens, he spotted them, Dixneuf and two armed terrorists emerging from the depths of the forest. The trio was

approaching a massive parachute spread out on the ground, with a mobile doll Virgo III lying on its back at the center.

Wufei immediately contacted Lady Une.

"Target confirmed... Huh, he does look like Zechs Merquise."

"Don't say that aloud," Lady Une responded. "Chances are the Preventer Wind won't appreciate the comparison."

"Heh, I figured as much..." Wufei's lips curved into a cold smile.

"Commencing mission now."

Ending the transmission, Wufei leapt clean over the cliff's edge. He slid down the steep slope with perfect balance, then kicked off a jutting rock to vault high into the air before landing nimbly atop the Virgo III.

Arms folded in a show of supreme confidence, he smirked and declared,

"Well, well... Took you long enough. Welcome."

Dixneuf and his companions, startled by this sudden appearance, fumbled for a response. The two bodyguards immediately opened fire with their machine guns. But Wufei, moving like a blur, effortlessly danced through the hail of bullets. Vaulting into the air, he launched a swift roundhouse kick that knocked the machine guns clear out of their hands. Then, in an instant, he laid them both low with precise close-quarters blows, strikes to the pit of the stomach, the midpoint between the eyes, pressure points designed to render them unconscious in seconds.

This was one of the martial arts techniques at which Wufei excelled: close-range combat performed at lightning speed. Even though these men were presumably well-trained themselves, they stood no chance against him.

"Don't waste your energy on futile resistance. Surrender," he said calmly as he turned.

Standing behind him, Dixneuf showed no sign of compliance. He remained stock-still. Under normal circumstances, a one-armed man like him would pose little threat to Wufei.

A protracted silence fell over them. In the spring night sky above, Spica, Virgo's brightest star, glistened like a distant beacon.

"Astoria..." Dixneuf murmured under his breath, voicing the name of the goddess that inspired the constellation of Virgo.

The harsh, mechanical whirring of servos and gears suddenly shattered the quiet. Behind Wufei, the dormant Virgo mobile doll began its boot-up sequence, systems humming to life with ominous purpose.

Slowly, inexorably, the massive machine began raising its towering frame from its horizontal rest.

A faint chill traced down Wufei's spine. For a split second, he thought a pilot might already be inside the cockpit. But he realized almost immediately that was a false assumption. Dixneuf was likely running the mobile doll remotely.

Deciding the bigger threat was the man controlling it, Wufei chose to ignore the Virgo itself and launch a direct attack on Dixneuf. He sprang into the air, aiming a sharp kick straight at his target.

Dixneuf, however, evaded with a leap beyond ordinary human capability, then vanished into the darkness of the forest spread out ahead of the cliff rather than fleeing toward the sea. His quick reflexes and deft maneuvers were far beyond normal, further proof of intense modifications.

"Prosthetic legs? Whatever it is, that's more than some standard replacement," Wufei muttered as he informed Lady Une through his communicator:

"He's using Jupiter-grade hard-vac type astro-cybernetics."

"I see. Sounds like taking him alive isn't going to be easy," came Lady Une's reply.

"Our attempts to deactivate the explosive are going nowhere fast. If possible, we wanted him 'cooperative' so we could force the code out of him."

"Too risky. Only viable course is termination," Wufei answered, his voice cutting off any sympathy for Dixneuf's life.

"Though even killing him might not guarantee he stays dead," he added.

Wufei chose not to pursue the man immediately. If he possessed such advanced cybernetics, odds were he could disappear without a trace. Instead, Wufei stripped weapons, including a machine gun, from one of the unconscious guards and stood ready before the now-upright Virgo. He knew Dixneuf would return to the mobile doll sooner or later, no matter where he hid, his prized machine was the key to his getaway.

That lull didn't last long. Under Dixneuf's remote operation, the mobile doll Virgo began walking forward. Wufei proceeded at a measured pace alongside it, resuming his report.

"Virgo III is outfitted with two planet defensors and a single beam rifle, standard issue. There's a Leo-type high-mobility pack on its back, but I see no evidence of additional beam cannons or mega beam weaponry. It's probably just an escape unit. Unfortunately, I don't have anything powerful enough to destroy it at the moment."

"Understood," Lady Une answered calmly. "The rest is up to you."

"Roger. I'm focusing on the search. Over and out," Wufei said, cutting the transmission.

"If I'm going to settle this, I need to take him out before he boards the Virgo."

With that thought in mind, he sharpened his senses, scanning the murky forest for any sign of his quarry. The man was meticulous; even Wufei's trained eyes, now adjusted to the dark, couldn't pinpoint his location.

"Given this level of preparation, he's probably modified his eyes with night-vision enhancement as well."

The Virgo continued its relentless advance.

"And its speed... it's too fast."

Anxiety gnawed at his composure. Something about this felt off, as though he'd overlooked a crucial detail. He had been off the front lines for months now; maybe his instincts had dulled. Just as he began to doubt his judgment of Dixneuf's tactics, the Virgo came to a halt.

That meant Dixneuf had to be close by. Wufei sprang into a nearby tree, positioning himself on a thick branch that overlooked the Virgo's cockpit. At the same time, he honed every last sense on the perimeter.

Even now, he couldn't detect the slightest trace of Dixneuf's presence.

The darkness spread before him like a living thing, and he could perceive everything within it, the gentle sway of branches, leaves rustling in the breeze, even the scurrying footsteps of small animals fleeing from Virgo's imposing presence.

Wufei recognized his own mounting frustration.

"I'm making a critical error in judgment somewhere."

That's when it happened.

A blinding radiance erupted from somewhere a few dozen meters directly in front of him. It wasn't Dixneuf. Rather, a flash bang dangled from a tree branch, blazing in a burst of painfully bright light.

"Damn!"

Wufei had grown used to the darkness, and the sudden glare blinded him completely. The next thing he heard was the sound of machinery behind him, the Virgo's cockpit hatch opening.

Eyes still clamped shut, Wufei spun on instinct and fired his machine gun toward the cockpit area. But the rattling clang was off, it sounded like the shots had ricocheted off armor.

"He made the Virgo turn its back."

Apparently, Dixneuf had used remote controls to pivot the mobile doll. By the time Wufei's vision began to recover from the flare, the high-mobility thrusters on the Virgo's back were already igniting in brilliant gouts of flame.

All he could do was leap clear to avoid the powerful blast. Dixneuf must have slipped into the cockpit in those few seconds, managing a broad flanking maneuver to circle around to the Virgo from behind.

Once airborne, the Virgo hovered, then loosed a devastating beam rifle shot into the forest. In an instant, the woodland erupted in roaring flames, orange tongues licking hungrily at the night sky. Wufei had already taken shelter well out of range.

"Heh..."

He watched the Virgo speed off and, guessing its trajectory, keyed his communicator.

"It's me. The Virgo is heading southwest toward Sanc Kingdom Bay."

He sensed that he was no longer the right person to finish this fight.

"Copy that. Red One, Cancer, standing by," said a voice on the other end, Heero.

With nothing else to say, he ended the call. Just then, Trowa emerged from the burning trees, lugging the two unconscious soldiers that Wufei had taken down, one slung over each shoulder.

"You deliberately let him escape," Trowa noted, handing one of the men over to Wufei.

Wufei received him in silence, draping the man over his own shoulder.

Trowa studied his face. "I never imagined you, of all people, would hold back."

"That's not it..." Wufei's expression remained impassive. "I simply failed."

His eyes conveyed neither regret nor bravado, no flustered sense of apology or excuse.

"Do you plan to go after him, then?" Trowa asked.

"No. First, we need to get these two to the shelter."

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Western Spire**

**09:55pm**

Duo felt the weight of despair pressing down on him.

He'd been working on disarming this cylindrical, timer-based nuclear bomb for over an hour now, yet he still couldn't hack into the built-in computer.

He was certain the bomb's computer was designed to stop the detonation, installed precisely for that purpose. The problem was, there had to be a special password only Dixneuf could input.

Simply shutting down the computer wasn't an option. Given the elaborate booby traps embedded in this device, it stood to reason that killing its power would trigger an immediate explosion.

Bringing Dixneuf here to force him to enter the password might have been a solution, but the odds of that working were slim. More likely, an unstable man like him would just accelerate the detonation out of sheer malice. Everything about this bomb radiated a twisted fanaticism, one that made rational negotiations seem impossible.

That didn't mean Duo had spent the last hour doing nothing. He had meticulously inspected the shattered remote-detonation switch that had been shot to pieces, analyzing its circuit board and identifying its frequency. Then, using his laptop, he carefully synchronized his system with the bomb's integrated computer, without directly hooking the two together.

But the text that lit up his monitor was downright bizarre. A completely unknown jumble of characters, no discernible pattern. No consistent grammar or symbols.

With things this cryptic, there was no safe way to inject dummy code or a delay loop. Even brushing a single key risked triggering some hidden kill switch.

If only they could disable the motion sensor inside, they might attempt cutting the detonator wires. But...

"Man, I'm completely hosed here."

As far as Duo could tell, the computer was running an entirely custom-coded system.

"Where'd Quatre run off to at a time like this?" he muttered, wishing for a little backup.

About half an hour earlier, Quatre had shown up to help. The instant he took one glance at that alien script on the monitor, he seemed to realize something, and without warning he'd said, "I'll be right back," and dashed off.

Duo hadn't even had time to ask questions. Now, time was ticking; he wasn't sure exactly how many minutes had passed since.

"Ughhh..." Letting out a groan, Duo finally saw Quatre returning up the spiral staircase.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Quatre said. "Scrounging took longer than I thought."

He was juggling a small computer module, a satellite-communication antenna, and various other pieces of hardware.

"How's progress?"

"Shredded; my pride, that is," Duo sighed wryly. "Any idea how much time we've got left? I'm sick of cramming a scope down the bomb's throat just to check the countdown."

"You don't carry a watch?"

"Getting chased by time gives me hives," he said with a shrug. "Must've set my sense of it down somewhere and forgot to pick it up."

"Your watch?"

"No, my sense of time."

That elicited a quiet chuckle from Quatre.

"Call it two hours, give or take," he added, deliberately vague, and handed Duo an old, somewhat battered notebook computer.

"Duo, can you repair this?"

"What is it?"

"It's got an AI named 'Sam' installed."

"And patching it helps us how?"

Even as he complained, his fingers were already stripping the casing to assess the damage.

"Well, from what I can tell, this 'Sam' is the only system recognized by the bomb's internal computer for external access. It might be the key to bridging the two."

Duo cast a sidelong glance at the bizarre text still displayed on his own monitor.

"That garble actually says that?"

Quatre nodded as he set up the satellite antenna.

"More or less... I can't fully decipher it, but it's written in a mix of Old Norse runes and a script used by certain Native American tribes, both were used in far-northern regions of the planet, but they share only minimal similarities."

Duo just bobbed his head in an uneasy show of understanding. In truth, Quatre's linguistic explanation was mostly over his head.

"I'm going to sort through as many possible keywords as I can," Quatre continued. "My guess is that the data being displayed here was imported from 'Sam.'"

Duo eyed him skeptically. "Might as well tell me, what other weird words popped up?"

"They all seem to be names of people: 'Jay Null,' 'Thomas Carrant,' 'Heero Yuy,' and then the Peacecraft sisters, 'Sabrina' and 'Katerina'..."

The only name Duo recognized was "Heero," though presumably this referred to the colonial leader, not their Heero.

"Pretty sure most of those folks are dead."

"Actually, Jay Null should still be alive."

"Oh yeah?"

"You'd know him as Doctor J."

Hearing that name, like a living curse, Duo couldn't help groaning.

"Something about this reeks of trouble..."

Quatre shrugged.



“We can still try. After all, it’s my fault we ended up in this mess to begin with.”

“Ugh, come on,” Duo muttered. “Still collecting stray crosses to shoulder? Buddy, none of this is on you.”

“Thanks, Duo, but I don’t carry crosses.”

“Yeah?”

“Different religion.”

That brought a small grin to Duo’s face. Whenever Quatre felt even a little comfortable enough to crack a joke, it meant there was still hope.

“All right, let’s give it hell.”

## **Sanc Kingdom Bay, Heero Yuy**

**10:02pm**

“He’s here.”

Right after Heero said those words, his radar chimed in with an insistent trill, confirming the presence of the high-speed silhouette he’d been expecting. There was no doubt it was the Virgo III, outfitted with a high-mobility option.

“Target confirmed,” he murmured inside the mass-production Cancer, a mobile suit designed for underwater combat. He’d been waiting for exactly this moment. The rear-mounted screw propeller was pushing the machine to its absolute limit, carving a white wake across the dark ocean surface.

Diving underwater to stay hidden would be too slow. Yes, he’d be spotted out here in the open sea, but speed was critical. The farther away the target, the lower the chance of a clean hit. He had already run every possible simulation on the Virgo’s maneuvers, picturing precisely where they’d meet and fight.

His two anti-air guided missiles, mounted on the Cancer’s shoulders, were calibrated to pierce Gundanium alloy. He’d have only a small window, barely more than ten seconds, to fire. That was more than enough time to bring it down, provided he could get through the Virgo’s defensive systems.

Those planet defensors, there were two of them, would likely destroy his missiles before they ever made impact. And there was one more issue: if the Virgo noticed him first, it could open fire with its beam rifle.

\*

In the Virgo's cockpit, Dixneuf had already picked up on the Cancer's presence. The crimson body stood out even in the night sea.

"Heero Yuy... so he's the one."

A white wake trailed the red mobile suit across the pitch-black water at breakneck speed. The very sight seemed to radiate hatred, an unspoken declaration that the pilot behind the controls sought blood.

And yet, Dixneuf felt no need to hurry. Between the Virgo and a Cancer, the difference in performance was vast. Air-to-sea combat alone made the Virgo the obvious favorite.

"Does he really think recklessness is a winning strategy?"

His mindset was a curious mix of manic obsession and steely logic. First strike was always the most effective. He keyed in his target lock on the Cancer's projected path. In a matter of seconds, it would cross the point where he planned to fire.

Bleeding off speed from the high-mobility thrusters, Dixneuf leveled the Virgo's beam rifle and pulled the trigger.

\*

The first beam salvo speared straight into the Cancer's propulsion unit, molten sprays blasting from the drives.

"Urgh..."

Heero gritted his teeth and shoved the control stick forward, forcing the Cancer to accelerate even harder.

"Hang in there, Cancer."

He should have braked, jinked, broke line-of-fire; that was the sensible move. But he pushed the Cancer beyond its limits, disabling the safety protocols for one final burst of speed. The thrusters spun into the red, close to burning out entirely.

A second beam flashed behind him, erupting into a towering spray of water just a breath away. He narrowly evaded it. Heero's face showed no panic, but inside, his emotions were in turmoil.

"I'm taking him down."

If he could drag the Virgo beneath the surface, a torpedo strike would finish the job.

"No matter what, I'm bringing it down."

\*

Dixneuf, on the other hand, blinked in astonishment, unable to hide his surprise. The first shot had missed. He'd counted on at least forcing his

quarry to bleed speed, but the crimson suit still ripped toward him at a pace that defied logic.

A flicker of alarm shot through him, could he actually get shot down if he hesitated?

"I need to be certain..."

A prickle of foreboding told him what failure here would mean. He throttled back the booster pack, dropped altitude for a cleaner shot, and sighted again.

"This should do it."

He was sure he'd land a solid hit. Adjusting his aim with surgical care, he fired a volley of beam rifle blasts, gauging the Cancer's accelerating path and laying down a direct line of fire just ahead of its nose. No escape route remained, if the Cancer kept barreling forward, it would slam right into the beams.

\*

Heero saw the angle of those beam shots and acted on reflex. Any further acceleration was beyond the Cancer's capabilities, but he had no intention of braking.

"If going straight means getting hit, then I just won't go straight."

Without hesitation he thumbed the forward-tube release. A torpedo knifed along the surface, right into the Virgo's beams, blossoming into a roar of white fire and foaming sea. The explosion birthed a towering water column that pitched Cancer upward like a surfer catching the crest.

As the mobile suit broke free of the spray, it brought the low-flying Virgo directly into its missile lock. Heero flicked the release for the Cancer's two anti-air guided missiles.

\*

A jolt of terror ran through Dixneuf as he watched the Cancer vault into sight.

"This can't be happening!"

He saw the missiles streak forth.

"This is impossible!"

He tried to dodge, slamming the high-mobility thrusters to maximum to claw back some altitude.

\*

“Right where I want you,” Heero muttered, reading off the constantly shifting data on his monitors as the Cancer started to plunge back down toward the sea. He set the missiles’ tracking parameters, guiding them relentlessly toward the Virgo.

\*

With a brilliant flash, one of the missiles struck home, the explosion rattling Dixneuf until his consciousness began to fade. The direct hit blew away the propulsion unit on the high-mobility pack.

“Astoria...”

He breathed the word before blacking out. It was the keyword that triggered the mobile doll system. The Virgo began to lose speed, but in what was called “Astoria Mode,” it jettisoned the damaged high-mobility pack before hitting the water, deploying its two planet defenders.

Their powerful electromagnetic fields, coupled with the Virgo’s own propulsion, gave it enough thrust to hover at a low altitude.

\*

Meanwhile, the Cancer slipped back underwater. Observing the Virgo’s maneuver on his monitor, Heero spoke in a steady tone.

“Clever move. But a fatal error.”

He adjusted course to close in on the hovering Virgo. Using the Cancer’s distinctive front “claw” torpedo tubes, he latched onto one of the planet defenders and yanked it down into the sea. The electromagnetic field sparked violently and then flickered out.

Now the Virgo was dragged into the depths. Its beam rifle was useless underwater, while the Cancer’s combat prowess beneath the waves was second to none. Heero tormented the Virgo with repeated torpedo strikes. Breaking through Gundanium armor meant hitting the same point over and over, or somehow detonating it from inside.

But this “Astoria Mode” Virgo wasn’t entirely defenseless. And Heero was down to his last torpedo, still lacking a decisive finishing blow.

Suddenly, waist hatches hissed as homing missiles tried to cycle open, only to trigger the crude plastique packet Wufei had slapped on earlier. The booby trap cooked off the magazine in a sympathetic bang, fractures spider-webbing through the frame.

Seeing that, Heero scoffed to himself, cursing Wufei's "help."

"He overdid it."

With that, Heero fired his last torpedo. It smashed right into the Virgo's cockpit, causing a massive explosion. The wreckage sank silently to the bottom of the sea.

"Mission... complete," Heero murmured, checking the battered state of his Cancer.

"Cockpit lock is malfunctioning. Propulsion is offline... I can float to the surface using emergency buoys, but this hulk isn't going anywhere."

## **Sanc Kingdom Castle, Western Spire**

**10:55pm**

Duo had just finished repairing the outdated notebook computer. Its screen was still cracked, yet a small Norwegian Forest Cat kitten appeared, peering out from behind the fractures.

"So you're Sam, huh?"

The cat mewed softly, "Meow."

He paired the relic with his own contact-link laptop. The moment the handshake completed, the processors went into a frenzy and the once-indecipherable symbols on the bomb's monitor flowed into readable text. Duo filtered furiously for a shutdown routine or override password, but he found nothing of the sort.

Half-joking, he asked, "C'mon, Sam.

Mind telling me if there's a password to stop this bomb from blowing up?"

For a moment, Sam said nothing, then mewed "Nyaa," displaying YES on screen in large letters.

Duo leaned in so far he nearly head-butted the keyboard.

"Great! So what's the password?"

Sam answered with another "Meow-meow," but no text appeared.

"Cat-speak isn't helping, buddy. How about something humans can understand?"

Duo all but begged in prayer, but the only replies he got were more feline cries.

"I have the keyword," said Quatre, walking up behind him with a comm tablet in hand.

"For real?"

"There's a problem, though..."

"What is it?"

Quatre wore a somber expression. "I got in touch with the Doctor."

He turned the monitor toward Duo, revealing Doctor J's face.

"Well, well. It's been a while, Duo Maxwell," said the elderly researcher.

"Wasn't exactly dying to see you again."

"Believe me, the feeling's mutual. But never mind that, I'll give you the password: PEACECRAFT×2 HEERO YUY."

"That's all I need—"

Duo's fingers were already on the keys.

Doctor J stopped him with a dry chuckle.

"Ah, one small detail I forgot. The moment that password deactivates the bomb, it triggers the Perfect Peace Program."

He delivered this calmly, as if it were nothing.

"And in any case, it won't respond if you enter it. Only someone from the Peacecraft family can actually input that password."

"You could've led with that!"

"All right, all right. Let me back up. That 'Sam' and the 'PPP' were originally created by a friend of mine years ago..."

Duo was forced to endure a painfully long explanation from Doctor J, which boiled down to:

Thomas Carrant, who dreamed of ending all war, developed a system called the "Prototype Perfect Peace Program." Intended to stop humanity from waging war, it could kill millions of those involved whenever a conflict arose. Early on, it functioned as a cyber-terror tool worming into Alliance military mainframes, but it was left unfinished. Defining "war" is difficult, and discerning combatants from civilians in every situation is nearly impossible. No mere human, playing God, could wield it safely.

A few years later, Carrant's younger brother Quinze tried using that data to further the colonies' independence. Catching wind of that, the political leader Heero Yuy asked Doctor J to seal the program permanently. The doctor employed an evolving quantum-security system, allowing only the Peacecraft family, known for their steadfast devotion to pacifism, to disable it. This happened twenty-seven years ago, in AC-170.

Ideally, it should have disappeared forever. But Dixneuf Neuenheim got his hands on it, rewriting the code into a twisted system that enslaved others via medical nanomachines. If the password were entered now, yes, the nuclear bomb would be disarmed, yet program would eventually activate. That would cause nanomachines worldwide to go berserk, leading to wholesale slaughter on an unimaginable scale.

“And so,” Doctor J concluded, “you mustn’t trigger the program. And unless Relena Peacecraft wakes up from her coma, you have no way to override the bomb safely.”

Duo finally understood the bleak look on Quatre’s face.

“There’s... nothing we can do?”

Doctor J shook his head. “Afraid not. You’ll have to die there.”

“Come on, that’s not even remotely funny!”

“It’s a joke, calm down. Fewer than ten of you remain in the castle, including you two. All you need to do is hunker down in an underground shelter. The Sanc Kingdom’s going to be wiped off the map, but that can’t be helped.”

Quatre expanded on that.

“The hostages’ liner will clear the bay within the hour. The city’s been fully evacuated so human casualties should be minimal.”

“That’s not like you,” Duo growled. “Sure, the people might survive, but what about the wildlife? The environment? The whole ecosystem would be shot, fallout’s going to be obscene.”

“Yes,” Quatre said softly. “But we can’t choose a future that guarantees mass nanocide.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Duo sighed. “Just... guess that means another loss for us.”

He could swallow defeat, he’d done it before, but this one tasted worse than bile.

“Sanc Kingdom, huh? It was a great country.”

Just then, they received a call from Sally. Relena had regained consciousness. Though she’d only just come out of surgery, she insisted on learning about the current state of affairs.

Duo and Quatre explained things in turn, laying out their last remaining option. Doctor J chimed in now and then, providing specialized commentary. Strangely enough, Relena listened calmly. She displayed no outward sign of distress, letting them finish before lifting her gaze, eyes resolute.

“Where is Heero? Right now, where is he?” she asked in a faint, rasping voice.

With a grim expression, Quatre answered, “According to reports, he took down Dixneuf but is still out in the bay with his Cancer. Its propulsion is gone, so he can’t move.”

“You’ve sent someone to rescue him, haven’t you?”

“No... We don’t have a single functional boat or aircraft.”

“And the nuclear blast radius? Would Heero’s location be safe?”

Quatre was at a loss for words. The pain of it clutched at his chest.

Duo took over, voice subdued.

“He’s stuck in the bay, with his cockpit hatch jammed. I hate to say it, but... there’s no way to save him.”

Relena was silent for a moment, as though steeling herself for something.

“I see...”

After that long pause, she calmly requested that everyone come to her room.

**Sanc Kingdom Castle, Second Floor, Makeshift Infirmary**  
**11:27pm**

Relena sat up straight, regal in bearing, and spoke.

“Doctor J, when I visited your facility before, you mentioned that ‘The Little Prince’ was finished. Is that correct?”

On the comm screen, Doctor J went momentarily silent, as if gauging the intent behind her question. He finally answered.

“Yes. And the second unit, ‘Sleeping Beauty,’ will be completed soon.”

“In that case,” Relena said, “using them should hold off the Perfect Peace Program for at least a hundred years, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Fifty-fifty at best,” Doctor J replied, folding his arms in thought. Then a slight grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Still, it’s not a bad idea. If we link the core nanomachines to yours, Miss, it opens up new possibilities for the future...”

“Then let me be the one to input the password,” Relena said firmly. “Please give me Sam.”

It might have been a painful choice for her to make, but there wasn’t a trace of hesitation in her eyes. Duo and Quatre knew better than to argue. They had no real alternative but to respect her resolve.

An old notebook computer was placed before her.

“I am Relena Peacecraft,” she said gently, running her hand over the computer. “Sam... I’m counting on you.”

“Meow,” came a soft cry. Somehow it sounded terribly sad.

Just then, another transmission came in on a separate channel, this one over the OZ line. Heero’s image appeared, a cold biting wind tearing at his hair, guilt etched deep.

“Stop this, Relena...”

His voice was uncharacteristically rough, taut with emotion.

“Don’t go back to being a Peacecraft!”

“No, Heero,” Relena said, her gaze unwavering. “This is the only way for us to survive.”

“Relena,” he insisted, “don’t worry about me.”

—*Life is cheap. Especially mine...*

He might have continued in that familiar way, but Relena cut him off.

“Heero, that’s not true. You should value your life more... You haven’t really lived it to the fullest yet.”

Heero fell silent, unable to object.

“Live,” she told him. “Live until that instant when your soul shines brightest, and let me see it when it does.”

Heero managed to force out a few halting words.

“Is that... a mission?”

“It’s my wish,” she answered.

With that, Relena ended the transmission.

“I’m not saying goodbye,” she murmured. “I know we’ll meet again.”

Then, with slender fingers, she began typing the password into Sam.

PEACECRAFT×2 HEERO YUY

Thirty minutes remained until the detonation, yet the moment the nuclear device was deactivated, and the Perfect Peace Program activated in its stead.

\*

So the spring night over the Sanc Kingdom wore on, and April 9, AC-197, came to a close steeped in anguish.

In the wake of those events, the whereabouts of the five former Gundam pilots, Heero and the others, became a mystery. Peace in the Earth Sphere still held, but only in the Earth Sphere. On distant Mars, the gears of “history” began to slip out of alignment.

The Preventers’ survey team, which later combed the depths of Sanc Kingdom Bay, never did find the remains of the Virgo III.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

When Relena Peacecraft stepped into the cryogenic capsule dubbed “The Little Prince,” she never once looked back. Perhaps she had already frozen her tears.

All anyone could see was that, in her arms, she clutched a teddy bear, her cherished memento from Heero.

# **Rhapsody of Quiet Despair**

Mars File 5

*"Wolves don't scare me one bit. In Peter and the Wolf, The Three Little Pigs, The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats, Little Red Riding Hood, they all lose every damn time."*

*"The Boy Who Cried Wolf is different though."*

*"That story's just about some lying brat getting what he deserves. The wolf's not particularly strong in that one."*

*"True, lying is wrong... By the way, do you know about Fenrir?"*

*"Never heard of it... another wolf?"*

*"Mm-hmm. A wolf from Norse mythology. Fenrir was the one who defeated Odin, the strongest of all the gods. Pretty cool, right?"*

*"Then when I say I'm a wolf, I'm talking about that Fen-whatever."*

*"Fenrir."*

*"Fenrir, Fenrir... I'll remember that."*

—MC-0018 Schbeiker Church—  
Duo & Naina

## **MC-0022 NEXT WINTER**

Pacifism? Screw that.

We've got to fight. Fight and keep on fighting, until all those naive peaceniks and war-crazy lunatics finally understand their own weakness.

Don't get me wrong, it's not about hatred or vengeance. I don't care about living the so-called "normal" life, or going back to some comfortable home. As long as I can stave off hunger for another day and have a place to lay my head tonight, that's enough to make me happy.

Justice isn't my style. God sure as hell doesn't exist. I don't need a family, or friends, or comrades, or anyone at all. I can live on my own just fine. Actually, groups bound by some lofty ideology or big talk scare me a lot more than going solo. All that stuff about history, dogma, or philosophy the hotshots spout, lies, every bit of it. If I relied on that nonsense, I'd get trampled.

I believe only what I think, what I feel, and I fight based on that alone. Works for me. I've made it this far mostly by luck, so if I die on the battlefield, I'll die with no regrets. Yeah, I know. I'm probably a damned fool.

Who am I, you ask? I'm the "wolf in devil's clothing." Most people call me "Duo Maxwell," and frankly, it's too much of a pain in the ass to keep correcting them, so that's what I go by.

Right now on Mars, there's a war between two major powers: the Martian Federation and the Lanagreen Republic. There's also this Earth-based group called the Preventers, who aren't on either side. They're basically out here picking fights with everybody. Supposedly, I'm a member myself, but I couldn't care less about the details. Whether they're putting out fires or starting them, conflict is always entertaining if you ask me.

Besides, the Martian Federation's leader, Relena Peacecraft, and Lanagreen's Zechs Merquise are both just meddling, self-righteous pains in the ass. Whether they're right or wrong, I can smell it a mile away. Thinking too hard about it just clogs up the works. I'd rather not bury myself in excuses and end up lying to myself.

My old man, an absolute fraud of a priest, used to say, "Act on instinct! Don't waste that tiny brain of yours overthinking!" Hilarious, right? Sure, I was just a kid, but I figured the difference between me and those old men with their arteriosclerotic brains wasn't that big a gap. Not that I ever said it out loud.

The Lanagreen Republic has been expanding rapidly these past few months. Ever since the Federation started yammering about "total pacifism," they've basically rolled out the red carpet for Lanagreen's invasion. My old man used to say, "Diplomacy without power is just a painted hamburger; can't fill anyone's belly," and I agree. Real hamburgers smell great, but a painted one reeks of nothing but paint. If you want serious negotiations, you need muscle to back it up.

He was full of crap most of the time, but he was strong enough to get by on this hardscrabble planet.

"Hey, you worthless brat," he'd say, he called me that all the time.

"When has talking alone ever solved anything?"

"Never," I'd answer.

Back when I wandered around doing odd jobs, if there was a scrap over food, it usually ended in a brawl. At the Schbeiker Church, sure, we didn't fight, only because we were terrified of Sister Hilde's infamous chokehold. In other words, peace by force.

Anyway, what I'm getting at is that no matter how brilliantly you win an argument, once someone pulls a gun, it's all over. That's the harsh truth. "If you leave it to nature or raw instinct," my old man liked to say, "people inevitably slide into war, that's humankind for you." Considering we live on the "planet of the warring god," I can't say he's wrong.

Inside the supposedly disarmed Martian Federation, the only ones putting up resistance, weak as it may be, are my orphanage sister Naina and her group. The Federation's main force relies on these unmanned

weapons, which are beyond useless. You can practically smell their cowardice. They're little more than fancy window dressing, not even good for intimidation.

Honestly, pacifism is worth less than a tomato sandwich slathered with mustard and mayo, at least the sandwich actually fills you up. Spouting empty slogans is easy; if you really want peace, you'd better be prepared to die for it.

So yeah, I don't particularly blame the Winner family princess for going over to the Federation's "Peacecraft" side. But if somebody picks a fight with me, I'm taking the bait.

Which means we're going to fight, plain and simple.

I couldn't just sit around messing about on the seabed of Elysium. Somehow, I've got to head straight for Relena City with my partner, the "Warlock," in tow. The cockpit is dim, and there's a smell in here like rusty iron, though it's not my partner that's rusting. It's the distinct odor seeping in from this Elysium Sea.

Outside on the monitor, the water is a murky brown, like someone dumped ketchup into watercress soup. Probably the mix of Martian red sand and Europa algae gives it that gritty color. Every sea on this planet is clouded, except for the "Lanagreen Sea," which was once perfectly clear. It really was beautiful out there, scent of the tide riding the breeze, fresh like a spring meadow, warm like basking in sunlight. That little harbor town was a personal favorite, but it's gone now.

I hate the water, being submerged only drags up memories I'd rather not relive. Sure, memories matter, but still. I've passed the Frecluff Isles, and so far, there's no sign of anyone trying to attack me. Even an idiot wouldn't pick a fight in these waters.

I know the Shawhook II got hauled off to Elysium Island by the Federation. I spotted it myself when I surfaced. Onboard were my predecessor, some eternally-youthful middle-aged guy called Professor W, a tall fellow named Doktor T, and Catherine (who'd punch me if I dared call her an "old lady," though she's not here to hear it). Four of them in total.

I have zero interest in rescuing them. Not my problem, they barely put up a fight anyway. My partner and I can ride these roaring jet currents to make landfall near Elysium Island in no time. Then, under cover of night, we can slip into Relena City, head straight for the presidential palace.

Our target is Relena Peacecraft and no one else. All we have to do is kill that pompous president. Once she's gone, maybe Catherine and Naina will finally give up on their precious pacifism. Apparently, blowing her away means wiping out hundreds of millions of people, including my

old man, but I couldn't care less. The human race is bloated as it is. Mars can restart with whoever's left alive.

Sure, it's messed up. But I'm fine with that. Once Relena's dead, Zechs is next. Zechs Merquise, Lanagreen's Major General, is driven by pure spite, hatred and revenge fuel his every move. If we let him roam free, he'll probably wipe out humanity under some "war for justice" banner.

And I can't have that.

The moment we broke the surface, a transmission came through.

"This is Scheherazade... Warlock, respond."

Dawn was nearly upon the sea. A faint light glimmered over the eastern horizon, thinning that ever-present tang of rusted iron in the air.

"Yo... you got some business with me?"

"Message from Professor W," came a voice through the monitor, some guy named Phobos, wearing a knit cap.

"We're heading out to rescue the Doctor and the others taken hostage. Join us. The rendezvous point is—"

I cut Phobos off before he could keep rattling on.

"Go do that yourselves. I've got my own priorities."

"Understood."

Phobos seemed to accept it without any fuss.

"Transmission out."

And that was that, he ended the call on me. Real curt, or maybe too curt. An acrid scent of gunpowder flared in my nose, a sudden jolt in my mind whispering, "They're aiming for me.

But from where...?"

Elysium Island's silhouette was visible on the monitor, still two or three kilometers off. I zoomed in on the island's ridges. Just then, a tiny flash flickered dead ahead, along the edge of a steep cliff. For a split second, that light closed in on me. There was no time to dodge. It looked like a bird.

As it drew closer, I realized that bird was a giant crow shrouded in white light.

"You've got to be kidding..."

Out of nowhere, chaos tore through the air like a raging storm. I struggled desperately to keep my partner stable, but several tornadoes sprang up, yanking us in. We were swept into the sky, black twisters coiling around my partner.

"Give me a break!"

For a moment, I thought it was some illusion, maybe a hack targeting my nanomachines, but I quickly realized that wasn't it. Twisted in the funnel clouds, my partner and I were dragged straight toward Elysium's

shoreline. The moment the tornadoes died down, we slammed into solid ground. We'd landed on a sandy beach beneath the cliff.

I managed to switch to manual posture control in time, so we avoided catastrophic damage, but ordinarily, the crash impact would've killed us instantly. Still, I whacked the back of my head and jaw pretty hard, rattling around in the cockpit.

"Damn... that hurts..."

"You never cease to amaze me, lil Duo."

A strangely gentle voice echoed in my head.

"That was schwarz from the Seven Zwarg."

Standing atop the cliff was Snow White, wrapped in a white hooded cloak, a large crossbow in hand with another bolt already nocked. Professor W was on the comm, apparently inside that Snow White's cockpit.

"Its element is 'wind.' I'm impressed you managed to stay upright at all."

That's the danger with him: behind that kindly face lurks genuine malice. On my monitor, those greenish-blue eyes had zero hesitation. Even in his gentle tone, I caught that subtle gunpowder scent. Guys like him are a real threat.

"Next up is weiß from the Seven Zwarg... You won't dodge this one. Its range is even wider than the schwarz."

"Hey—"

I decided to spill a bit about my situation, not that I wanted to talk, but to see if I could make him understand.

"I've been fighting nonstop, you know... can't remember the last time I slept."

I counted off the battles since I hopped in this cockpit.

"I've taken on forty Maganacs piloted by the Winner family princess, three of Lanagreen's Virgos plus Epyon, five hundred lightweight Federation flyers, twelve of those so-called 'Merciless Fairies,' and Prometheus. I fought them all, one after another."

Just thinking back on it exhausts me.

"That's a total of five hundred fifty-seven units... Not that many,"

came another voice behind me, Phobos again. He and his mobile suit had snuck up somehow, cutting off our escape from behind. There was no detectable scent around him at all.

"Besides, you weren't alone in those fights."

A quick glance at the rear monitor showed Scheherazade, cloaked in some rainbow-shimmering, transparent mantle. Beneath its partially finished armor plating, I could see raw internal components, it looked

downright eerie. Even if you can make a suit transparent, you can't make its smell invisible.

I'd only ever seen the schematics, but there was no doubt in my mind. This thing was from the same line as my partner, a Gundam-type.

I shot a glare at Phobos.

"Would you just let me finish? What I'm trying to say is—"

No, this wasn't me venting. I just needed to buy time. While talking, my fingers raced over the console, flipping to combat mode.

"I'm running on fumes here, okay? I'm so far past my limit, I can't afford to go easy on you even if I wanted to!"

From beneath my partner's black mantle, I whipped out my beam scythe. Spinning around, I lunged at Scheherazade in a single fluid motion. I was sure I'd cleaved it in two...

"So you really are exhausted... Your follow-through was weak," came Phobos's voice, right in front of me. Scheherazade now stood face-to-face with my Warlock.

"And that bit about not holding back was just a bluff, right?"

"You... you bastard..."

I was certain no suit out there could surpass my partner in close combat, yet Phobos had slipped Scheherazade clear of my beam scythe's swing. The suit had definitely been within the arc of my blade, so it must've dodged backward, moving opposite the scythe's direction of travel.

All right, then...

Seized by anger, I slashed upward with the beam scythe, swinging from low to high. If it could move sideways that fast, there's no way it could handle a vertical strike. This time, I was sure I'd split it right down the middle. Or so I thought, until Scheherazade vanished; just an afterimage. It had read my movement along the outer edge of the attack and jumped out a split-second later.

"Stop screwing around!"

I pulled out a second beam scythe from beneath my partner's cloak and lunged forward. With dual scythes, it shouldn't be able to dodge both horizontally and vertically. Not at this speed.

I swung the right scythe downward in a crushing overhead arc while sweeping the left horizontally. Scheherazade drew something like a short dagger, thrusting it straight out between those two arcs and catching both beams single-handedly. Sparks sizzled and crackled. In the corner of my vision, it looked like little cinders were burning in midair.

"This jambiya is made of MG alloy,"

Phobos said on the monitor, seemingly untroubled.

"It's lighter and tougher than Gundanium..."

Unbelievably, my partner was losing the power struggle. We just couldn't push through. I tried to act unfazed.

"Oh yeah? Then the 'M' in MG must stand for Mars, right?"

"No. It stands for madness."

I'm pretty off my rocker, but he's on another level, a truly mad bastard.

"Close combat is definitely your suit's strong point," he said.

"Then what the hell is your suit supposed to be?"

The second I spoke, my partner's right wrist was severed. A console alert flashed RIGHT MANIPULATOR MALFUNCTION. A jarring chill shot straight up my nose.

"Scheherazade specializes not just in close combat, let's call it point-blank combat."

My spine tingled. Time to retreat. I thought about using a nanomachine illusion to confuse them, but it was too bright out for that, and I'd used way too many nanomachines in prior fights. Plus, if that cloak was coated with nanodefensors, it wouldn't do much anyway.

So I forced my partner forward, shoving Scheherazade aside and bolted. If I'd stayed, my partner would've been torn apart, no, dismantled might be a better word. That's the feeling I got. Not destruction, but dissection. It reminded me of being lost in a blizzard, that primal sense of a creeping dread I can't quite put into words.

The sandy beach below the cliff stretched north and south, so I sprinted north, hugging the rocky wall to stay out of Snow White's line of fire. From what I recalled, Scheherazade's mobility should be inferior to my partner's.

I made it to the northern tip of the beach. I could hear the waves rolling in, smell that rusted tang. I stopped, thinking I'd lost them.

"You run pretty well, like a faithful little pup."

Phobos's voice echoed nearby. I smelled snow, no, ice. Turning around, there was Scheherazade, standing right behind me. It reminded me of the times my old man would sneak up, smoking a cigarette just inches from my back. Rage spiked.

"Who're you calling a mutt?!"

With that, I and my partner sprang southward, firing our shoulder thrusters to flee at even greater speed. But that jerk... calling me a dog? I'm the wolf in devil's skin, for crying out loud. Yes, a wolf. My long, braided hair is the proud tail of a lone wolf. Naina once said so herself.

"It looks really cool, Duo! When I see you running from behind, you remind me of Fenrir from the old myths."

And now this guy calls me a "mutt?" Hell no. I'd never let that slide.

I glimpsed the south end of the beach, only to see someone else already there, waiting. I skidded to a halt, salt-and-rust wind blowing past. And sure enough...

“What’s wrong? Had enough, mutt?”

Scheherazade and that smug jerk were waiting for me. My whole body felt drained.

“Maybe Duo’s just hungry,” came Professor W’s voice. Snow White had apparently descended from the cliffs at some point, now standing close by. I hadn’t noticed a thing. The gunpowder smell was gone.

Still... how is Scheherazade faster than my partner? It makes no sense. Must be because my stomach’s empty. Right. That’s gotta be it. I haven’t eaten a bite since that sandwich Naina gave me.

“All right, fine...”

I gave up the tough-guy act.

“I’ll help you guys out...”

Hunger, exhaustion, and fatigue from all these battles finally overwhelmed me. They kept talking afterward, but I barely remember. I must’ve fallen asleep in the cockpit. I had a dream about my childhood, one I’ve probably had a thousand times but still barely recall. I only remember a scent from that dream, the same one that lingered around the port town of Lanagreen. So I figure that’s what it was.

Maybe I mumbled something about “Fenrir” or “Naina” in my sleep. Half-dazed, I prayed to the heavens that no one heard me. Then again, did I really pray? Did I actually plead with that old man? Sometimes, bits of my subconscious leak out in ways that disgust me. Because deep beneath this devil-skin wolf, there’s a stray puppy, shivering in the rain, and I’d die of shame if anyone ever saw it.

I woke up to find it was already late afternoon. Professor W had finished repairing my partner’s severed right wrist. Come to think of it, he’s the one who assembled this suit to begin with, so a fix like that is probably child’s play for him, even if it’s nearly suppertime now.

I crawled out of the cockpit, and the professor greeted me.

“Ah, awake at last?”

A mouthwatering aroma drifted through the air. Phobos was tending a small campfire on the sand.

“Phobos here has cooked up something tasty. Let’s eat together,” Professor W said, leading me closer to the flames.

“I need to correct two things,”

Phobos remarked, taking a hunk of roasted meat skewered on a stick from the fire and handing it to me.

“First, I just cooked whatever I could find locally, so I wouldn’t go calling it delicious cuisine.”



Without a word, I bit into it. The taste was something like crab, but not quite.

“Hey... what is this? Not crab, right? Shrimp maybe?”

“Heh heh... Better not to know if you want to enjoy it,”

Professor W said, popping a capsule from his pocket and swallowing it. Apparently he doesn't eat solid food like me or Phobos.

“What's the second correction?” the professor asked, after taking a drink of water from his mug.

“I'm no longer Trowa Phobos. If you have to call me something, just call me 'Nameless.’”

Weirdo. If that's acceptable, maybe I should change my own name.

“Fine then, I'll stop being Duo. From now on, I'm Fenrir—Fenrir Maxwell, the wolf in devil's clothes!”

“I prefer 'mutt.' 'Mutt Maxwell'... That's got a nice ring to it,”

Nameless added, voice dripping sarcasm.

Professor W snorted with laughter.

“Both of you fail, I'm afraid. Why not just stick to the names you've got? Show a little more pride in who you are.”

I kept quiet. Nameless looked less than convinced.

“Hey, how about we make a pact?” I whispered in his ear.

“Just between us, we call each other Fenrir and Nameless.”

“I'll think about it.”

He didn't sound enthusiastic. Guess he's determined to keep treating me like a dog. What a pain.

Night fell quietly.

The breeze off the sea, once tinged with a rusted-iron scent, now carried a whiff of black oil. Since I'd slept through most of the day, I volunteered for sentry duty. The other two were dozing in their cockpits.

It was a dull watch.

No suit in the Federation's Elysium base had a stealth-capable nanodefensor-coated cloak like ours. According to Nameless and Professor W, even Prometheus's dark green cloak had gone up in flames at the hands of Snow White's Seven Zwarg.

Which meant if any Federation unit tried approaching, our perimeter sensors would definitely pick them up. Strictly speaking, there was no need for a lookout at all. Still, I'd insisted. It wasn't like I could sleep anyway.

I'd stopped trying to run off on my own. No doubt if I tried, the other two would only get in the way. And, if I'm being honest, I at least wanted to rescue my taciturn predecessor. For all my complaints, I respect

Heero Yuy's skill. Of all the people I've met, he's in a league of his own. There's a kind of sadness clinging to him that I can't quite place.

Whenever I'm bored, I file my nails. I like tinkering with machinery, but my fingertips always get filthy with oil and paint, and that grime drives me nuts. I use a favorite nail clipper and file to polish them. The friction smell is kind of like what you get entering a planet's atmosphere from space. My old man put me through that a few times during training. Not saying I like it, but I don't hate it either.

After a couple of minutes, my nails take on a subtle shine, like pearls. For the record, I don't paint them, I'm still a guy, braid notwithstanding. Besides, I can't stand the smell of nail polish. Absolutely not.

Because my partner's nickname is "Warlock," I got into the habit of doing cheap magic tricks. It means I pay special attention to my fingertips.

At last, satisfied with the sheen of my nails, I sensed a presence up on the cliff. Something felt wrong. an additive or compound smell. Yet there wasn't a peep on my sensors. No heat source changes. No strange magnetic interference from a sandstorm. The radar should have been working perfectly.

But my bad hunches never miss. The tension in the air told me danger was closing in. I flipped on the comm and whispered, "Nameless, Professor... wake up."

They both came to in seconds.

"Something's off," I said quietly.

Professor W answered with a pleasant smile, his eyes dead serious.

"Looks like our visitors have arrived."

"Visitors?" I echoed.

His eyes were intense, but his lips still curved up.

"Yes, my younger sister, your special lady, Duo, and Phobos's rival in love..."

I had plenty of retorts, but I kept silent. Judging from Nameless's face on the sub-monitor, he was thinking the same thing.

Perched on the cliff were three manned Mars Suits. Their faceplates were done in the shape of playing-card suits: Heart, Spade, and Club, each faintly glowing. The general silhouette was reminiscent of the old mobile suit Leo. Not sure why they'd need such heavy armor on Mars, but if they were up against Gundam-types like ours, or Lanagreen's Virgos and Epyon, maybe even that wouldn't be enough.

The one in the middle was the Queen of Hearts, and I recognized it. Naina's suit. Tonight, though, she wore a bright-red riding hood trimmed



elegantly in gold. Probably the same stealth-capable nanodefensor material as our cloaks. That explained why we hadn't picked her up on scanners.

To the right was the King of Spades, and to the left, the Jack of Clubs, each with a trailing red scarf.

There are only two kinds of people on the battlefield: those who end up dead and those who end up alive. And both ways are painful. The dead get a big fat "The End." Can't be a happy thing. I've never died, so what do I know, but the family and friends they leave behind have it pretty rough, I'm sure.

In my case, no one would miss me anyway, so I don't care how it goes.

The ones who live have to carry the burden of every soul that died on that field, and that's no picnic, either. War is nothing but slaughter; no room for sugarcoating. It wears on you. And if you're not prepared for that, all you can do is run.

I wouldn't say I'm numb to it, but I try not to dwell on "souls" or emotional burdens. Still, I do have the bare minimum of resolve. I'm guessing Nameless and Professor W are the same.

On my main monitor, I switched to night vision scope and picked up the three Mars Suits. Beyond them in the night sky, a few faint stars flickered like dim-witted lights.

"All right," Professor W said on the sub-monitor, addressing Nameless and me. "From here, we have three possible courses of action."

His words made me pause. If our goal was to rescue our teammates, it seemed we only had one real option, yet here he was talking about three.

"First, we can take out those three Mars Suits, then press on to Relena City and rescue the hostages by force."

I figured that was our only real option anyway. If we wanted to save our friends, we'd have to bust them out.

"Second option: maintain neutrality for the moment, stay safely out of sight while letting Lanagreen's Virgo landing forces and those three duke it out, and then, once it's over, do the same forced entry. Option One, just delayed."

I blinked at how casually he laid it out.

"Wait, a landing force?"

So far, my console's sensors weren't showing any contacts whatsoever. The night sea was calm, with no sign of large-scale movement.

"Where the heck are they supposed to be?" I asked skeptically.

"They're still outside our detection range," he replied calmly. "Right now, they're probably about twenty kilometers off to the southeast."

"And you know that how?"

He smiled wryly.

"Let's just say 'the heart of space' whispered to me, though I doubt you'll accept that explanation."

His grin sharpened slightly.

"It's actually a simple deduction. I expected you to catch on."

The look on his face could have been read as a genial smile, but somehow I had the sneaking suspicion he was laughing at me.

"Yeah, but before, you said something about 'visitors...'"

"Oh, my apologies. Did I mean they'd come pay us a visit?"

"No... not exactly," I admitted.

After all, the only reason we saw the Mars Suits first was because I caught a weird vibe and went to check it out. There was no chance Naina's team could pinpoint our location, cloak and all, just by guesswork.

From another sub-monitor, the knit-cap-wearing guy, Nameless, spoke up. "If Quaterine's in one of those Suits, do you think she could be reading 'the heart of space' and predicting our moves?"

"I doubt it," Professor W said. "If she really knew we were here, she wouldn't have appeared so exposed. She does have a decent sense of tactics. If she were going to show up at all, she'd form a perfect encirclement first to make sure we had nowhere to run."

That was true enough. Even Naina had been meticulous when she ambushed me and my partner; she'd readied her so-called Merciless Faries to ensure we couldn't escape.

"So then why are they here if not to fight us?" Professor W continued in a lecture-like tone. "Basically, there's no question that this coast offers the easiest point of entry for a larger force. Dropping directly onto the city center runs a high risk of being shot down. But these sheer seaside cliffs make this area ideal for a defensive stand. You've got clear lines of sight for a first strike. And based on the way those Mars Suits are equipped, I see a few features meant to counter mobile dolls—"

He seemed ready to explain at length, but the knit-cap guy, Phobos, apparently, cut him off. "So in other words, they're not here to fight us. They're here to prep for a battle with Lanagreen's forces. Which means they're anticipating a confrontation with Virgo units."

"Precisely. As expected from you, Phobos."

I still wasn't fully following all this. Professor W went on to describe the recent political situation in the Lanagreen Republic, the likely routes and tactics of the Virgo force's invasion, the weather conditions on

Mars, all of it, apparently certain that his predictions were spot-on. Listening further felt pointless.

“The real question is this third plan,” I said, turning my attention to the one detail that mattered to me. “Let me guess—”

“Sharp as ever, Duo,” Professor W said with a half-smile. “And yes, that guess is correct.”

Oh, terrific... so all those earlier bad vibes and danger signals I’d been feeling were connected to this.

“The third option is for us to cooperate with the Mars Federation’s side and repel the Lanagreen Virgo force’s landing. When we’re done with that, we circle back to option one, charging into Relena City and rescuing the hostages.”

I was speechless.

Exactly as I’d suspected, but, seriously?

Working with the Mars Federation, at this point? So their total pacifism shtick was putting them at a disadvantage, but that was their own doing. If you asked me, the sooner we got rid of Relena Peacecraft, the better it’d be for Mars.

“It’s best if we ignore who’s allied with whom, or what the strategic advantage is,”

Professor W said lightly.

I’ve got no real grudge here, but no reason to help them, either.

“Is this some kind of joke? Why should we lift a finger to save their nation?”

I asked, fed up. He looked surprised.

“That doesn’t sound like you, Duo. You don’t need a reason to help someone, do you?”

He said it so naturally I had no comeback. Though I wanted to point out that this situation was a bit dire for “helping,” but whatever.

“We’ll see how the battle unfolds before deciding,” Nameless cut in before I could.

The professor nodded with a small grin.

“Precisely. That’s the plan.”

“When and how do we make that decision?”

“By majority vote as events develop.”

“All right, I can live with that.”

“Me too,” I said, giving a small nod, though it felt more like resignation.

I hadn’t abandoned option one so much as realized the circumstances had changed. If the Republic’s Virgo force was really coming, then the job wasn’t so simple. I couldn’t exactly team up with soulless mobile dolls to crush Naina. My pride wouldn’t allow it. So for now, So for now, the second option, hanging back to watch them duke it out, seemed like the

obvious best move. Phobos probably thought the same thing. Professor W was the only one who seemed to be cooking up some alternative plan in that mind of his.

At his suggestion, we moved to the beach's northern edge, supposedly the best vantage to assess the battle's progress. But strategically, that put us on the far left flank, which seemed risky. It smelled of trouble.

A thought crossed my mind, does Naina really not know we're here? Are Nameless and I just dancing to Professor W's tune? The old man reminded me way too much of my shady father figure, that fake ass priest who'd always trick me. Both reeked of deceit.

A few minutes later, we picked up a reading. Five large MD transport craft from Lanagreen were closing in from the southeast. Each of these transports could carry up to twelve Virgos. Sixty in total, presumably set for an amphibious landing.

Those three Mars Suits, Queen of Hearts, King of Spades, Jack of Clubs, would be facing an enemy force twenty times their size. Even an idiot could see how rough that fight would be. They'd already vacated the cliff. Three of the transports arrived first, dropping wave after wave of Virgos onto the beach.

Naina's Queen of Hearts charged in alone, apparently uninterested in any combined strike with the other two. She flew straight into the middle of the enemy formation, a bold assault meant to disrupt them.

Because that red riding cloak kept her from showing up on Virgo sensors, she could slip into their midst. The Virgos fumbled with sluggish defenses, and her massive beam mace gutted them in an instant.

But while a single Virgo might be weak, in a swarm they're far more dangerous. Their Neo-Planet Defensors formed an impenetrable shield, and their beam rifles began raining down a coordinated barrage. The Queen of Hearts was subjected to a merciless downpour of high-power fire. Still, with that nanodefensor-coated cloak, the shots never quite struck home, her cloak disturbed the sensors and messed up their aim.

From my partner's cockpit, on my right, I heard Professor W's calm voice through Snow White's comm.

"Virgos are especially troublesome in a group. They become a giant, multi-headed, multi-limbed monster driven by a single will... that collective frenzy hides a spiteful, wicked intent."

Multi-headed, multi-limbed monster? I had trouble picturing that. My mind conjured up images of spiders covered in eyeballs, or massive

squids, or octopi, forcing me to compare them somehow. Either way, I hate creatures like that.

Nameless, standing in Scheherazade on my left, spoke up.

“At the end of the day, they’re unmanned weapons. No resolve, no accountability.”

All the worse, in my opinion. I’d had hell taking on forty Maganac mobile dolls by myself, no, the entire ordeal nearly killed me. And thrashing those three Virgos (alongside the Epyon) was no stroll in the park, either. Even the Federation’s lightweight flyers, as spineless as they were, became a real pain in large numbers.

Still, I kept my mouth shut. Someone who hasn’t experienced it firsthand won’t understand, no matter what you say. My predecessor taught me that the hard way, tossing me into real combat without explanation. Pain in the neck, but hey, I’m alive because of it.

Naina’s Queen of Hearts fought the same way she always did, driving forward in a straight line. Around her, nearly twenty Virgos formed into circular waves of attack, snaring her route of escape and closing in on her as the center. From afar, it looked like they were boxing her in, but in truth they’d fallen into a predictable pattern, ripe with blind spots. Once the Virgo units began spiraling in, they risked firing at each other. And since mobile dolls don’t hesitate to engage in friendly fire, Naina was counting on them to self-destruct.

Sure enough, within moments three of the Virgos blew apart.

“It’s a comedy,” Professor W murmured, an odd remark at such a grim sight.

“They say if something tragic happens once and then happens twice, it’s tragedy; by the third time, it’s comedy.”

Yet his face was devoid of mirth. In a strained, pained tone, he went on.

“The first time was AC-182, when King Marticus Peacecraft’s Sanc Kingdom fell under attack by the United Earth Sphere Alliance... The second was AC-195, when Relena Peacecraft restored the kingdom under total pacifism, only for OZ to invade. The country surrendered and was dismantled...”

I’d heard enough. Stories of the past always rubbed me the wrong way, my old man was the same, rambling about days gone by. Professor W must have noticed the disinterest on my face because he quickly added one final comment.

“I was there the second time around. It was the same, great hordes of Virgos landing on the beach.”

“Huh. So a pacifist nation gets wiped out for the third time,” I muttered. “Heh... Some comedy.”

Relena Peacecraft, the Martian Federation’s second president, had brought about the downfall of another so-called peaceful state. The fools who’d voted for her got exactly what they deserved. No sympathy from me.

“What do you think?” asked Professor W, his tone cool. “Shall we call a vote?”

I was all for it, but Nameless still seemed on the fence.

“Not yet,” he said. “Let’s see how the other two Mars Suits move.”

The Jack of Clubs, wearing its trailing red scarf, dove in to support the Queen of Hearts. Its beam tabar, a lethal combination of a spear-like beam sword and ax-like heat blade, let it strike both on straight paths and in arcing sweeps. Like my beam scythe, though, it must have been tricky to wield. If you weren’t quick, enemies could slip inside your guard in seconds.

But the Jack of Clubs was dominating. Watching that nimble footwork, I assumed the pilot must be the Winner family princess, but Professor W and Nameless disagreed. Nameless said Quaterine’s fighting style was more precise and delicate; Professor W insisted this bold style belonged to Naina’s twin brother, Mille Peacecraft. And those two knew Quaterine way better than I did, so I had to admit they were probably right.

I was surprised that Mille Peacecraft fought so much like Old Master Chang, his rhythm of closing in and pulling back was a perfect match. At first I thought he might be copying the old man’s technique somehow, but that was impossible. A top-tier Preventer pilot’s moves wouldn’t be that easy to mimic.

Charging ahead, Jack of Clubs still had enough presence of mind to cover the Queen of Hearts. One moment it would surge forward recklessly, the next it would pull back to provide a sweeping defense. Old Master Chang would never put that kind of teamwork first, and Quaterine’s approach wouldn’t be so aggressive. So yes, Mille must be some eccentric who’s both taciturn and boldly expressive in a discordant way.

Between the Jack of Clubs and Queen of Hearts, the Neo-Planet Defensors started failing one by one, and the Virgos’ total count dropped from sixty down to fifty. They were still outnumbered twenty-five to one, though. Obviously, Naina and Mille’s suits would get worn down if this kept up.

Then King of Spades, which Quaterine presumably piloted, began its charge, swinging a beam lance in great arcs. It looked purely brute force at first, but a closer look revealed her attacks were precisely aimed, her defenses flawless. She wasted no movement at all.

In one fluid motion, King of Spades bisected the trailing Virgos, now weakened by the failing Planet Defensors, then swept through three more gathered in front. I couldn't help admiring her skill. I'd fought Quaterine twice before: once when she used Maganac mobile dolls with advanced tactics to toy with me and Heero, another time in a wild, gatling-gun-blazing rampage with Prometheus. Now, in hand-to-hand combat, she was dispatching Virgos at a speed my eyes could barely follow. It felt like she was instantly picking the most effective tactics for each situation, no, more like she was adapting her moves to her current suit. I could never pull off something like that.

It looked, too, like King of Spades was herding the Virgos toward a specific area, making a wide arc counterclockwise, corralling them gradually north-northwest. Right toward the northern stretch of coastline, which was exactly where we were observing. I clicked my tongue, silently. No matter how this played out, it was bound to end up with us picking Option Three anyway, wasn't it?

Just then, the Virgos changed tactics. They stopped scattering their targets and closed in on just one, King of Spades, which was behind the other two.

"Quaterine's too capable for her own good," Nameless muttered. "Fighting like that, she always ends up taking the brunt alone."

"Indeed. The enemy's about to pin down the King, then pick off the other two," said Professor W.

"And that suits Mille's Jack, too," Nameless added.

It almost sounded like he was angry. The Queen of Hearts had surged too far ahead, the Jack of Clubs was stuck in the middle, and King of Spades was left to cover both from the rear. The swarm of Virgos scattered and regrouped, honing in for a counteroffensive to pick off all three Mars Suits one by one. It was obvious, even to me.

Nameless, typically deliberate, spoke more quickly than usual:

"Professor, let's put it to a vote."

I see how it is. We'd been set up from the start. It dawned on me too late, I should have realized sooner that he and Professor W always intended to jump in. That whole "majority vote" talk was basically a joke; we never truly had multiple options.

"Damn it, enough with the farce! If it's comedy the third time around, I'll make sure it ends right now!" I shouted. A comedy that isn't funny? No thanks.



“I’ll go back up Naina! You handle the rest!”

Before I could jet off, Nameless and Scheherazade leaped forward first.

“Forty-two left,” he noted, appearing on my sub-monitor. “That’s seven each, Fenrir.”

He still pissed me off, but hearing him actually call me “Fenrir” was admittedly nice.

“Yeah! Let’s do it!”

I spread my partner’s black mantle and drew twin beam scythes, roaring,

“All right, make way for the ‘wolf in devil’s skin!’”

No point holding back. My partner and I rushed the Virg—no, the entire horde, on a collision course. My stupid old man used to say, “You’re not supposed to use a ‘warlock’ like that,” but I pilot this suit the way I want.

The Virgos’ neo-planet defenders were already spread too thin. They’d been rotating formations and merging repeatedly, leaving openings. Plus, Naina and the others had worn down their electromagnetic output enough that we could slice in easily. Once you got inside a cluster of Virgos, the rest was just hacking and slashing, mowing them down in a whirlwind.

“You’re here to help me, Duo?” came Naina’s voice through a secret line on the comm.

So she’d been able to listen in on us all along, huh? Well, no time to worry about that now. The Queen of Hearts fought right by my side, hefting that oversized beam mace like it weighed nothing.

“Yeah, I couldn’t stand watching you get held up by these nobodies!” I shot back.

“Heh heh... thanks.”

Meanwhile, Scheherazade disassembled the Virgos around King of Spades, unstoppable arcs of that janbiya blade.

“Trowa Phobos, I’m not about to thank you,” Quaterine’s voice broke in over the same secret line.

“Don’t bother,” Nameless answered flatly. “And I’m not Trowa Phobos anymore.”

The Queen of Hearts’ beam mace and my Warlock’s beam scythe hammered the Virgos with alternating straight and circular strikes. It was like the same pattern as Mille’s beam tabar, except we could coordinate our lines of attack more efficiently. We’d cut their numbers in half, and the surviving ones had lost every last neo-planet defensor. I’d personally

wiped out four, and Naina had taken down three more. Nameless, Quaterine, and Mille must have destroyed about the same apiece.

At that moment, Professor W's voice rang out:

"This is Snow White. Everyone, step away from the water... I'm about to fire the Seven Zwarg's weiß."

From the northernmost point of the coast, Snow White prepared the same attack that had been aimed at me earlier. We followed orders, breaking off and racing inland.

"Stance... set."

Snow White steadied its footing.

"Nocking... setup."

One white arrow fitted onto that crossbow. Mille's Jack and Quaterine's King were still scrambling away from the shoreline, but Professor W wasn't waiting.

"Drawing..."

He pulled the bowstring taut. His aim was already locked.

"Full draw..."

Just in time, the Jack and King made it to the sand, far enough from the water's edge.

"Release!"

A dazzling flash of white streaked from Snow White straight at the huddle of Virgos. Midway, that flash burst into countless dove-like shapes, fanning out over the dark ocean in a brilliant shower. The sea turned stark white. A vicious spark erupted. Then came an upward strike of inverted lightning from the water to the sky, a massive plasma discharge.

In that instant, the remaining twenty-some Virgos shut down at once.

Professor W had almost used that nightmarish arrow on me?

The thought made my blood run cold. Clearly, he was a dangerous individual. This arrow didn't just smell of gunpowder, it was more like straight-up nitroglycerin or something equally explosive.

Either way, the battle was over. If he had something like that all along, you'd think he'd have used it right from the start. Then again, maybe he's the type, like me, who prefers to save his best trick for when it's truly needed.

"Not at all," Professor W said with a laugh on the sub-monitor, apparently reading my expression. "I never intended the White Arrow to be a secret trump card. It carries an electrical 'lightning' property that becomes useless whenever the Virgos' neo planet defenders are active. Their electromagnetic fields saturate the area, neutralizing the effect."

So that's why he waited for us to bring down the planet defensors. Fine by me, seems we share the same preference for letting other people do the heavy lifting. Efficient, I guess you'd call it.

Just then, I overheard Mille Peacecraft speaking to Quaterine over the comm.

"Quaterine... there's a transmission for you from one of Lanagreen's retreating MD transport ships."

"For me?"

"I'll patch it through."

"Greetings, Quaterine," a female voice said. "It's been a while. Since Saint Minerva, am I right?"

"Stella? Is that you, Stella?"

Quaterine sounded unnerved.

"Heehee... I see you've gained plenty of new friends. Lucky for you." The newcomer's tone was haughty and condescending.

"Why would you be with Lanagreen?" Quaterine demanded.

"Unfortunately, I'll be heading out now, but next time I won't go so easy on you."

Then the line went dead. I had no idea who Stella was or what history she shared with Quaterine, but reaching out directly from the enemy side reeked of a personal vendetta. The way the Virgos had fought also felt guided, like a single will was controlling them, maybe that Stella woman had been in charge of the MD system.

I considered telling Quaterine, but now wasn't the time for friendly chit-chat. So I turned to Professor W and snapped.

"Now we can finally have a fair three-on-three, right? Let's get back to option one!"

He simply smiled.

"I'm afraid we're done here."

I didn't get it. Then he switched to an external speaker and shouted to Naina and the others in their Mars Suits.

"We surrender! We'll throw down our weapons and surrender!"

"What the—why?!" I yelled, totally thrown. I was the only one who seemed upset. On my sub-monitor, Nameless looked calm, as though this was inevitable.

"Relax," he said.

Relax? You gotta be kidding.

"This is part of the plan. We have to get into Relena City if we want to free Miss Catherine, Doktor T, and Heero Yuy."

"Well, sure, but..."

"Maybe we'll get a shot at meeting Relena Peacecraft, too."

"How're we supposed to assassinate her if we're locked up?"

“Is that so hard?”

Nameless’s expression suggested he could pull it off just fine. Clearly, Nameless and Professor W were in cahoots. Come to think of it, aside from Naina, everyone here was basically a stranger. Who’s to say they weren’t all fooling me from the start?

“Understood,” came Naina’s voice over the Queen of Hearts’ external speaker. “Duo! I’m glad you came around!”

No way. I hadn’t agreed to anything. A fleeting urge hit me to slip away into the dark, alone, but I squashed it. This wasn’t the moment to make a break for it.

I fingered the brown ring at the tip of my long braid, the one Naina gave me four Christmases ago.

“I used to like you, you know,” she said gently.

“Yeah? Guess that makes two of us...” I shot back, trying for a cocky grin. “I’ve always liked... me, too.”

I had no choice but to surrender.

Several hours later, we were in a hover transport, shackled with flimsy cuffs, bound for Relena City. At least these handcuffs looked easy to break, so all we’d need was good timing and some fresh weapons. On the trip over, my stomach started rumbling again.

“Hey,” I asked Nameless. “What was that meat we ate earlier?”

“Mars ammonite.”

“Ammonite? Are you serious?”

“Apparently some genetically engineered strain took root in the Utopia Sea a few years back. No one really knows much else.”

On Earth, ammonites were ancient fossils, extinct shell creatures from ages ago. I vaguely recalled a creepy illustration in a book somewhere, a spiral shell with squid-like tentacles. Some of them were up to two meters long, I’d heard. And now they’re breeding on Mars? Maybe the oceans here really do resemble Earth’s prehistoric seas.

“Is that... safe to eat?”

“Beats me.”

In the end, living creatures survive by devouring other living things. If humans have souls, then so do chickens, cows, pigs, and probably ammonites as well. Still, if a wolf devours something, you’d expect it to be a little piglet or a lamb, or, at most, a juicy Little Red Riding Hood. So part of me felt uneasy about having eaten such an alien creature. Oddly enough, my hunger vanished just thinking about it.

Dawn broke by the time we reached Relena City. Naina, Quaterine, Mille, and the rest brought the three of us to the presidential residence.

Down a long corridor, at the very end, lay the president's office. A delicious aroma of crisp, pan-fried bacon wafted from within. My stomach growled shamelessly.

Inside, Doktor T and Catherine Bloom were already enjoying a lavish breakfast. On a spotless white tablecloth sat platters of bacon and eggs and green salad, plus a basket of warm croissants. Next to them was a clear, amber onion soup, and shiny silverware that made me squint. In the center stood a basket piled high with muscat grapes, apples, bananas, fresh fruit galore.

Doktor T set down his utensil, dabbed his mouth with a napkin, and said.

"Took you long enough..."

Professor W, calm as ever, replied, "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Catherine gave a broad smile.

"Phobos, I saved a banana for you."

Nameless offered a mirthless laugh.

"Ah... right..."

Heero wasn't anywhere in sight. Meanwhile, Naina, Quaterine, and Mille started helping themselves to the breakfast laid out for us, although we weren't invited to eat. I was about to protest, but Professor W preempted me.

"Behave. We're prisoners, remember?"

It was like he saw straight through me again. So prisoners didn't get any breakfast? That kind of discrimination's allowed now? And speaking of which...

"What about Doktor T and Catherine?" I asked. "Aren't they prisoners?"

"No," Doktor T said, tossing a piece of croissant into his mouth. "We're guests."

The flaky pastry looked mouthwatering. Even a crumb of that crust would have tasted like heaven.

"Guests? Why are you 'guests'?"

"We're with Heero, a state guest," Doktor T explained, glancing toward the large desk in the back.

Morning light spilled through a big window, illuminating a swivel chair turned away from us. When that chair finally turned, it revealed Heero Yuy wearing a black virtual visor just like the ones my old man used at the North Pole base.

Heero removed it, speaking coldly.

"All done, Relena..."

From an adjoining room, President Relena Peacecraft of the Martian Federation emerged with her advisor, Lucrezia Noin. Both had apparently finished their meals and held blue floral teacups. A gentle aroma drifted from them, more refined than anything I'd ever smelled.

Offering Heero a cup, Relena asked.

"So... how was the 'Peacecraft File'?"

Heero said nothing and made no move to drink the tea. It was as though none of us existed. The tension in the air went far beyond simple exclusion. It was like we were invisible to them.

"Should I see it too?"

Suddenly, she was just a girl to me, not the president. She gave a small sigh, the kind Naina used to let slip sometimes, and dropped her slender shoulders.

"I can't help hesitating..."

She closed her eyes.

"Before, you wouldn't have," Heero noted softly.

The surface of the tea rippled. A pistol glinted in his hand, the muzzle gliding upward to aim at the center of her forehead. Heero spoke quietly:

"Once you've seen it, I'll kill you..."

Relena inhaled sharply, opened her eyes, steeled, clear, and bright, and answered.

"All right..."

No more hesitation.

She raised the black virtual visor to her face.

## Afterword

Wufei is such a challenging character to interpret, I always feel like I can't afford to portray him carelessly. Perhaps that's why he doesn't appear as often as the others; my own hang-ups act like a brake on my writing. My apologies. But there's no doubt that the moment Wufei steps onto the stage, everything lights up. Please look forward to his upcoming moments in the spotlight.

When Ryuzo Ishino voiced Wufei, there was an undercurrent of sorrow in every shout. Beneath the intellectual phrasing, you can sense this ever-burning passion. It wasn't really something we on the production side intentionally set out to create; it was more of a personal touch Ishino brought to the performance. In fact, maybe it reflects the man himself, shining right through into Wufei.

During a break in recording, Ishino shyly admitted that he'd been building Gunpla (naturally, the Shenlong) on his own time. He ended with, "People might think it's odd for a grown man to do this," which struck me as both endearing and proof of how deeply he truly loves this series. It reminded me of Wufei's own attitude, he holds such love for his own machine, yet never speaks of it to anyone else. If circumstances allow, I'd love to see Ishino again, to experience that thoughtful, reserved personality firsthand, and reassess my view of Wufei from a different angle.

More about this in the afterword of Volume 8.

# Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

## Vol.07 Rhapsody of Quiet Despair (Part.01)

**Written by:** Katsuyuki Sumizawa

**Illustrations by:** Asagi Sakura [Character]  
MORUGA [Mechanical]

**Mechanical Design:** Hajime Katoki  
Junya Ishigaki

**Original Story:** Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino

**Cooperation:** Koji Nakajima [Sunrise]  
Tetsuko Takahashi [Sunrise]

**Advertising Support:** Bandai Hobby Division

**Supervisor:** Hideyuki Tomioka

**Cover Design:** Hajime Katoki

**Text Design:** Atsushi Doi [Tendo noPolicy]

**Editing:** Kadokawa Shoten  
Tsuyoshi Ishiwaki  
Tomohiro Zaizen  
Yasue Nagashima  
Miwa Matsumoto