

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP

新機動戦記ガンダムW
フローズンティアドロップ

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8 RHAPSODY OF QUIET DESPAIR (Part.2)



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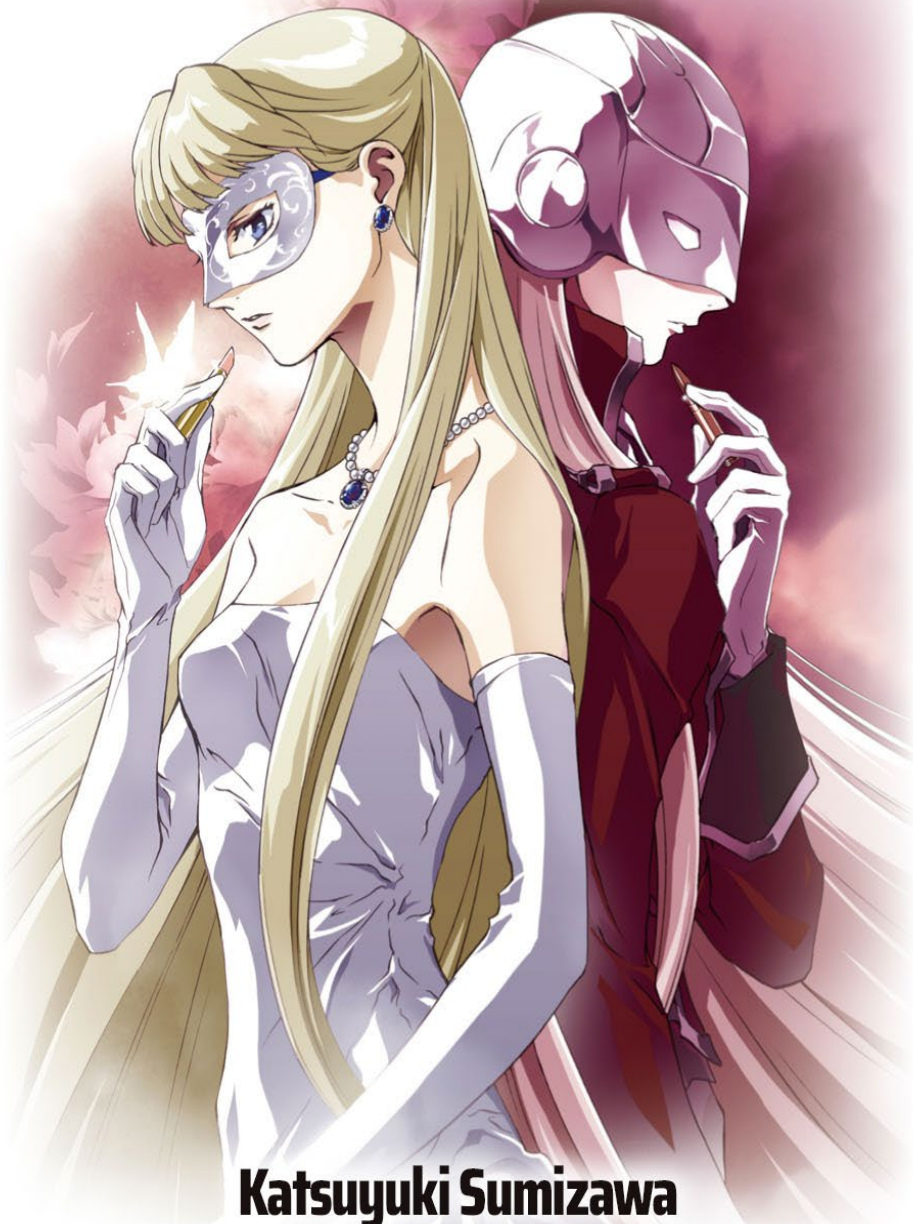
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Rhapsody of Quiet Despair

Peacecraft File.4

Once upon a time, there were twin sisters named Cinderella and Cendrillon.

Both of their names meant "little ashes."

One day, word reached them that the king was holding a grand ball at his castle, and both sisters longed to attend.

Unfortunately, the twins had neither the money nor the fine clothes suitable for such an event.

At that very moment, a kind, hearted fairy godmother appeared. With a wave of her wand, she conjured a magnificent pumpkin carriage, a splendid gown, and exquisite glass slippers.

But the magic was only enough for one.

After discussing their predicament, the twins agreed: Cendrillon would attend the ball, while Cinderella stayed behind to handle their stepmother's endless chores.

At the ball, Cendrillon danced joyously with the prince, sharing moments that felt straight out of a dream. Yet, at the stroke of midnight, as the magic began to fade, she hurriedly fled, leaving behind a single glass slipper on the castle steps.

Determined to find the woman he adored, the prince used the glass slipper as his only clue. His search brought him at last to the sisters' home.

On that fateful day, Cendrillon, eager to repay Cinderella's kindness, had journeyed far away to fetch water from a distant well.

When the prince arrived, he found Cinderella at home and asked her to try on the slipper.

Because the sisters were identical twins, the glass slipper fit her perfectly.

The prince decided then and there to marry Cinderella.

By the time Cendrillon returned from the well, Cinderella was nowhere to be found.

—From the tale passed down in a certain royal family—
Cinderella and Cendrillon

AC-146 APRIL

Political paralysis is fertile soil for "proactive forces of arms." When politicians grow lazy and the populace apathetic, those who carry weapons start thinking, "If we don't take charge, who will?"

Indeed, it was the world's military establishments that finally fused the Earth Sphere under one banner. In a multipolar international order,

wiping out conflicts in a single stroke with overwhelming force proved far more “efficient” than letting states bleed each other white through endless skirmishes.

Thus was born the leviathan known as the United Earth Sphere Alliance Forces.

Accustomed to such decisive destruction, these self-styled guardians thought nothing of inventing imaginary enemies just to justify their own survival.

Everything began to shift when a lone student named Heero Yuy strode into the Romefeller Foundation’s hall in Luxembourg and opened his anti-war speech with three words, “Shut up, old men.”

The Alliance’s righteous façade tilted at once.

His address was scathing and brutally honest. By turns thunderous and supple, fervent yet rhythmic, he laid bare how the chosen few’s coercive utilitarianism had widened the gulf between rich and poor, robbed ordinary people of the will to live, and erected a society that exalted war while scorning peace.

He hit the heart of the matter, and his logic was crystalline. Nor did he stop at criticism: he offered precise, practicable reforms that drained the color from every dignitary present. The Alliance’s venerable generals were left speechless.

That day marked the dazzling political debut of the man who would later be hailed as the legendary leader of the colonies, Heero Yuy. At the same moment, the entire Earth Sphere began its slow descent into a desolate darkness.

Eloquent righteousness breeds insidious resentment. Radiant youth becomes a target of the old. A reformer without private ambition earns the hatred of those who profit from the status quo.

After the speech, Heero and Sabrina went to ground in Cinquant Khushrenada’s mansion, having heard that a special ops bureau of the Alliance was on the move. Its objective was simple: assassination. Perhaps the stage of history was not yet ready for a “beacon of hope” like Heero Yuy.

The Alliance General Staff still refused to accept the impossible, the twin defeats it had suffered in the Baltic and North Seas. The Third, Fourth, and Fifth Fleets had possessed more than six times the strength of the rebel armada, yet they were wiped out almost at once. In barely two months, air and naval supremacy over the North Atlantic had shifted wholly to the rebellion. Overland supply lines still functioned, but even they were beginning to sag; maintaining the network that ringed the Sanc Kingdom was draining resources. Forced to retreat, the Alliance Army opened ceasefire talks with the rebels at once.

The rebels agreed, on two conditions. The conference must be held inside the Sanc Kingdom, and it must be broadcast across the entire Earth Sphere. Both demands were unprecedented, yet the Alliance accepted them, prompting every rebel officer to the same conclusion: So the Alliance has finally lost its nerve.

It was, in truth, a wily gambit.

The negotiations were scheduled for the grand hall of Sanc Kingdom Castle.

*

Spring had barely brushed the Sanc Kingdom. High mountain forests remained white and cold, and pockets of old snow still clung to the streets around the castle. Katerina Peacecraft studied the scene from the deck of the rebel flagship Robin Hood, floating at anchor in Sanc Bay.

"Still holding snow... Good," she murmured into the icy sea wind.

Snow swallows stray sounds and brings a hush; its whiteness, she hoped, might also smother the lies that clogged her own heart.

"I'm a hopeless student who does nothing but lie, right, Professor Heero?"

Katerina had not seen Heero since landing on Earth. If she did, she would have to keep a promise.

"I'm hurting. Please, help me."

She had blurted that once, and later Heero had asked her about it. They were both in separate cockpits, their Wyverns streaking toward Earth.

"What's hurting you so much? Tell me," he'd said.

She had refused.

"It's a secret. I'll tell you once this mission's over."

Empty words, she could never speak the truth.

"I'm in love with you, Professor Heero."

She was certain that Sabrina loved him too. Nearly six months had slipped by since then. She doubted she could craft a tidy lie for Heero now; the best she could manage would be the muddy babble of a thawing path.

"Professor, Sabrina suits you better..."

Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative," shorthand for "A lie is a sin," has no religious flavor; it is merely the universal law that flows from the highest principle of morality. Sabrina had tried to live by it ever since

learning of it from Heero at Marquis Weridge's estate. Katerina had heard of it first, back when Heero tutored her in the Darlian household on the colony, but she had never fully grasped it. Even as fellow pupils, Sabrina had always been the superior student.

The truth was that Katerina still loved Heero, a shameful, lamentable devotion. She had to cut that thread, for her own resolve as a soldier and for the happiness of her once-unlucky elder sister. She knew that the two of them had come to Earth in search of her two months earlier, yet she had never gone to meet them, fearing her resolve would crumble.

"I don't need anything. I have the memories with Professor Heero."

She borrowed the line from Humphrey Bogart in that ancient film, Casablanca.

A voice called her name from behind. She turned to see Sabrina. The ceasefire was hours away, and Sabrina had come aboard the Robin Hood for final talks with the rebel staff. Cinquant Khushrenada and Eric Shergold of the Romefeller Foundation accompanied her as aides.

Katerina felt a breath of relief that Heero was not among them, and yet, unable to stop herself, she asked:

"Where's Professor Heero?"

"He's looking after Sam."

For an instant Katerina's eyes flicked to the Wyvern Sam parked on deck, then she realized, it was the cat, Sam. The mistake made her smile.

"Is Sam fond of him?"

"He's left plenty of scratches."

The two girls laughed softly. Katerina pictured Heero, earnest as ever, quoting difficult words while wrestling with their spoiled cat.

The early-spring sun carried little warmth, yet a faint glow flowed between them. Together with the others they studied the cease-fire documents the Alliance had provided, points where they could compromise, points where they must stand firm. They examined every conceivable angle. If the Alliance demanded the surrender of the Wyvern Sam, they would refuse outright, yet that clause was absent. Evidently headquarters had decided that, even if presented with the cat again, there was nothing to gain.

With the preliminaries finished, Cinquant Khushrenada made a suggestion.

"In future, the two of you should avoid appearing in the same place."

"Why?" Katerina asked, genuinely puzzled.

Looking apologetic, he explained: according to official records, Sabrina Peacecraft had died last autumn in the shuttle explosion that

destroyed the Earth diplomatic mission. Therefore it would be wiser to keep secret that the woman who appeared in the Romefeller assembly hall had been Sabrina, not Katerina.

Katerina accepted immediately. She had always believed the Peacecraft legacy belonged to Sabrina. It also solved the problem of facing Heero again. The only hitch was that her beloved sister would have to use her name.

"I'm truly sorry, Sabrina."

"No, Katerina... I should be the one to apologize."

"Eh?"

"I did nothing. I let you shoulder all the danger."

"Don't worry about it. This suits me just fine."

After Sabrina and the others left, Captain Marticus Rex approached Katerina shyly.

"I'd heard the story of the twins, but..."

Katerina, still staring after the departing launch, did not turn.

"You two leave very different impressions."

At the time, Marticus seemed to harbor a quiet affection for her. He told his comrades that her guileless princess smile was irresistible.

"It feels as though the goddess of victory herself is smiling at us. For soldiers in the grinding trenches, that hope is priceless. To have such a comrade close by, what could be more heartening?"

Indeed, the weights each sister bore were not the same. Even when they wore identical smiles, Sabrina's eyes held a hidden sorrow.

"Well then," Katerina brightened.

"I need to pick a new name!"

AC-146 APRIL 20

The conference in the Sanc Kingdom convened at last. Around the central table sat the representatives of the Alliance, the rebels, and Sabrina Peacecraft herself.

She possessed everything required of a head of state: brilliance, learning, and a peerless gift for negotiation. Yet one stain marred her composure. On every broadcast overlay, next to her face, the caption read "Katerina Peacecraft." That deliberate falsehood weighed on her, a thin film of unease she could not shed.

The world's gaze fixed on one question: would the Alliance admit defeat? They would not. Instead, they framed the talks as a humanitarian cease, fire, necessary only to "prevent further bloodshed."

From the rebels' point of view, that alone counted as progress. The war had begun in resistance to Alliance oppression; if the iron fist

relaxed, that by itself was a step forward. And so the Alliance ceded far more than pride normally allowed.

"Very well," Sabrina said calmly. "In the spirit you propose, we will accept the cease, fire."

Outwardly it sounded routine, "to avoid bloodshed" is the negotiator's stock phrase. Yet Sabrina, ever the champion of peace, chose to take the cliché at face value. She knew it was not peace, any ember of hostility belied that word, but it could be the first footfall on the road.

Besides, both armies needed the respite. Spirits in the rebel ranks still blazed, but ammunition, fuel, and funds were nearly spent. The Alliance lines fared little better; the war had burned through their treasuries as well. Fine talk of humanity masked a harsher truth: neither side could afford to keep fighting.

Clause by clause they walked through the draft treaty, trading concessions, tightening language. Then Sabrina's gaze froze on the final page. A brand, new item, not in any advance copy, had been slipped in: "On Reparations to the Kingdom of Sanc."

The sum the Alliance demanded was staggering: more than five times the entire Peacecraft fortune. An impoverished micro, kingdom could never pay it, and why should Sanc pay anything at all? The text rattled off justifications: "primary driver of conflict escalation," "damage to neighboring states," "unilateral secession from the Alliance," and so on. All technically true, yet unprecedented, victors do not pay reparations.

So this, Sabrina realized, is what it means to win the war and lose at the table. The rebels had assumed the Alliance had lost its nerve. Wrong. With sly diplomacy they meant to ram through demands steeped in spite. In her haste for peace she had failed to pin down every premise beforehand.

Could she still refuse? A rejection would tear up the treaty and reignite the war. Katerina and the others would go back to the front, their hands red once more. Inland battles would be uglier than any naval clash, dragging civilians into the carnage. To hold the new lines, they would need massive foreign loans; a long war would end with the Alliance triumphant after all, and the final bill, loans plus reparations multiplied many times over, would bankrupt the kingdom.

Then we must bow our heads and pay, she concluded, heart twisting. She wanted the killing to end, for the soldiers, for the people of Sanc, for her beloved sister. But where could she find such a fortune? She could not dump the burden on her own citizens. Despair pressed in, airless and complete.

A soft voice brushed her ear.

"Princess... please agree to the reparations."



It was Eric Shergold of the Romefeller Foundation, somehow beside her without her noticing.

"We will take care of that matter," he murmured, and withdrew.

All limits lie within oneself, Sabrina thought. Dead ends and despair are prisons we build. The moment another hand offered a key, her sky cleared. She chose to trust Eric, and Cinquant Khushrenada beside him.

"The Sanc Kingdom accepts all terms," she said, meeting her opposite numbers' eyes.

When she signed the parchment, "Katerina Peacecraft" flowing beneath the seal, the war between Alliance and rebels in northern Europe was over.

At the same instant, the rebel forces disbanded.

*

The Alliance Army's high-handed withdrawal began. In the Sanc mountains roads were bulldozed wider, forests slashed apart, villages seized for supplies. All foreseen; every civilian in the region had already evacuated.

Midnight. The retreat crawled on. One unit, however, veered wildly: Company 09, 99th Tank Battalion aka "Hydra." Abandoning the scheduled route, they swung toward an evacuation site and opened fire. Their report to headquarters claimed pursuit by rebel forces, though the rebels no longer existed, and Sanc's unarmed populace posed no threat.

The rearguard company commander had snapped. He ordered high, explosive shells into the shelter, then trained his machine guns on the people who fled.

"Stop, sir! These civilians are unarmed!" his crew pleaded.

"Aren't you furious?" he raved. "No glory, no medals, no reward! They're the enemy! Civilians turned resistance fighters!"

Fabrication ran in the Alliance's veins.

"No one will dare complain!"

At that instant a blinding radiance blossomed overhead, a flash grenade! The commander lost the target, every electronic system went dead, and the civilians scattered into the darkness.

Blinking hard, he looked up. A double, headed dragon of burnished silver hovered there, the Wyvern, wings agleam.

A gentle girl's voice drifted from the sky.

"You know the ceasefire, yes? If you truly crave a dance... allow me to lead."

There was no mistaking Katarina's tone.

“Meowrrrr!”

A feline hiss followed at once. Guided by the quantum computer Sam, Katarina had come to fight for those who could not. Realizing this was the legendary Sam, the Hydra tanks scattered like roaches, and fled into the snow, lit night.

*

Deep in the northern forests of the Sanc Kingdom lay the hideout that Katerina and her friends called Sherwood Forest.

Drawn by their loyalty to her, Captain Marticus Rex and a handful of former rebel crew had left the flagship Robin Hood and gathered here. The heart of the base was a maintenance dock for the Wyvern, and the technicians “D.D.”, Mike Howard, and others could often be seen darting beneath the dragon, shaped machine.

Taking a cue from the same English legend that had named their warship, they christened the base Sherwood, for they were outlaws in the eyes of a mighty power, yet brigands sworn to defend peace and freedom.

AC-146 MAY

A May night breathed through the trees, filling the air with sap-scented life. A brook murmured under the moon, scattering quicksilver ripples. From somewhere in the darkness came the haunting call of an owl.

The Shergold estate sat amid that mountain idyll, where purple mountains met crystalline waters; a vision of white columns and broad, gentle steps that even outshone Sanc Castle in splendor.

Sabrina Peacecraft alighted from her car by the fountain, suddenly self-conscious in everyday clothes, this was no formal visit, but the opulence made her wish she had dressed the part.

To think that Eric lived alone in such an extravagant estate.

Of course, being unmarried, he surely employed several live-in servants, but even accounting for that, the grandeur seemed excessive.

“Still, I have to know,” she whispered, bracing herself.

She had come for answers. Until recently she had believed the Romefeller Foundation had covered the Kingdom’s staggering reparations. In truth they had been paid, in full, from the personal fortune of the Shergold family, and no invoice had ever reached the Sanc Kingdom.

The moment Eric Shergold met her at the door she blurted, "Why would you do such a thing?"

To her surprise he wore casual slacks and an open collar, his informality eased her nerves.

"Oh, please, think nothing of it," he laughed, as though brushing away a child's concern.

His hospitality was so disarming she almost believed she shouldn't worry about a debt measured in kingdoms.

"Caught me, have you?" he said with a schoolboy grin while guiding her to the drawing room.

All the way she tried to explain that, grateful as she was, the sum was far too large to pass off as charity; she had no means to repay him. Settling onto a sofa, Eric swept the fringe from his brow and answered with the same mild smile.

"It wasn't a donation... Think of it as an advance investment in your country."

Sabrina, seated opposite, fixed him with a narrow, almost accusatory stare.

"Investment?"

"Exactly. The Sanc Kingdom is vital to the world's future. I knew that from the instant I first saw you, Princess."

He maintained his smile as he continued in a tone meant to enlighten her.

"Right now, everyone clamors for war, whole nations have perished to feed that hunger. Today no one listens to the voice of peace. But tomorrow might be different. It must be. So, the Sanc Kingdom has to survive until that tomorrow."

Sabrina sighed, the weight of his insight settling over her.

"We weren't fighting the Alliance," she murmured, "we were fighting the age itself."

Eric nodded, admiring her clarity.

"An unbeatable foe, yes, but glorious all the same. You and yours shine so brightly I had to invest, however modestly, in that hope."

"Do you truly believe an age of peace will come?"

"If we believe, it will. Yet peace is as fragile as spun glass; drop it, and it shatters. Keep it safe in your heart, that, Princess, is your mission."

Convincing her to leave had exhausted him. Rolling his shoulders, Eric returned to the drawing room,

"You look spent, Eric," teased Cinquant Khushrenada, now lounging where Sabrina had sat.

"Easy for you to say," Eric groaned, collapsing onto the sofa. "If you were eavesdropping, you could've helped."

"Such boorishness would shame the Khushrenada name."

"Boorishness? You have such peculiar sensibilities."

He filled two Baccarat tumblers with amber Scotch and handed one over.

"A toast."

"Ah, good idea..."

Glasses lifted to eye level.

"To the future of the Sanc Kingdom," said one.

"To peace," answered the other.

They drank it down. Cinquant studied the empty crystal.

"Peace as delicate glass... Quite poetic for a man who usually only courts profit."

"Didn't sound like praise," Eric grumbled.

"Because it isn't. You should listen to your own heart more honestly."

The intricate Baccarat crystal cut was both delicate and bold, refracting the room's light into complex, brilliant patterns.

Cinquant held up the glass, watching its prismatic display as he continued quietly.

"Transparent, fragile things are beautiful because they capture people's hearts, rather like the Princess herself. I thought you might say as much."

Eric's cheeks flushed the faintest shade of red.

"Wh-What are you implying?"

"Your 'investment' had motives beyond finance, I suspect."

"Now hold on--"

"Bull's-eye, then."

"Keep this up and I'll get angry!"

Eric splashed another measure into his own glass. Cinquant smirked.

"So? Did Cinderella like her glass slippers?"

Eric answered only by drinking, silent and steady. He was fifteen years her senior; what chance had a middle-aged man with so delicate an infatuation? Everyone knew the prince who brought the slipper rode a white horse and wore a crown. Reading his mind, Cinquant chuckled.

"Oh, don't fret. In an old film called Sabrina, Audrey Hepburn ends up with Humphrey Bogart, not the young pretty boy."

Eric said nothing more, and the Scotch kept disappearing.

*

Back in Sherwood Forest, a new engineer had joined the crew, a willowy beauty who once designed fire-control systems for the rebellion. She swept through the dock in a lab coat and flowing hair, issuing crisp orders as she recycled spare weapons into a fully integrated defense grid overnight.

She was, alas, as eccentric as the rest.

"Call me Sorcière," she said, French for witch. "Nothing deeper than that. If it helps, think of me as a genius."

Within a month she unveiled five massive new heavy tanks. Her sense for naming things was... *unique*. She christened the model Jack-o'-Lantern, after the grinning pumpkins of Halloween. Inevitably the crew dubbed them the Pumpkin Tank Squadron.

One evening Katerina invited Sorcière to the communal showers, only to be brusquely refused. When she asked again, Sorcière whipped off her long wig to reveal stiff, cropped hair.

"I am unquestionably male, thank you very much. Cross-dressing is merely a hobby of mine."

With that he stalked away. One day this Sorcière would become Doktor S, designer of the Prometheus and Heavyarms, proof that his naming flair never dulled.

Katerina, inspecting the finished tanks, clapped her hands in delight.

"They're wonderful, pumpkin tanks forged by a witch!"

In her excitement she threw her arms around a blushing Marticus.

"Then tonight I'm Cendrillon, Cinderella!"

"Uh, well--" Marticus stammered.

"And this spell won't end at midnight!"

"Meow," agreed the Wyvern's AI-cat Sam, over the comm.

Releasing Marticus, Katerina turned to the gathered outlaws and declared.

"Come, my friends, time for another evening ball. An endless waltz!"

Her smile blazed brighter than ever against the moon-lit trees.



Rhapsody of Quiet Despair
Peacecraft File.5

“War is a painful state of emergency in which one presses a claim of justice by force of arms.”

—Immanuel Kant
Toward Perpetual Peace

AC-146 MAY 25

Aram Khachaturian’s *Masquerade* suite opens with a magnificent waltz, beautiful, seductive, yet suffused with melancholy. Its phrases call up the masks worn at the ancient Carnival of Venice on the Adriatic; noble, yes, but shadowed by loneliness.

Sabrina Peacecraft had played that waltz on the piano often in childhood, before Sam came into her life. In a dim room that seemed to choke the breath from her lungs, she poured herself into the keys to drown a solitude that might otherwise have devoured her.

Looking back, she realized that even then she wore a mask of her own.

They called her the cloistered lady, but the title was far from true. Sabrina’s heart forever strained after freedom, desperate to burst across boundless plains and up into an infinite sky. The more she forced herself into prim, ladylike manners, the more her spirited, tomboy nature fought to surface. Yet she hid that true self behind a mask of modest, docile grace.

Why? Even she couldn’t say for certain. Because it felt natural? Because everyone expected it of the kingdom’s princess? One could tack on reasons by the dozen. Whatever the logic, a sense of mission surely pulsed beneath it all.

Perhaps as recoil from that mask, Sabrina’s dreams always cast her as someone else entirely, galloping horses through meadows, banking twin-engine planes over cloudbanks, even drifting through space in an astrosuit. Some nights she became a warrior on a battlefield roaring with flame, life trading blows at the knife-edge of death. On waking she labeled those scenes “nightmares,” yet the self who lived them had felt... fulfilled.

She dreams like that again tonight. Surfacing from REM sleep, she still hears that waltz, haunting and repeated. And suddenly she sees it: the whole chain of dreams mirrors the reality of her twin sister Katerina.

The thought leaves her in a strange, wordless daze.

Do I truly exist at all?

Her presence feels thin, hollow, uncertain, akin to the weightless disorientation she once knew inside an escape pod, hurled into vacuum when a shuttle exploded beneath her.

What if the "real" me is only a dream that Katerina is having?

It echoes the Chinese parable told by Zhuang Zhou, the Butterfly Dream. A man dreams he is a butterfly, flitting free; on waking he wonders, am I the man who dreamed of being a butterfly, or the butterfly now dreaming it is a man?

A rush of yearning and jealousy bites her chest. Every desire she has ever nursed, every freedom she has craved, has taken flesh in Katerina. Against that open smile and hope-lit gaze she can never win. The soul that burns so bright and brave dazzles her, makes her want to shield her eyes. That was the plain truth when she first met her twin.

Now, in the present, Sabrina is passing herself off as "Katerina." Seated before a vanity mirror, she studies her face and faces the weight of the lie. No matter how hard she imitates her sister, she cannot summon that smile, cannot rinse the melancholy from these eyes.

"I... can never be the real Katerina."

For the first time in her life she paints a faint rouge on her thin lips. The Masquerade has already begun.

*

When Katerina Peacecraft sorties in the Wyvern, she dons an elegant dress uniform and a white helmet-mask that covers her eyes, introducing herself as "Six Merquise."

A dashing prince in disguise. The idea owes nothing to the cross-dressing engineer Sorcière; Katerina simply feels that a gender-free persona suits the battlefield.

Fastening the mask, she hums in a whisper, "Somewhere over the rainbow..."

Judy Garland's lullaby steadies her nerves, a tune Sabrina once taught her.

"I'm off now, Sabrina."

The words float toward her beloved sister inside her mind.

Katerina's own recurring dreams cast her as the cloistered lady: poised, gentle, radiant, every motion a natural grace. Even as that dream self chafed at the confinement, waking Katerina found herself yearning for such ideal womanhood. She once invited Heero Yuy to dance, awkwardly copying her sister's speech; she tried negotiating with the rebels in Sabrina's refined cadence. Each attempt left her steeped in

self-loathing. No matter the arena, smart dress, kindness of heart, breadth of learning, command of music, art, letters, even the effortless sparkle of sipping tea and nibbling a cookie, she could never match her perfect sister.

Thus she is grateful from her core that Sabrina now plays "Katerina Peacecraft" for the world. Beneath that gratitude lies a sliver of guilt: that the sister she can never equal wears the same face as she.

Mask and uniform become her penance. By adopting a masculine guise, she offers contrition to the complete woman her sister embodies. In that spirit she crafts the playful alias Six Merquise. She considered "Cendrillon," Cinderella in French, but judged the name too close to the kingdom's princess and to her foster family, the Darlian line.

The surname "Merquise" drew upon historical roots, derived from the ancient Frankish title "margrave," evoking the image of a military leader charged with protecting the kingdom's frontier. As for "Six," despite its superficial similarity in pronunciation, it wasn't intended as a shortened form of "sister." Instead, it came directly from the French word for the number following "cinq," meaning "five." Thus, her chosen name signified a sixth option, an alternative that lay beyond the "Fifth Kingdom," beyond Sanc itself, and into uncharted territory.

Later, Milliardo Peacecraft will style himself Zechs Merquise, swapping six into German sechs and refining it to Zechs.

Tonight, Six Merquise's Wyvern lifts from Sherwood Forest with five brand-new heavy tanks, Jack-o'-Lanterns, in tow, bound for a defensive action along the frontier: a broad plain near Lake Lerna, northwest in the interior. The river flowing from that lake to the Baltic marks the very border they must hold.

*

The United Earth Sphere Alliance Forces had never intended to honor the ceasefire.

The ground forces, in particular, were withdrawing with the sour conviction that they had not been beaten; unlike the navy, they had not spilled enough blood. Strip away lofty rhetoric and war still runs on hatred and envy, and the only cure, even in a minor skirmish, is to taste victory at least once.

That was what every tank division commander craved. Possessing the strength to win yet ordered to slink home untested was an insult they could not swallow. So when Hydra Company radioed that Sanc Kingdom

forces were pursuing their rear, headquarters seized the excuse. They re-formed a sizeable contingent and swung back toward the border.

No strategic goal, the thinnest of fabricated pretexts, it did not matter. If a battlefield existed, they would rekindle the fight.

The move echoed an old gambit nicknamed "Patton's Stone Soup." During World War II, General George Patton had wanted to drive his armored corps deep into enemy territory. Denied permission, he sent a token recon unit forward; when it drew fire he dispatched a rescue group, then another, swelling the "relief" until the whole army was over the line.

The name itself harks back to the Portuguese folk tale of Stone Soup: a hungry traveler borrows a pot, drops in a roadside pebble, and one ingredient at a time wheedles the household into providing salt, vegetables, even meat, until a feast is bubbling.

Alliance commanders required no more than a pebble of provocation; once the "pot" was set on the fire, they believed the rest of the ingredients, and the rich broth of victory, would follow.

Air Force coordination was scrapped from the outset. The Wyvern carried an onboard EMP generator; one burst would turn friendly aircraft into tumbling scrap. Instead, more than two hundred main battle tanks thundered toward the border alone. Once they punched through, infantry would stream in behind.

No matter how fast the Wyvern flew, a curtain of flak could still swat it down, or so the officers assured themselves. Tanks would not crash if the EMP fired; and even with comms jammed, each gunner could simply blaze away.

Numbers guaranteed victory. That, to them, was battlefield doctrine. They expected an easy win.

Against this juggernaut, the outlaws of Sherwood Forest could field barely one-twentieth the strength.

Word of the approaching horde came from the quantum computer Sam, and the dock technicians could not hide their alarm.

"We're really supposed to beat that?" muttered Mike Howard.

"We'll muddle through somehow..." came the languid answer from Marticus Rex, the operation's chief strategist. "One way or another it always ends up as 'somehow.'"

He shrugged.

He was responsible for both the plan and its execution, yet even his smile left people unsure whether it masked confidence or confusion.

"We've got a two-headed dragon and a squad of pumpkin tanks. We'll be fine. Well, most likely."

The answer satisfied no one.

The technicians were asking "Will we be okay?" precisely because they felt there was an overwhelming disparity in forces, yet his response completely failed to understand the intent of their question.

His attitude made it impossible to judge whether he was confident or not.

"Hmph, that tells us nothing," scoffed D.D.

Sorcière, watching soldiers clamber into his freshly built Jack-o'-Lanterns, added quietly,

"And it won't ease the nerves of the men who have to stand in front."

"Sam scrubs the unknowns," Marticus said with a sly grin, "and Six Merquise is on the stick. The rest is down to you geniuses."

Grumbles rippled through the crew. The youngest gunner, Chick Pargan, voiced what many thought.

"Everyone's worried because you made a rookie like me the gunner. I've never seen real combat!"

"You call yourself 'kid,' so you stay a Chick," Marticus teased. "Learn a little from Six Merquise."

"We may be the same age, but that pilot's in a league of their own!"

Marticus nodded, then locked eyes with him.

"True, but try believing in yourself for once. Your gunnery sims top the whole Forest."

He clapped the youth's shoulder, gentle and firm, a moment that would set Pargan on a winding fate: adviser to Marticus when he became king, witness to that king's end, butler to the exiled Darlian family, and guardian to Princess Relena in the restored kingdom.

Chick's life would forever be buffeted by the Peacecrafts, Katerina, Marticus, Relena, yet never once, in all his years, would Chick Pargan call that life unfortunate; he would remember it as rich beyond measure. And tonight's sortie was the first thread of that tapestry.

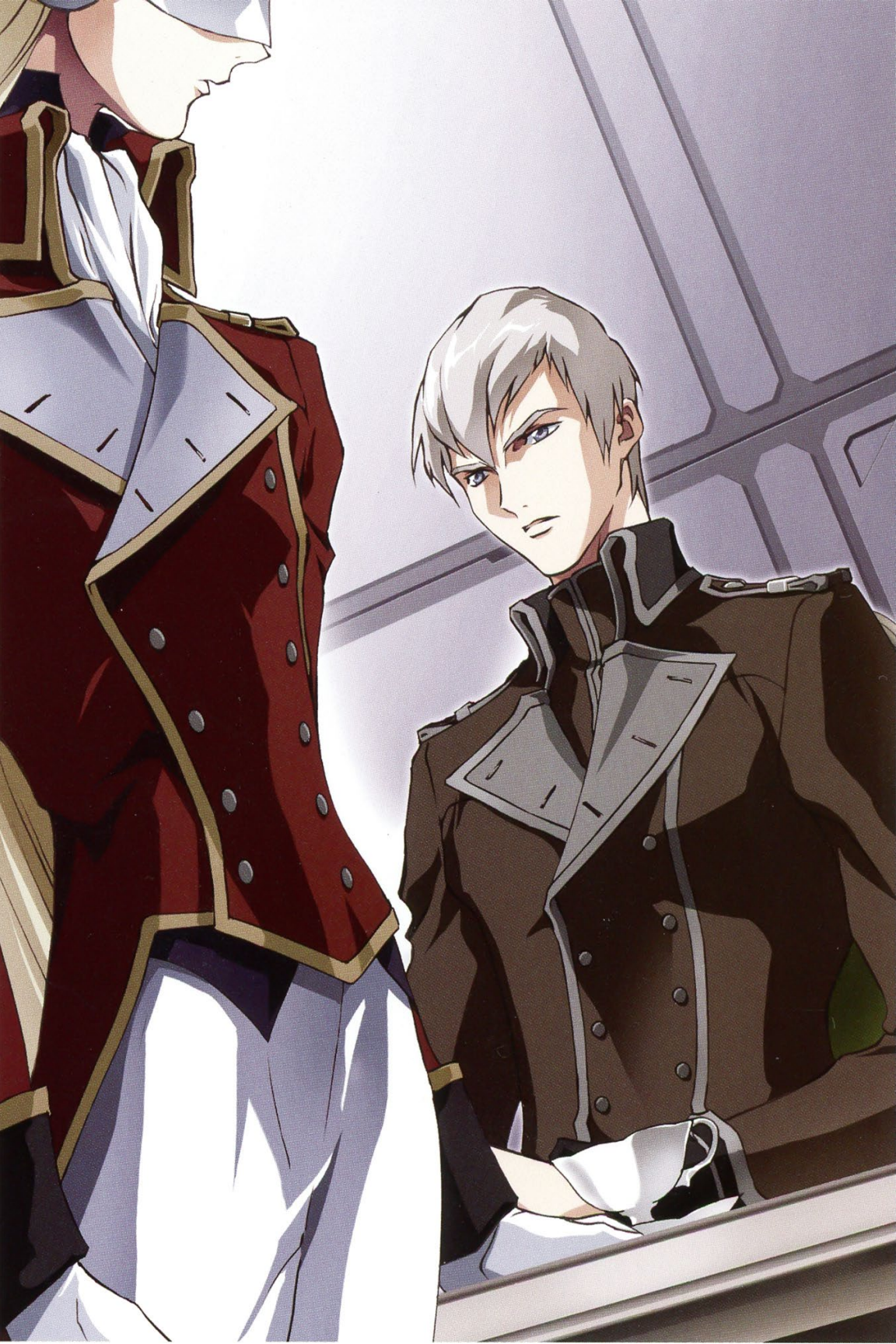
*

A few hours earlier, during afternoon tea, Katerina Peacecraft, already Six Merquise in her mind, had reviewed Marticus's audacious plan over fine china. She sipped tea, he coffee. When he finished, she let out a soft laugh.

"Delightful," she said.

"Relieved to hear it," Marticus exhaled. "I worried the burden might fall too heavily on you."

"Compared with what my sister shoulders? This is nothing."



She thought of Sabrina, destined to bear the kingdom's full weight for generations, while her own defensive sector, though wide, was temporary. With that she fastened the gleaming helmet-mask.

"Then I leave it to you, Katerina, "

"Six, if you please."

"Pardon?"

"From now on, call me Six Merquise."

Marticus hesitated, then asked the question at the heart of his turmoil.

"Are you truly giving up the title of Princess?"

"Yes!" Six answered, bright as dawn.

He opened his mouth, courage rising.

"In that case, there is something in my heart I can't cage any longer. May I speak it?"

She had sensed this for some time; his every gesture and turn of phrase dripped affection, and even his plan was steeped in that special feeling.

Six raised a gloved hand, palm forward, a silent stop.

"Right now, I'm a soldier. Tactical counsel, yes; anything else hampers the fight."

Adjusting the collar of her dress uniform, she added, "Forgive the cold shoulder, but take it as proof of my resolve."

Marticus snapped a salute, masking pain behind the neutral face of a staff officer.

"Understood."

He believed in the plan he had crafted, yet in himself he felt only defeat. That flicker of uncertainty, seen and unseen, would color every movement he made, sending ripples of confusion through the ranks.

*

As the sun slipped beneath the western rim of Lake Lerna, five Jack-o'-Lantern tanks settled into firing positions along the shore.

A moment later the operations command truck, Marticus's mobile headquarters, pulled up, fashionably late.

He wasted no time, the fifteen soldiers of the detachment piled inside, and the briefing began.

The truck was never meant to hold fifteen people; with everyone standing, elbows and knees jostled in the cramped aisle.

Yet the one truly comfortable seat, the operations officer's chair, was already occupied. Marticus's dog and closest confidant, Spade, lounged there imperiously.

The pup had grown since their last campaign; he could no longer be called a puppy.

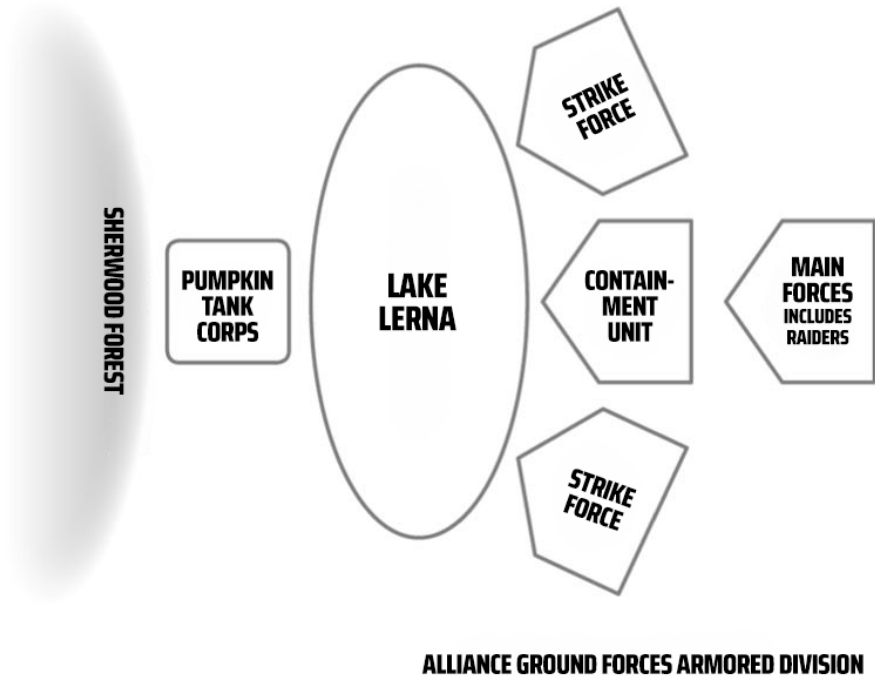
Marticus took up a spot before the mission monitor, idly scratching Spade's ears and exchanging playful nudges as he spoke with disarming ease.

"The Alliance formation is split into four groups, about fifty tanks each," he began. "Figure on a fixing force front and center on the eastern bank, the main body with its mobile reserve behind them, and strike forces up on the northeast and southeast flanks."

A fixing force pins our main strength in place; the strike forces wait for our line to weaken in that slog, then charge in from both sides.

The mobile reserve, with speed on its side, acts as a roving reinforcement: it can dash straight past our spearhead to sow chaos in the rear, cut supply lines, block retreats, whatever's needed.

Marticus projected an outline of Lake Lerna, an oblong blue eye, onto the screen and placed icons for each enemy group.



The layout echoed the Soviet "Deep Battle" doctrine of armored warfare.

“Classic textbook deployment,” he mused, and because he could never resist, the units appeared as five-sided shogi pieces on the display.

“Fixing force is the rook, strike forces the knights, the mobile reserve the dragon-horse, or so I picture it.”

“I’m no shogi expert,” one soldier ventured, “but doesn’t that mean we’re already checkmated?”

“Exactly,” Marticus’s grin flashed; he punctuated it with a devil-may-care wink. “But there’s an old saying from that island nation: A shogi game without pawns is a losing game.”

The explanation still made precious little sense.

“Given the Pumpkin Corps’ limited numbers,” boomed Staff Sergeant Sedichi, a burly veteran of countless ground actions, “shouldn’t we spread out to dilute their fire?”

Among the rebels, Sedichi was the steadiest hand in a tank fight, naval battles had offered him no stage, but on land he was indispensable.

(In years to come, his daughter would take the name Artemis, rise as a rebel commander, and duel Treize’s Specials to the death.)

“Nope. Scatter and they’ll swat us piecemeal, right, partner?” Marticus turned to his canine sounding board.

Spade answered with a soft woof, bobbing his head.

“Real war isn’t chess or shogi,” Marticus went on. “There’s no turn order where you politely wait for the other side to move. Once the shooting starts, every ounce of firepower hits the board at once.”

Audacious words, considering he had just laid out the battlefield like a board game.

“Can we really trust an ops officer like this?” Sedichi wondered.

Unperturbed by the doubt in the room, Marticus pressed ahead.

“The trick here is to mass our fire and punch straight through.”

On the map he parked the five Jack-o’-Lanterns on the lake’s western edge and drew a bold arrow knifing across the water toward the Alliance tanks beyond.

“Crush the fixing force first, roll right on into the main body, check.”

He finished outlining the scheme, reckless enough to qualify as a stratagem.

“Will it really go that smoothly?” asked Chick, the ever-nervous private.

“That’s where our very own Goddess of Victory struts her stuff. In a few hours she’ll show up with the enemy’s whole army in tow. Nothing to worry about... probably.”

“The probably part is what worries me,” Chick muttered.

History would crown Marticus Rex an accomplished strategist, yet contemporaries also swore he had a nasty habit of ending every reassurance with a remark that set teeth on edge.

It may have been a vice he acquired right around this time.

AC-146 MAY 26

The stroke of midnight came and went, yet the magic held fast.

Masked and dressed in a handsome officer's uniform, the bewitching Six Merquise drew the Alliance Army's armored division exactly where she wanted it, east of Lake Lerna, where the full moon laid a silver path across the water.

Her Wyvern skimmed the very edge of the tanks' anti-aircraft envelope, taunting them with impunity while refusing to fire a single shot.

From the ground it looked less like a twin-headed dragon of polished silver than a haughty house cat that would never deign to cuddle with strangers, aerial mischief at its finest.

The moment the armored column rumbled onto the lakeshore, the Wyvern knifed downward and began a nap-of-the-earth run over the water.

Lowering the guns' elevation robbed the tanks of rear-arc coverage, and with each second the target slipped farther beyond their effective range until they had to cease fire.

Keeping to the oval shoreline, the Wyvern traced a blistering circuit around the lake.

Inside the cockpit Six spotted the Jack-o'-Lantern heavy tanks waiting on the western bank.

They sat just beyond the Alliance guns' maximum reach, close enough to act, too far to be hit.

"This is Six Merquise!"

She flicked the transmit switch, mischief dancing in her voice.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Pumpkin Tanks, your guests have arrived for the ball!"

"Meow," chirped Sam.

An immediate response came back.

"King of Spades here!"

The reply came from Marticus Rex.

He had swapped the presumptuous Rex for King, then borrowed his dog's name for the rest.

"Roger that, Six Merquise. Enter Free Program when ready!"

"Leave it to me! We'll open with a double axel, triple loop, double Lutz, then finish on a quad jump, sound good?"

"Fine, but don't climb too high... Using Scheherazade for the music?"

“No. Masquerade! Khachaturian!”
Her eyes flashed behind the mask.
“Meow meow,” Sam trilled.
“Thanks, Sam. Let’s dance.”

The Wyvern slid to the lake’s center and settled, nose up, hovering upright like a figure skater poised at the edge of a flawless rink of moonlit glass.

Silence wrapped the water.

The white fuselage gleamed in the mirror-still surface, an eerie, perfect reflection that stole even the tank crews’ breath.

Then music spilled from the Wyvern’s external speakers, a resplendent waltz.

With it the machine glided forward, taking a sweeping run, climbed a few dozen meters, and spun two full counter-clockwise rotations: a double axel writ in air.

Had the lake been frozen, the illusion would have been complete.

“What is she playing at?” muttered one gunner.

Side thrusters flared; the Wyvern banked outward and reeled off a triple counter-clockwise jump, then rolled onto its back, skimmed forward with one wingtip kissing the water, popped straight up again, and twirled twice clockwise.

“No way...”

Awareness spread, slow but inexorable, through the crews.

A final soaring leap, four full spins.

“Are... are we being mocked?”

The rear-area commander’s roar cracked across the net.

“Quit gawking! Open fire, now!”

The lead tank had already loosed its shell.

An avalanche followed, fury answering ridicule.

Units that had been too far back now surged to the shoreline, vomiting shells across the water; the stately waltz was drowned beneath the thunder of guns.

Smoke, spray, and shockwaves swallowed sight and sound.

Mist veiled the full moon, and a pale rainbow ring, a moonbow, formed around it.

All one hundred fifty tanks, fixing force and strike wings alike, ended up axle-to-axle in a single, jagged line along the eastern shore.

Through that unbroken barrage the Wyvern danced, accelerating, braking, leaping, corkscrewing, every motion an elegant taunt.

Not a single round struck home.

She had read the cadence of the guns, and the tanks' deadliest flaw, turret lag, was laid bare.

When a target darts from lateral to vertical in an instant, slow-traversing guns bleed accuracy.

It was the failing that would one day let mobile suits wrest the crown from armored divisions.

Upgrades came, dual-turret speed guns, homing-missile carriers, but limited ammunition and poor versatility left tanks helpless before the times.

The barrage faltered.

Roughly fifty vehicles had bled dry their magazines; orders snapped for them to swap out with the reserve.

Any break in the wall of shells opened an escape route for the Wyvern, and the tanks had to advance to the water's edge to keep a low-flying target in sight.

Fresh fire was to wait until the smoke cleared, no more wasting shells.

Stillness flowed back across the lake.

If one strained, perhaps the hiss of the Wyvern's thrusters, or that infuriating waltz, might return, the crews thought.

But the only sounds were the clank of replacement tracks behind them and the engines of their neighbors.

Some felt a prickling dread.

Cold sweat traced spines.

A breeze swept the water; the smoke curtain tore away.

The Wyvern was gone.

The moonbow yet circled the lunar disk.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for attending tonight's masquerade," came a voice from within the luminescent halo.

The Wyvern was already high overhead.

"We now present our closing finale."

The words were gentle, dreamlike, an invitation to fantasy.

Masked, Six Merquise addressed Sam.

"Showtime, my friend..."

"Meow."

"It's all right. Trust me."

She began to sing.

"Somewhere over the rainbow—"

The crystalline notes were meant to steady her own heart, yet to the Alliance crews they were a bewitching, unsettling requiem.

The Wyvern thrust out its manipulators; the beam sabers mounted there extended to full, shimmering length.

Then it folded its wings, dropped into a steep dive, and streaked for the one hundred fifty tanks lined up on the eastern shore of Lake Lerna.

“Don’t you dare miss this time, steady your aim!!”

The armored division commander bellowed the order to every crewman.

The gunners braced, expecting another bout of that erratic aerial dance. He was sure the enemy’s goal was to bleed the tanks dry of shells; that assumption proved fatal.

“Take careful aim” cost them the one fleeting chance they ever had.

The Wyvern’s dive became a sudden level sprint. It carved a vast counter-clockwise oval, an around-pylon turn, and dropped to tank-height.

Then, gliding along the southern flank of the line, its beam sabers flashed.

Turrets split open one after another.

In scarcely half a minute every last one of the one hundred and fifty guns lay sheared away.

The Wyvern moved with all the lightness of a figure skater circling the rink to collect bouquets at the end of a program.

Edges bitten off by saber heat warped grotesquely; if a round were fired now it would detonate inside the hull.

Safety interlocks slammed shut and the entire tank corps fell silent.

That moment was exactly what Marticus had planned.

“Since we have to fight a war,” he’d told Six before the operation began, “let’s make it something dazzling rather than grimy.”

A glamorous war, he might be the first in human history to coin the notion.

The Wyvern’s flashy aerobatics had been nothing but overture to this turret-cleaving checkmate.

His lone worry had been that Six or the Wyvern might take a hit, yet their speed and agility carried them through unscathed.

Years later, some of the soldiers who watched that display would rise to senior positions in weapons development; the episode made them early supporters of the first mobile suit, the Tallgeese.

Perhaps it became a formative experience that made them realize their own powerlessness, a scene burned into their minds.

Moments later five Jack-o’-Lantern heavy tanks surfaced from Lake Lerna. Amphibious drive was among their special traits.

A crackly loud-hailer carried Chick Pagan's voice from the lead vehicle. "Attention, the fifteen tanks ahead. Please dismount calmly and clear the road, we'll be coming straight through."

His tone was leisurely, devoid of malice.

One Alliance crew, still boiling with rage, raked the speaker with machine-gun fire at point-blank range; the rounds bounced off the Jack-o'-Lantern's armor without a scratch.

The tank's other signature feature was a titanium-reinforced composite shell.

Chick called again, unfazed.

"Very well, to save time we'll commence firing. Life is precious, so please evacuate quickly."

No one moved.

"As expected," he sighed. "Allow us a small demonstration, then decide."

All five turrets slewed a full 180 degrees, pointing backward across the lake, and fired simultaneously.

Five supersonic shells ripped through the night, sucking columns of water skyward, each leaving a thick spiral of spray like a spinning tornado.

They behaved more like rockets than tank rounds, grotesquely extended range, stupendous impact.

The blasts hammered the far shore, shredding earth and armor alike.

These new heavies had always could have opened with such a strike; the fact they hadn't was a stinging indictment of the Alliance's impotence.

Turrets swiveling forward again, Chick spoke once more, gentle as ever.

"Apologies for the noise. As you've seen, please dismount within nine hundred seconds."

Fifteen minutes of grace, but they needed none.

Hatches flew open; crews scrambled out and fled. Beside the fifteen in front, another forty soldiers, twenty tanks to either side, bolted as well.

Such was the terror the Jack-o'-Lanterns inspired.

The five "Pumpkin Tanks" demolished the abandoned vehicles blocking their path and rolled on toward the main body.

The battle's outcome was already fixed.

The last fifty Alliance tanks still had their turrets, but their magazines were empty, and now the Wyvern drifted down overhead in a shimmer of light, drawing an even sharper line between victory and defeat.

The Alliance Ground Forces surrendered.

Not a single combatant on either side lay dead or wounded, an utterly unrivaled, perfect triumph.

The glamorous war had blossomed at last.

Inside the cockpit, Six Merquise slipped off her mask.

Her long hair clung, damp with clean, triumphant sweat.

"We did it, Sam..."

"Meow."

"Thank you... I mean that."

"Meow meow."

Sam mewed softly, as though congratulating the girl who, if only for a moment, had returned to being Katerina.

*

Heero Yuy found himself at the Khushrenada family's villa in the Sanc Kingdom, forced into the unlikely task of entertaining Sam the cat.

"Meow, miaow."

Heero sighed deeply.

This peculiar circumstance had started about an hour earlier.

In the dead of night, Sabrina had urgently summoned him, thrusting Sam unceremoniously into his arms.

"Why me?"

"I need you to remain yourself, Professor."

She offered no real explanation, nothing to clarify her words.

Yet as Heero studied Sabrina's face, he noticed she wore faint traces of makeup, hinting at a decision burdened by heavy contemplation.

"Rather than tying yourself to the Peacecrafts, I hope you'll follow your own path, Mr. Heero."

Her eyes brimmed with sorrow.

Heero, sensing nothing more could be said, simply turned and walked down the darkened street with Sam at his side.

Thankfully, the threat of assassins no longer hung over him.

Within the borders of the Sanc Kingdom, he was supposedly safe, an assurance gained from the successful signing of the ceasefire treaty.

Initially, he had considered Marquis Weridge's residence, but given its distance, he ultimately decided to return to Cinquant's house where he was staying.

Heero was by nature dedicated to fulfilling any task he was given with utmost sincerity.

Hence, he was earnestly trying his hardest to entertain Sam.

But the brightly-colored, feather-and-fur cat toys were utterly useless against this obstinately indifferent feline.

Sam, capricious and cranky, showed no interest, in fact, he refused even to glance their way.

"You're mistaken!"

"Meow."

"As a cat, you're perfectly within your rights to be a utilitarian or consequentialist."

"Mew..."

"But only humans can control instincts with reason! The freedom animals possess to seek satisfaction and pleasure is fundamentally different from the freedom humans have to make conscious decisions!"

"Fwaaaah," Sam let out an enormous yawn.

Cinquant, overhearing this exchange, interrupted with a sardonic chuckle.

"How disappointing that someone as intelligent as you is struggling so much with a mere cat. It's honestly depressing just watching you."

"Then take over. I've never been suited for animal care, even as a child."

"Unfortunately, unlike you, I don't speak cat."

"I don't either," Heero started to say but stopped himself.

Cinquant was clearly mocking him.

Heero changed the topic. "By the way, I heard rumors that you're funding Sherwood Forest."

"Oh? Surprising. Did Princess Sabrina tell you that?"

"So it's true?"

Cinquant answered unapologetically. "Yes. The Khushrenada family is indeed providing funding. We consider it an immense honor."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

"As a deterrent, to eliminate conflict on Earth. They alone possess the strength to stand against the United Earth Sphere Alliance."

"So you sacrifice a few for the greatest happiness of the many?"

"It's their own will, their own chosen action. That act holds moral value. So long as the motivation and the goal are to achieve peace, there's nothing objectionable about it. Even Immanuel Kant himself could hardly deny the virtue of such actions."

Certainly, Kant allowed for civilian militias to maintain standing armies as self-defense measures, provided they acted out of duty-bound morality and pursued noble purposes.

"Yet Katarina deceives herself. I refuse to watch my student suffer any further."

"I agree on that point. However, is there anyone else who could fill her shoes? Certainly not myself, nor you, I would imagine."

On the chaise, Sam stretched out his front and hind legs, baring his defenseless belly, and began drifting into sleep. Cinquant continued.

"The opponents the princesses of the Sanc Kingdom fight against aren't merely the Alliance. It's the era itself, or perhaps the destiny imposed upon them."

"Sabrina and Katarina are not alike."

"Oh?" Cinquant raised an eyebrow. "And how exactly do you think they're different?"

"Their perceptions of space-time vectors are completely opposed," Heero explained. "Sabrina is pessimistic when it comes to space, yet she remains optimistic about time."

Sam's eyes were closed, but his ears perked slightly. The mention of Sabrina's name seemed to stir something in him.

"Katarina, on the other hand, is optimistic about space but pessimistic regarding time."

"Marvelous," Cinquant chuckled softly. "But to my ears, it still sounds like catspeak."

Heero fell silent, carefully weighing his words.

Perhaps the difference could be compared to farmers and hunters.

Farmers always carry anxiety about the land right before them, forever fearful of storms, drought, and scorching sun. Yet, despite their fears, they trust that one day their seeds will sprout, blossom, and bear fruit.

Hunters, meanwhile, lose patience when prey fails to appear. They believe firmly that beyond the distant hills lies fresh game, and even if disappointed, they continue pushing toward the next horizon, convinced it must offer new opportunities.

Each holds both optimism and pessimism simultaneously, just toward different things.

Heero was about to explain further, but Cinquant read his expression perfectly and cut him off.

"Ah, spare me the explanation... Essentially, what you're saying is that they're each fighting in their own distinct ways, correct?"

"...I have no objections to putting it that way."

"Then let me ask you: when does your own battle begin? By that standard, those princesses are far stronger, and far braver, than you."

"My battle?"

"Every human being is constantly fighting something. That doesn't necessarily mean killing each other."



Sam rolled over sleepily.

"My own battle... My own way of living..."

Heero silently repeated Cinquant's question over and over again, recalling Sabrina's words, "Professor, please walk your own path."

"Perhaps you're right... Even persistently denying war can become its own kind of battle."

"I too will soon head to my own battlefield... My eternal friend, have you discovered yours?"

Heero lifted his head and met Cinquant's gaze, his eyes clear and steady.

"Yes... I think it's finally becoming clear to me."

"That's good. Learning how to speak cat can wait until after you return from your own battle."

Sam was now sound asleep.

The conversation between Heero and Cinquant ended there.

When next they met, they would do so as enemies, but that would be a tale for another time.

In addition, Cinquant's daughter Angelina would eventually marry Heero Yuy's nephew, Ein, and from that union would come Treize Khushrenada, the hero who would shape history.

But let us speak no more of that for now...

*

Responding to Sabrina Peacecraft's urgent summons, Eric Shergold arrived at Sanc Kingdom Castle.

He had been informed it was a matter of great importance.

"I apologize for calling you out so late at night... But there was something I absolutely had to speak with you about, Eric."

"Is Sam asleep? I haven't greeted him properly yet."

Sam had grown fond of Eric, and the two shared a customary greeting, touching the tips of their noses together.

"I've left him with Professor Heero tonight. The matter I wish to discuss is very serious, and I didn't want any distractions."

"Oh, I see..."

Eric felt a pang of disappointment but wondered what could possibly be so critical that she would entrust her beloved Sam to someone else. As far as he could recall, the only matter of comparable urgency was when they had negotiated the ceasefire treaty with the Alliance.

Sabrina's expression was deeply troubled.

"What's happened?" he gently inquired.

“Actually...” she hesitated, trailing off.

Clearly, something extraordinary had occurred. Eric adopted a more serious demeanor.

“Please, tell me. Whatever it is, if I can help, you have only to ask.”

“Yes...”

Her eyes were glistening now.

“It’s Father and Mother...”

Those few words alone were enough to confirm Eric’s fears.

Sabrina and Katarina’s parents had been bedridden for some time. Their long period of captivity had ravaged their elderly bodies. Even after the monarchy had been restored in the Sanc Kingdom, they hadn’t appeared before the public.

Through her quiet sobs, Sabrina relayed what the doctors had said: that their parents had mere days left to live.

“Then we’ll find another doctor immediately. I apologize for my bluntness, but this kingdom’s medical standards are somewhat inferior to those of other nations.”

“Yes... Thank you...”

Eric promptly contacted his secretary, instructing him to secure the finest medical specialists available.

“Eric, please listen.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve come to realize it’s time I prepared myself.”

“Prepared yourself? No, don’t worry. I’m sure your parents will recover, ”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I mean preparing myself, to inherit the throne as ‘Katarina Peacecraft.’”

“I see... That’s admirable—” Eric stopped himself mid-sentence.

As Sabrina closed her eyes, Eric noticed for the first time the faint shimmer of pale pink eyeshadow, a delicate touch of pearl catching the castle lights.

(It struck him suddenly that she was no longer a girl, but a woman.)

Only now, his normally oblivious self noticed Sabrina’s subtle makeup.

Sabrina opened her eyes, her gaze firm and resolute as it met Eric’s.

“And so, I have a request.”

“Anything. Whatever you need, if it’s within my power.”

Words he’d said countless times before, repeated once again.

“Please marry me.”

At first, Eric couldn’t quite comprehend what he’d just heard.

It was a phrase that, as a single man, he had never once heard directed at him.

No, it was a phrase he had imagined he would someday speak to someone else, certainly not something he expected Sabrina to say. Her words went far beyond anything he'd anticipated.

"I—I beg your pardon?"

He had no choice but to ask her to repeat herself.

Sabrina's expression was painfully serious, tears beginning to well in the corners of her eyes.

"Please marry me... I can't possibly bear the weight of this kingdom alone. Eric, I need your strength by my side."

"W-wait, hold on a moment! If it's financial support, I can provide as much as you need—but marriage, that's... I mean..."

Eric was flustered, stumbling over his words.

"Besides, you're still so young—"

"You're right," she interrupted quietly. "I understand if someone as inexperienced as myself isn't enough. And I know that I do not yet truly love you. But even so, I promise to grow, and love can be nurtured even after marriage."

"You mean... you don't love me right now?"

"No," Sabrina answered honestly, lowering her eyes. "I'm sorry."

A faint sadness crept into Eric's heart.

But when he looked into those earnest, beautiful eyes, he felt the urge to answer her sincerity in kind.

"Very well. Let's marry."

Slowly, Eric knelt before Sabrina on one knee, speaking softly.

"But please... let me be the one to propose to you properly."

Taking her slender left hand gently in his own, he softly kissed the back of it.

The shadow of anxiety lifted from Sabrina's face.

"Will you marry me?"

Saying this, Eric pretended to fumble in his pocket before gently slipping an imaginary ring onto Sabrina's delicate finger.

"There..."

"...An invisible ring?" she asked softly.

"No," he replied earnestly, "it's a king's ring, one that only fools cannot see."

Sabrina wiped away tears of joy that were on the verge of spilling, laughter bubbling gently from her lips.

"But Eric, I'm going to become a queen."

Eric rose slowly, drawing his beloved future queen tenderly into his embrace.

"I know."

Then, softly, he pressed his lips against hers, delicately painted with the faintest shade of rouge.

Rhapsody of Quiet Despair

Peacecraft File.6

"Peace is the state in which all hostilities have come to an end."

—Immanuel Kant
Toward Perpetual Peace

AC-147 SPRING

Sabrina Peacecraft was in love.

The object of her affection was Eric, the man she had married the previous June, her husband.

Yet she had not found the courage to speak these feelings aloud, to give voice to the truth that bloomed within her heart. After all, she had foolishly said, "My love might not be sufficient," when he proposed. Now, confessing her true feelings seemed unbearably embarrassing.

Following her parents' deaths, Sabrina had ascended the throne of the Peacecraft royal family, taking the regal name "Katerina." During her coronation, she announced her marriage to Eric Shergold.

Many considered the union purely political. The Sanc Kingdom had paid its reparations to the United Earth Sphere Alliance, but war compensation and reconstruction expenses necessitated external financial assistance, yet no nation responded. Usurious debts continued to mount and the kingdom teetered on bankruptcy. Hence, everyone suspected this marriage was a calculated gambit to secure salvation from the influential Shergold family within the Romefeller Foundation.

But Shergold's wealth was never destined to aid the Sanc Kingdom. Eric's substantial inheritance was bound by his late father's will: it would remain available only if Eric stayed within the Shergold lineage. Upon marrying into the Sanc Kingdom, he forfeited the entire fortune to his sole relative, Bill Maxwell. Bill, a distant Shergold cousin, was a pastor running a modest church on Space Colony L-2 V-08744, known for its poverty and multiethnic communities. The vast Shergold fortune would soon dissolve into philanthropic endeavors and the colony's philosophy of wealth redistribution.

Naturally, Eric had explained all of this before their marriage. Sabrina had smiled warmly in response.

"If it benefits those in need, then that's wonderful. Besides, please don't worry about money. It was your character that captivated me."

Their wedding was modest, unusually so for royalty and former wealth. The former king's funeral had perhaps been grander. Attendance was limited, there was no lavish reception, and the ceremony was a simple church affair. Yet this frugality highlighted the sincere determination of the royal couple, struggling but united.

The citizens accepted their queen's frugality. Sabrina dedicated herself tirelessly to untangling the diplomatic knots with neighboring countries and repairing relations with the United Earth Sphere Alliance. Eric leveraged his financial acumen to rebuild the Peacecraft estate's finances.

Through their dedicated efforts, within less than a year, the Sanc Kingdom had regained its footing as an independent nation. Significant debts remained, but provided they lived modestly and avoided further disasters, eventual repayment was feasible. Slowly, economic disparities diminished.

"Happiness" is subjective. Citizens, who bore the brunt of hardship, might hesitate to call their condition "happy." Yet no one faulted Sabrina or Eric. Seeing their dedication, the people accepted their circumstances with understanding.

A few strokes of luck blessed the Sanc Kingdom. The previously symbolic ceasefire treaty with the Alliance took effect, and troops stationed along the border withdrew. Globally, conflicts had reached a lull, bringing temporary peace.

Outlaws like Six Merquise of Sherwood Forest were freed from prolonged defensive battles. Six shed her mask and uniform, becoming Katerina Darlian once more, though she still concealed her face behind tinted glasses. Occasionally, she would venture into Sanc Kingdom's markets, always stopping by Sanc Kingdom Castle afterward. Though barred from entering, she left small bouquets at the gates bearing messages:

"Queen Katerina, thank you for saving us. --Six"

These heartfelt thanks were for her elder sister, who had bravely assumed the throne under her name. Upon receiving these flowers, Sabrina wept openly.

"No, I should thank you," she sobbed softly, grateful to her sister who had risked everything for their homeland. "It was you who truly saved Sanc Kingdom. Thank you, Six Merquise."

Around this time, Sabrina was three months pregnant. The doctor confirmed everything was progressing well. Sabrina eagerly wished to share this joyful news with Eric, but his intense workload rarely provided opportunities.

One evening, finally alone together, Eric fell into an exhausted sleep the moment his head touched the pillow. Sabrina adored his sleeping face, serene and innocent, belying their fifteen-year age difference. She smiled gently, watching him sleep. Curled at his feet was Sam, their Norwegian Forest cat, who lately favored Eric over Sabrina.

Hours later, Eric awoke, sensing Sabrina's tender gaze.

"Can't you sleep?" he murmured.

"No," she replied softly. "I don't want to sleep."

"Why not?"

"Because I wish to savor this happiness forever."

With sleepy warmth, Eric sat up and gently embraced Sabrina's slender shoulders.

"Rest assured, Your Majesty. Your happiness will endure, even in sleep."

Sabrina nodded, finally revealing her pregnancy. Eric's eyes widened in delighted surprise.

"No wonder things have been going smoothly! It's maternity luck!" he laughed.

"Maternity luck?"

"An old gambling superstition from my youth: 'pregnant women bring good fortune.' Perhaps because they are life's most precious treasure."

"I see," she chuckled softly.

"And if two fortunes converge simultaneously, miracles are bound to occur."

Sabrina smiled, reassured by his words. Sam yawned widely and gave a soft "meow," as everyone in the room basked in quiet contentment.

Yet Sabrina had still not confessed her love to Eric.

*

The ruins stretched endlessly, as far as the eye could see.

Rain fell relentlessly, an unceasing drizzle caused by the colony's malfunctioning weather system. Amid the cold downpour, he, Heero Yuy, stood mired in a hopelessness beyond rescue. He wore a raincoat, but both body and spirit were thoroughly soaked. The drops falling from his soaked hair at least spared him the trouble of wiping away tears.

"How long do we have to keep doing this?"

He murmured aloud, asking no one in particular. Naturally, there was no answer. Still a young man, his youth had already passed him by, yet he loathed himself for remaining so immature.

"Sir..."

His former student, Quinze Currant, approached, stumbling over rubble.

"I can't get anywhere near the ambassadorial shuttle's crash site," he reported breathlessly.

"I see."

By the time Heero and Quinze had arrived, the evacuation had already concluded, but it was obvious that rebuilding this devastated colony would take an unimaginable amount of time. The damage was catastrophic.

The destruction had begun when the second Earth delegation's shuttle crashed into the spaceport's main support structure, triggering an explosive chain reaction and catastrophic earthquakes that turned the area into an unrecognizable wasteland. The center of the impact was surely even worse.

Quinze clicked his tongue bitterly.

"Damn it. Those Earth bastards are gonna pin this whole thing on us."

"Yeah... probably."

Heero turned up his coat collar, ready to leave the ruins behind.

"Sorry, Quinze. I'll leave the rest to you."

"Where are you going?"

"To turn myself in to the military police."

"Wait! You know how they'll spin it! Even if we're innocent, they'll fabricate evidence and testimony to suit themselves."

"I know," Heero replied flatly. "But nothing will be solved by running away."

In truth, Heero Yuy had intended to bring the colony's desperate plight directly before the second Earth delegation, not by following proper channels, but by boldly crashing their welcome ceremony. He'd hoped to force acknowledgment of the colonists' rights as independent individuals.

"No matter how this turns out," he said, his voice firm with resolve, "I want it known that our actions had a meaningful purpose."

That was his conviction at the time.

"This needs to be addressed now, before it fades into history."

This was his attempt at practicing what one might call "universal moral philosophy," driven by his academic determination to both explore and prove his beliefs.

Heero Yuy's battle in the L-1 Colony had only just begun...

AC-147 NOVEMBER

On the twenty-seventh of that month, a princess was born to the Peacecraft family.

The birth was surprisingly smooth, without complication. Sabrina named her beloved daughter "Katerina," after the sister to whom she owed so much. By happy coincidence, the baby's birthday matched the day two years earlier when Katerina had re-entered Earth's atmosphere, bravely rallying her people to restore the kingdom from rebel occupation.

*

On that same day, a single shuttle soared away from Earth, breaking through the atmosphere and into the vastness of space. Aboard the shuttle were Katerina and Marticus.

"You know, technically this is my second trip into space," Katerina remarked. "But the first was when I was a baby, so I don't remember it at all. It feels like the first time."

Katerina, who once dreamed of becoming an astronaut, smiled delightedly at Marticus from her seat, savoring the sensation of weightlessness.

"Being freed from gravity is such an incredible feeling."

"I've experienced it several times during training, and I'm still not used to it," Marticus replied, his face pale as he desperately resisted nausea. "I think I'm more suited for duties back on Earth. Bringing Spade instead of me would've probably been more helpful."

Katerina chuckled softly, glancing sideways at the nearly tearful Marticus.

Their destination was a resource-transfer station linking Earth and the colonies, where their old comrades from "Sherwood Forest" awaited them. These outlaws had decided to relocate their base into space, anticipating the inevitable conflicts that would erupt there, despite Earth's current, fleeting peace.

—The fires smoldering on Earth would eventually ignite in space—

That was the prediction reached by the "AI Sam," analyzing comprehensive current data. He'd been programmed with very specific directives: "Conflict Resolution" and "Eliminating Warfare."



Much of this was influenced by Sabrina's peaceful ideals, as well as the final wishes of his creator, Thomas Carrant, who had died longing for peace. Though it was entirely possible to override these objectives, the outlaws had embraced "Al Sam's" peaceful ideals and set off into space willingly.

From the moment Six Merquise had removed her mask, Wyvern had been entrusted to the outlaws. Al Sam, wishing Katerina to find happiness as an ordinary girl, had expressly refused her company. Though Sam himself was surely lonely, Katerina felt even more bereft.

"Is Sam doing alright?" she asked wistfully.

"Oh, he's fine. The engineers adore him," Marticus reassured her.

Mike Howard, D.D. ("Diamond Desperado"), and Sorcière, the three engineers, never treated Wyvern merely as a weapon nor Al Sam as merely a virtual "cat." Instead, they viewed him as an irreplaceable friend and equal. They enthusiastically discussed upgrading Wyvern for space combat, even planning to construct a cruiser-class astro-vessel capable of long-distance journeys, should Al Sam require it.

Indeed, at the station awaiting their arrival, an upgraded Wyvern and a newly built cruiser-class astro-vessel awaited final testing, hence Katerina's summons.

"I wonder if maybe Sam actually prefers their company over mine," Katerina muttered.

Marticus smirked mischievously at her nervous expression.

"That might be true. There's a saying, 'Cats forget their owners after three days.'"

"Really? I've never heard that before."

"It's an old proverb from an island nation in the East. Probably unreliable."

"You're terrible, Marticus."

"Well, you laughed earlier at my nauseated expression. Consider it payback."

Katerina still looked slightly sulky.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Sam is fine."

No matter how skilled the pilot, none could outperform Katerina when piloting Wyvern. No one else could bring out the machine's true potential, such selective pilot compatibility was common among legendary machines.

Yet it went beyond mere pilot preference. It was undeniably Al Sam's genuine affection toward Katerina, causing him to subconsciously sabotage other pilots' attempts through overzealous control. It was a logical paradox beyond mere shyness, Sam wanted

desperately to keep Katerina safe from battle yet also knew her unparalleled skill was necessary.

Clearly, reprogramming would have been the logical course of action, but the engineers respected AI Sam's individual quirks and refused to alter his core personality. With considerable hesitation, they'd eventually called Katerina into space, choosing her as the pilot for the test flights.

*

The shuttle was nearing the space relay station when its path was abruptly blocked by a colossal warship looming out of the darkness. Activating their communication channel revealed exactly what they expected, it was the outlaw cruiser named "Sherwood."

This space cruiser, designed and built by Mike Howard and D.D., was the rebellion's first, secretly constructed at a hidden facility owned by the Romefeller Foundation's resource-development satellite, funded covertly by Cinquant Khushrenada.

As soon as the communication opened, co-pilot Pagan's face appeared, shouting urgently, "The situation is dire! We must leave immediately! Dock your shuttle in the aft hangar, we're departing for L-1 Colony at once!"

Marticus complied immediately, docking as instructed. The crew hastily made their way to the bridge, where Mike and the other engineers explained the "dire situation."

For several years, colony citizens had suffered under oppressive control. Particularly, the L-1 Colonies were tightly regulated through severe censorship, bans on demonstrations, and a ruthless crackdown on free thought by the United Earth Sphere Alliance. Six months earlier, disaster struck when the second Earth delegation's shuttle was sabotaged and crashed into Colony C-03388. The explosion was declared an act of terrorism, with the supposed mastermind quickly surrendering himself: Heero Yuy.

After following ostensibly legal procedures, Heero and several other "thought criminals" had been condemned to public execution at the Alliance's lunar base labor facility, scheduled for December 1, AC-147, at precisely noon Colony Standard Time. This event, kept under wraps by tight censorship, had only now been uncovered through hacking by AI Sam and the rebel technicians.

"Professor Heero!" Katerina gasped instinctively.

Marticus and the engineers were equally shocked, fully aware of Heero's past connection to the Peacecraft family. Reaching the moon in time would take two days at best, they had no time to lose.

"Let's launch a rescue operation immediately," Marticus said firmly. "This is something only we can handle."

AC-147 DECEMBER 1

The United Earth Sphere Alliance's lunar base, located in the Sea of Tranquility, was first established in AC-133.

Originally, this location served merely as a monument commemorating the Apollo 11 moon landing of the previous century. However, with the commencement of colony construction, the area rapidly became densely populated with various production plants, transforming into a critical military site. Upon the Alliance's establishment in AC-133, the base was formally requisitioned and subsequently expanded into what now stands as the largest military installation in space.

For the Alliance Space Forces, this base was strategically essential for surveillance and monitoring of the L-1 and L-2 colonies. Yet, it was undeniably over-armed for dealing with colonies that lacked significant military capabilities.

Scheduled for execution on this particular day were twelve political prisoners, including Heero Yuy, Jay Null, Henry Fia, and Wu Wanglong.

Although officially labeled a public execution, the event was actually recorded and edited footage intended for broadcast at a later date. Live satellite broadcasts were never even considered. Any statements shouted by prisoners moments before execution could effectively neutralize the propaganda's intended impact. The Alliance's public relations office routinely engaged in such manipulation, successfully suppressing potential terrorists through these means.

Apart from Heero, the so-called political prisoners were primarily technicians involved in weapons development within the colonies, many with extensive criminal records beyond their ideological opposition.

Jay Null, in particular, harbored a vehement anti-Alliance sentiment. He designed and deployed remotely operated space fighters to repeatedly attack Alliance military bases.

Jay's squadron consisted of ten fighters, all sharing the same foundational design as his earlier Wyvern model. It comprised one red fighter specialized for offensive operations named Apollon (Sun God),

and nine blue fighters optimized for defensive roles collectively known as the Heliopolis Ennead (Nine Pillars of the Sun Temple). Together, these fighters formed a high-speed tactical unit.

Jay's downfall occurred when Alliance military police successfully traced his remote operation signals, raided his location, confiscated his equipment, and arrested him.

Ironically, this resulted in both Apollon and the Heliopolis Ennead being commandeered by the Alliance Space Forces and integrated into their primary combat units.

There was no point claiming innocence at this stage.

Handcuffed, Heero and the others were escorted toward the execution ground. Jay and Heero, kept in separate cells until now, reunited at this grim moment. Jay wore a sardonic grin despite the circumstances.

"Funny, we weren't born together, yet we'll die together. I never signed up to share your fate."

"Agreed," Heero replied dryly.

"If you see Thomas in heaven, give him my regards."

"Why don't you tell him yourself?"

"Because I'm obviously headed for hell," Jay laughed bitterly.

"Though frankly, there's no such thing as the afterlife anyway. Ha!"

"Shut up and move!" snarled a guard, prodding Jay with his rifle.

"Relax, I'm just easing the tension with humor for these nervous youngsters," Jay snapped back defiantly.

*

Meanwhile, the space cruiser Sherwood had approached lunar orbit. Inside its hangar bay, Wyvern waited, newly equipped with space thrusters. Katerina, in her astro-suit and masked again as "Six Merquise," climbed aboard the cockpit, gently stroking Al Sam's forehead on the main monitor.

"Counting on you," she whispered.

"Mrow," Sam purred happily as Wyvern's systems smoothly activated. Its wings remained closed in launch position as Sorcière's voice crackled over the comm.

"Wyvern, catapult engaged, ready for launch?"

Six responded with a confident thumbs-up.

"Six Merquise, if you're becoming a girl again, try reclaiming your heart first."

Ahead, the launch signals shifted from red to green.

"Roger, Sorcière. Six Merquise, Wyvern launching!"

The electromagnetic catapult roared to life, hurtling Wyvern off Sherwood's deck and into space. Amid the infinite void, the gleaming white-and-silver craft unfurled its wings, smoothly driven by newly-enhanced thrusters. This advanced propulsion system, developed by Mike Howard, would later inform the high mobility of the legendary Tallgeese.

"Hold on, Professor Heero!"

Wyvern's wings expanded fully, blazing forth at maximum thrust, a dazzling trail of light reaching far across the emptiness, straight toward the lunar surface ahead.

*

The Alliance lunar base's forced labor facility stood adjacent to a vast resource-mining field, and it was beneath the protective guards of the mining mass driver rails that the executions were to occur.

The site itself was enclosed within a hemispherical dome, affording a hauntingly clear view of the Earth above. Firing squads were considered somewhat antiquated compared to more modern methods, yet deemed more humane than beheadings or hangings.

When the execution hour arrived, Heero and the other eleven prisoners were arranged in a single line. Automated propaganda cameras focused on them, no doubt expecting fear or despair, but the prisoners stood defiantly composed, each accepting their fate without visible distress.

Even the executions themselves were impersonal, automatic targeting systems carried out the shootings, designed specifically to spare human soldiers from psychological trauma.

Heero felt the blindfold tighten around his eyes. At least, he thought, the last sight he'd glimpsed was the Earth, four times larger and immeasurably more beautiful from the lunar surface than the moon appeared from Earth. That blue sphere brought vividly to mind Katerina and Sabrina's eyes.

Moments later, the door slid shut with a heavy clang. The guards, it seemed, had left them alone to their deaths.

Heero braced himself, expecting gunfire at any moment.

Yet nothing came. The silence dragged painfully on, stretching from seconds into agonizing minutes. Unease began to gnaw at him. Had something gone wrong? Or worse, had nothing happened at all?

A strange sensation drifted over him, as if a breeze whispered past his face. He could swear he heard the distant rush of escaping air. A silent pressure built within his ears, deep and unsettling.

"What the hell are you waiting for?!" Jay shouted angrily beside him. "If you're gonna kill us, hurry up already!"

"What, who are you people?" came a startled reply from somewhere nearby.

Then, without warning, Heero's blindfold was yanked away.

Darkness enveloped the dome, complete and disorienting. All sound seemed to vanish, leaving a void of silence. Yet the Earth continued shining brightly overhead, vivid and blue.

Heero's handcuffs abruptly fell away, the ropes binding him swiftly severed. To his astonishment, a small figure in an Astro Suit was rapidly assisting each prisoner. Judging by the slender build, it was clearly someone young, perhaps even a girl.

"Who are you?" Heero asked, his voice barely audible over the painful ringing in his ears and the oppressive shortness of breath he felt.

The girl urgently gestured at another Astro Suit, motioning him to put it on immediately. She mimed running, clearly communicating: "Hurry!"

Heero complied quickly, sealing the helmet into place. Only then did the communications line finally crackle alive, relieving the intense pressure and the ringing silence.

"We have to move quickly! The dome's air supply is almost gone!"

That voice. Even distorted by static, he recognized it instantly. Though her face remained indistinct in the darkness, he knew exactly who it was.

"Katerina, is that you?"

"No, I'm Six Merquise," came the cheerful reply.

As Heero's eyes gradually adapted to the gloom, he could make out Jay and the others in Astro Suits escaping through an improvised exit, a breach in the dome sealed by emergency adhesive airlocks, normally used for patching spacecraft hulls. Despite the temporary seals, air was escaping with alarming speed.

"You two, hurry up! Backup power will be restored any second!" boomed a large man at the exit, though Heero wouldn't learn until later that it was Sergeant Sedichi from the Sherwood.

*

Several hours earlier, Six had deliberately drawn attention, swooping her Wyvern fighter mockingly above the Alliance lunar base. Predictably, the Alliance reacted immediately, deploying the remotely-operated Apollon and Heliopolis fighters. Six swiftly retreated, pushing her Wyvern's thrusters to maximum speed, successfully diverting the Alliance's full attention to the skies.

Meanwhile, five armored Pumpkin Tanks stealthily approached the facility, depositing teams of outlaw soldiers directly into the heart of the enemy base. Sedichi's infiltration squad promptly hacked into the mainframe through portable terminals, cutting off primary power to critical systems. The Apollon and Heliopolis, now robbed of their remote guidance, spiraled uselessly into passive orbit.

Simultaneously, the execution dome's power systems collapsed entirely. Cameras, targeting mechanisms, lighting, all rendered inert in an instant.

Under cover of darkness, Sedichi's team rushed in, rescuing the prisoners from certain death. Six had skillfully landed nearby, joining the rescue, but delays in Heero's retrieval left them perilously low on oxygen and dangerously exposed.

Heero and Six barely managed to reach the waiting Pumpkin Tank hidden within a nearby crater. As Heero scrambled aboard, a gentle, youthful voice echoed in his helmet's comm link.

"Heero Yuy... please, value your own life more carefully."

Turning swiftly, Heero discovered Six had already vanished into the darkness, presumably returning to her fighter. Feeling certain the communication channel remained open, he murmured softly:

"You should do the same, Six Merquise."

No response came.

Then Jay's familiar voice crackled from behind him within the tank:

"Ha, looks like we're both cursed with good luck."

"Seems that way..." Heero agreed.

"Been a long time since I last saw Miss Darlian, two years now, isn't it?"

"She denied being Katerina."

"Like hell she isn't! She's piloting the Wyvern I built, that's all the proof I need!"

*

In lunar orbit, the Wyvern faced relentless pursuit.

The Apollon and Heliopolis fighters had recovered their power circuits, resuming their relentless assault. Though the Wyvern maintained a clear speed advantage, the nine Heliopolis units moved in perfectly coordinated formations, systematically cutting off escape routes and leaving Six dangerously little room to maneuver.

Neither the Wyvern's machine guns nor the homing missiles prepared by Sorcière could penetrate the enemy's airtight formations. With each passing second, her options narrowed further. Ordinarily, a swift burst of acceleration would have allowed her to shake them off, but they'd clearly learned her tactics from their earlier encounter, anticipating each maneuver and blocking her every escape attempt.

Worse still was Apollon's powerful beam cannon. Without AI Sam's predictive analytics and ECM jamming systems disrupting the enemy's targeting, she would have been shot down immediately. The second strike from Apollon grazed her right wing, scorching the armor; the third demolished her propulsion system entirely.

If she allowed herself to be pursued to the moon's far side, she'd lead the enemy directly to the cruiser Sherwood, placing the mother ship in mortal danger.

"Sam, reverse direction!" Six shouted, resolutely making her decision. "They leave me no choice, I have to use the forbidden weapon!"

From the Wyvern's twin-headed structure emerged an energy cannon. Another one of Sorcière's inventions, it synchronized the main engine's full output directly with the reactor at the nose, releasing an enormous burst of energy. However, using this meant sacrificing maneuverability. Even after firing, her speed would drop drastically, missing would be fatal.

She had already prepared herself for the worst, steeling her nerves for mutual destruction if necessary.

The cannon's countdown initiated. Apollon, sensing this final gambit, also readied its beam cannon.

Six shut her eyes tightly.

"I'm sorry, Sam... It looks like this might really be it."

In the back of her mind, she thought she heard Heero's voice: "Don't throw your life away. Weren't those your words?"

But it was too late to turn back now,

Suddenly, an unexpected voice burst through the comms.

"Hold your fire!"

It was Jay Null.

"Looks like this round goes to you. I'll give Sam the override frequency for Apollon and Heliopolis. Frequency is XXXG-WDHSRS."

"Meow," Sam replied cheerfully.

"And the release code is Z-E-R-O."

"Meow, meow!"

The moment Sam input the code, the Apollon and Heliopolis units instantly disengaged from combat mode.

"From now on, those ten fighters are free from Alliance control. Consider them extensions of Sam's own limbs."

Jay had likely stayed silent until now to test his own handiwork, but Six was genuinely grateful.

"Thank you, Jay... I really do love you, you know."

Jay smirked audibly.

"Now, that's strange, this is supposed to be our first meeting, Six Merquise."

Six cleared her throat, recomposing herself with an air of formality.

"Your cooperation is deeply appreciated, Dr. Jay Null..."

*

After ending the transmission, Jay turned to address the pilot of the Pumpkin Tank.

"You know, your little band seems like they're up to some genuinely interesting things."

The pilot, Chick Pagan, didn't reply or even glance back at him. Jay tapped his mechanical left arm thoughtfully, laughing quietly to himself.

"How about it? Got room for one more? I assure you, I'd be useful."

"....."

Watching Jay from the side, Heero shook his head in quiet resignation. Ahead, hidden safely behind the moon, the cruiser Sherwood awaited their return.

*

AC-147 DECEMBER 24

By the After Colony era, Christmas, the religious holiday marking the birth of Jesus Christ, had mostly faded from popular memory. But in the Sanc Kingdom, people continued celebrating the ancient Nordic tradition of Yule, the winter solstice festival. The castle town streets were adorned with giant straw goats, known as Yule Goats, symbolic guardians of the season.

Newborn Katerina wore traditional white infant clothes cinched with a bright red sash, a Northern European custom reserved for the family's youngest daughter. Even Sam the cat was reluctantly decorated with miniature Yule Goat horns, although he promptly shook them off, clearly annoyed.

Eric and Sabrina quietly shared a rare, peaceful evening, enjoying a traditional Yulebord meal and saffron-infused golden buns. For them, this quiet respite was a precious moment in their busy lives.

As midnight approached, they settled in to watch classic black-and-white movies: George Seaton's *Miracle on 34th Street* and Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. Both adored these old Hollywood films, one of their precious few shared interests.

When the movies ended, Sabrina leaned gently against Eric's shoulder. She spoke quietly, dropping the formal language she had always used before.

"Eric... please, when it's just me and Katerina,"

"Luck comes to those who sincerely wish for it."

"Don't call me 'Your Majesty' anymore."

She wore no eye shadow on her softly closed lids.

"I don't need makeup around him anymore."

"All right," Eric whispered, his voice gentle and deeply affectionate. "I understand, Sabrina."

"I'm glad..." Sabrina murmured, enveloped in profound tranquility. In a soft, breathy whisper, she added, "I love you, Eric."

Having finally spoken those words, she surrendered herself entirely to peaceful sleep. Her serene expression, illuminated faintly in the dim room, was a vision Eric wished could last forever.

Rhapsody of Quiet Despair

Peacecraft File.7

"Eternal peace is not an empty ideal, but a duty which must be accomplished."

—Immanuel Kant
Toward Perpetual Peace

AC-148 MARCH

Duke Cinquant Khushrenada of the Romefeller Foundation bid farewell to his long years of bachelorhood, announcing his marriage to a young noblewoman from Liechtenstein.

Perhaps his decision was inspired by the happy domestic life of his close friend, Eric, now residing in the Sanc Kingdom. Cinquant invited Eric and Sabrina Peacecraft to attend his wedding celebration.

The solemn ceremony took place in an ancient castle steeped in tradition, nestled within Luxembourg. The reception, held in the castle's grand ballroom, dazzled with opulence.

Holding her beloved four-month-old daughter, Katerina, close to her chest, Sabrina observed the glittering festivities.

"Look, Katerina," she whispered softly, "everyone is so beautiful..."

Nearby, Cinquant and Eric, reunited after a long separation, conversed with evident warmth.

"Congratulations, Duke Khushrenada."

"Thank you, Lord Peacecraft."

Their relationship was no longer as it once was. Formality had subtly reshaped their interactions. Yet, as the evening unfolded, their exchanges began to recover the ease of past days.

"With this marriage, your position as Romefeller's leader must be secure now," Eric remarked.

"Things have not gone smoothly since you left," Cinquant admitted with a sigh. "The Foundation has been a handful to manage."

"Ah, that explains it..." Eric muttered, his gaze roaming the grand hall.

"What does?"

"There are quite a few Alliance military officers among your guests. Have you drawn them into the Foundation's fold?"

"To some extent, yes," Cinquant replied thoughtfully. "War should never be left in civilian hands. Those of us entrusted with responsibility must control and manage it."

"If such oversight leads to peace, then I have no objections," Eric responded cautiously.

Cinquant chuckled. "You truly have become a man of the Sanc Kingdom, haven't you? But Romefeller's wealth has always flowed from the military-industrial complex. That will never change."

Eric, at that moment, deeply understood that he and Cinquant now walked different paths.

"Very well. I sincerely hope your nobility's ancient chivalric ideals will revive."

"That's my younger brother, Chilia's responsibility," Cinquant explained. "A bit of an oddball. He refused a marriage proposal to become an adopted son-in-law of the Catalonia family and instead enrolled in the Alliance military academy."

Across the ballroom, a young man in military attire nodded politely.

"His philosophy insists combat must always embody virtue."

This Chilia would later join the Catalonia family, ascend through the ranks of the United Earth Sphere Alliance military to the position of Supreme Commander, and ardently advocate for the necessity of mobile suits, becoming a staunch supporter of Treize and his Specials, both openly and in secret.

*

Tragedy always arrives without warning, invariably slipping cruelly between fleeting moments of happiness.

Among European nobility visiting Luxembourg, the Peacecraft family was particularly revered. Sabrina and Eric's remarkable efforts in rebuilding the war-torn Sanc Kingdom had made them symbols of hope for the war's many victims.

In honor of their visit, several European nations proposed celebratory parades. Though Sabrina, modest by nature, initially declined, the host nations insisted on bearing the entire expense.

"We could secure additional economic aid this way," Eric reasoned gently. "Just smile and wave, it'll accomplish far more than my endless negotiations."

"But Katerina isn't feeling well..." Sabrina hesitated.

Indeed, the infant had been suffering from a mild fever, possibly due to travel fatigue. Yet, mindful of her kingdom's financial hardships, Queen Sabrina reluctantly agreed, leaving Katerina in the care of a trusted nursemaid.

The tragedy unfolded swiftly in broad daylight.

March 30, 3:00 PM. Sabrina and Eric's limousine exploded moments after arriving in Geneva.

A remote-controlled bomb had been planted beneath the vehicle, detonating in an instant. Eric died instantly, shielding Sabrina with his body.

Sabrina survived the initial blast but succumbed to her wounds without regaining consciousness, despite urgent medical attention. She was only eighteen.

Days later, the perpetrator was apprehended.

"Any royal aristocrat parasiting off Europe would have done," he callously claimed.

However, meticulous investigation revealed his stated motive as false. Collaborating with border security personnel who inspected the limousine's undercarriage, the terrorist had affixed the explosive device.

Given the highly coordinated nature of the attack, further investigation identified the terrorist as a former commander of Unit 9 of the United Earth Sphere Alliance Forces notorious 99th Armored Battalion, known as the Hydra Unit. He had been dishonorably discharged following disturbing conduct during the withdrawal from the Sanc Kingdom, harboring deep-seated resentment that drove him to orchestrate this brutal revenge.

The people of Sanc Kingdom plunged into profound mourning. Citizens wept at the sight of their empty, sorrowful castle. Their heir, young Katerina, was far too small to assume the throne.

A dark shadow had settled over the future of their once hopeful nation.

AC-148 APRIL

The tragic news of Queen Peacecraft's death reached even the rebel space cruiser Sherwood.

"You should probably return immediately," said Captain Marticus Rex, addressing Six Merquise. "If you don't, the Sanc Kingdom risks being partitioned by neighboring countries or absorbed entirely."

Currently, the outlaw cruiser Sherwood was already on course toward Earth's orbit. They had been fighting the United Earth Sphere Alliance to ensure peace for those living in space.

Six, Katerina, could not immediately come to terms with the news of her unfortunate sister's death. Media reports made no mention of "Sabrina," instead announcing the tragic end of "Queen Katerina." Even now, guilt tormented her over letting her sister live under her name.

Moreover, she felt profound self-blame upon realizing the Hydra Unit commander's hatred had targeted her specifically, stemming from when she repelled him with Wyvern. Nonetheless, she knew she had to overcome Sabrina's death. She had to embrace her nation's destiny, especially for the sake of her newborn niece, Katarina.

"To be honest," Marticus said lightly, perhaps sensing her internal struggle, "losing our ace pilot is going to be a significant blow to the crew."

Six saluted formally.

"Captain Marticus, permission to leave the ship?"

"Permission granted. We'll bring you as close to Earth as possible. But you'll have to leave the Wyvern behind, I'm afraid," Marticus said apologetically. "The doctors would miss Sam terribly."

"That's all right. Sanc Kingdom has its own Sam," she replied, though truthfully, the real cat Sam had never warmed much to her.

"Then please use one of the Heliopolis units as your shuttle for atmospheric entry."

"Marticus, did you know the Peacecraft family has certain customs?"

"You mean the rule against raising twins together?"

"Yes, and one other. Divorce is allowed, but remarriage isn't."

"Oh... I see," Marticus responded vaguely, unsure why she mentioned this at such a moment.

"I'll say goodbye to everyone."

Jay Null, who had joined them the previous December, was already repairing the Wyvern, simultaneously converting the unmanned Apollon and Heliopolis units into manned fighters.

"Wars shouldn't be fought remotely!" Jay often argued passionately. "Leaving the fate of lives to machines is something no human should do!"

Henry Fia, another recent addition and an expert in cockpit systems, assisted significantly with this conversion. He would later become Professor H, the creator of Gundam Sandrock.

The drive systems were handled by Wu Wang Long, recruited from death row at the lunar base. He would later become Master O, builder of the Shenlong and Altron Gundams.

Thus, aboard cruiser Sherwood were assembled, remarkably, all six engineers who would ultimately develop the first mobile suit, the Tallgeese.

"Thank you all for everything," Katerina brightly told the engineers. "I've had a wonderful time."

The normally taciturn technicians managed only brief, grunted responses like “Yeah,” “Sure,” or “Good luck.”

Once she departed, D.D. murmured, “It’s going to feel quiet without her.”

“Hey, big nose! You fancy the girl?” Jay teased.

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Mind you, I’ve known her longer!”

“Hmph! Maybe you met her first, but Howard, Sorcière, and I spent much more time with her!”

“Pointless debate,” interjected Wu Wang Long, usually silent.

“If she didn’t reciprocate, counting hours is meaningless,” Sorcière remarked coldly.

Henry, typically grinning, agreed.

“Indeed. It’s healthier to think of her as out of our league.”

“Stop gossiping and get back to work! What would you do if we encountered Alliance forces? Really!” Mike Howard, the oldest and unofficial leader, snapped irritably. Ever practical, he privately worried deeply about Katerina’s future.

Aboard this ship was another, seemingly misplaced individual, Heero Yuy. Due to the lack of suitable ports, he’d reluctantly joined the outlaws. Naturally, he couldn’t help but worry upon discovering his former pupil Katerina was not only a rebel but also a combat pilot. Nevertheless, before Heero, Katerina maintained her identity as Six Merquise.

Yet today, she decided, it was time to leave the masquerade behind.

“I have an old promise to keep with Professor Heero...” she recalled softly. It dated back to when she was still his student, sharing an awkward waltz under moonlight in the Darlian family gardens. At their parting, she confessed she carried “painful feelings” within her heart.

Years later, as Katerina prevented the nuclear missile strike aimed at the Sanc Kingdom, Heero questioned her about those feelings.

“Tell me about your painful feelings,” he’d asked.

“I’ll tell you once this mission succeeds,” she’d replied. That was their promise made two and a half years ago.

Perhaps Heero had forgotten.

Now, as Katerina prepared to descend to Earth, she carried a heart heavier than ever before.

For the Peacecrafts, remarriage was forbidden. Legally, Katerina Peacecraft was already married, to a man named Eric.

Heero donned his astro-suit and assisted in the exterior inspection and cleaning of the cruiser.

Since the beginning of colony development, space debris within Earth's orbit had become abundant, accumulating as tiny, millimeter-sized particles forming a layer of grime across the entire ship. Left unaddressed, this residue threatened to disrupt the sensitive ECM generators of the new stealth equipment and degrade the ship's powerful wide-range reconnaissance radar capabilities.

Though critical, the work was inherently perilous. Even with magnetic shoes and umbilical cables serving as lifelines, death remained a constant companion.

Heero had volunteered himself for this arduous task. Having been rescued from the lunar base, he felt obligated to repay his rescuers through commensurate labor. It was his intrinsic nature to avoid owing anyone.

Moreover, the quiet expanse of space resonated deeply with him.

Outside, an endless field of stars stretched across the void. Earth, too, loomed noticeably nearer. Gazing at these distant sights, Heero felt tranquility. Perhaps it was because they inspired visions of a hopeful future.

"Working hard, Professor?" a sudden voice echoed inside his helmet.

Turning, he saw Katerina standing behind him in her own astro-suit, visor raised to reveal her uncovered face. Heero, neither startled nor inclined to jest, replied plainly, "I'm taking a break right now."

"Quite cold after it's been so long since we last met," she murmured softly.

Despite sharing the same vessel, this was their first conversation since the lunar base incident, mostly due to Katerina's deliberate avoidance.

"So, you're heading to Earth?" he inquired gently.

"Yes..."

"I'm sorry about Sabrina."

"Standing here with you, gazing at these stars, reminds me of when Sabrina and I first met," she reminisced softly.

Heero remained silent.

"You were the one who rescued Sabrina after she escaped that shuttle," she continued.

"She lived honorably," Heero responded quietly, "and she inspired me to follow this path." Sabrina's words still echoed in his mind: "I want you to always remain a teacher."

"I still wonder why she turned you down..." Katerina sighed, her forced cheer masking deeper sorrow.

She didn't continue with "...especially when I had yielded to her."
Heero noticed her strained facade.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she answered swiftly, then quietly amended, "Probably..."
She still lacked confidence.

"I believe I have to fight, as Queen of Sanc Kingdom and as a
Peacecraft committed to peace."

"Only those willing to fight can truly speak about peace. You've
earned that right."

"But I might fail."

"You must be prepared for that," Heero advised calmly. "Yet, with
true resolve, even defeat reveals a future."

"A future?"

"Violence and injustice will always persist," he explained patiently.
"No matter how chaotic the world becomes, you must never let anger
or hatred consume you. If you fall, rise again and again, stand firm, and
keep your eyes fixed on the future. That future will surely be filled
with hope."

"Rise again and again..." Katerina repeated thoughtfully.

"Close your eyes first," Heero instructed gently. "Check that your
heart is empty. Don't cling to anger or sadness, no matter how you're
struck or trampled." This discipline allowed Heero to maintain his
composure under extreme adversity.

"Once your mind is clear, open your eyes. You'll see your
surroundings through an entirely new lens."

"I'll remember that when the time comes."

"This technique can help you overcome 'painful feelings' and
'difficult situations.'"

"Aren't you going to ask?"

"Hm?"

"About the 'painful feelings' I carry?"

For Katerina, even now, fulfilling that old promise felt important.

"I've given you the method, that should be sufficient."

Would that really work with matters of the heart? But Heero
remained oblivious to such nuances.

An alarm signaled Heero's astro-suit air reserves were nearly
depleted. Quickly, he downloaded a classical piece through his
helmet's internal computer network.

"Katerina, there are only a few minutes left. Will you dance with
me?"

"Yes, I'd be delighted."



The gentle strains of Johann Strauss II's "The Blue Danube" filled their helmets.

"Sadly, this isn't exactly a ballroom," he murmured.

"No, but it's under the same stars as back then. I'm honored this time you asked me."

They disengaged their magnetic shoes. Floating freely in the vacuum, they attempted a graceful waltz, but their umbilical cables quickly tangled.

Katerina laughed playfully, her eyes sparkling mischievously. Suddenly, she disconnected their tether buckle. The cruiser Sherwood rapidly receded.

"You always do reckless things..." Heero sighed.

"Sam will come fetch us."

They drifted gracefully through space, dancing together.

"Are you really all right?"

"You worry too much, Professor."

"That's not what I meant. Can you really bear the Sanc Kingdom's fate alone?"

"Yes... Because I have my memories with you."

"Hmph... Bogart's line from Casablanca."

"Shall we change the music to 'As Time Goes By'?"

"Yes... Let's."

"Play it once, Sam."

Far away, Sam the Wyvern approached, his reply through the communicator a simple "Meow."

Tenderly, Katerina touched her helmet to Heero's and whispered wistfully, "Here's looking at you, Professor."

*

The United Earth Sphere Alliance's space fleet awaited along the route to Earth.

To the Alliance, the rebel cruiser Sherwood was less an outlaw than a highly prized bounty. Despite relentless pursuits, the cruiser had always eluded capture, thanks to extraordinary propulsion capabilities and advanced stealth systems.

Now, however, Sherwood's position was entirely compromised. Surveillance satellites orbiting Earth had detected significant mass movement in an uncharted sector, prompting the Alliance to swiftly organize an interception fleet. The flagship of this armada was

christened "Verseau" (Aquarius), commanded by the young and talented Major Clarence Septem, assisted by Ensign Million Riddelhart.

"Why would they come to Earth, knowing they'll be caught?" Major Clarence wondered aloud.

"It's finally our chance to restore our honor after the lunar base disgrace," Million remarked heatedly, still holding a grudge over Sherwood's Pumpkin Tank Squad attack.

"What about Apollon and Heliopolis' data?"

"Fully analyzed," Million replied confidently. "Our new-generation space fighters, Zygon (Libra), will crush them!"

Identical in form to the Wyvern, the Zygon fighters deployed in six squads of four, totaling twenty-four units. They were unmanned, remotely piloted based on designs by Jay Null. At this time, space combat meant near-certain death, which explained the total lack of human pilots volunteering within Alliance ranks.

"Yet beware of the Wyvern's Sam," Clarence cautioned. "That single craft decimated our fleet in the Baltic Sea."

"But they're only eleven units!" Million argued. "Wyvern's EMP may be effective terrestrially, but in space, it's no stronger than solar flare radiation."

*

Numerically, the twenty-four Alliance fighters had overwhelming odds against the eleven rebel craft. But all rebel ships, Wyvern, Apollon, and Heliopolis, had been converted into piloted vessels manned by outlaw aces. Wyvern was piloted by ace Chick Pagan, Apollo by Sedichi, and the eight Heliopolis units crewed by expert pilots. The eleventh craft, piloted by Katerina, arguably held the group's greatest talent.

Comparing this battle to football simplifies strategic understanding. Nine Heliopolis units guarded the "goal net," Sherwood, while the Wyvern and Apollon attacked as strikers. The Alliance's twenty-four Zygons split into six squads, flanking the rebels and funneling them toward the fleet's fire.

The battle commenced.

Wyvern and Apollo flew straight toward the flagship Verseau.

In response, the Zygon fighters initiated their planned defensive maneuver. Two forward squadrons, eight craft in total, began wave attacks, folding their wings inward to drive the enemy into a tighter

central position. Simultaneously, two squadrons in the midfield acted as bait, further luring Wyvern and Apollon inward.

At the rear, the remaining eight Zygon fighters strategically dispersed in every possible direction, effectively sealing any potential escape routes and ensuring the enemy craft had no choice but to face the fleet's concentrated firepower.

From a purely tactical standpoint, the Alliance's coordination was impeccable, textbook in execution. If they neutralized Wyvern and Apollo, specialized for offensive actions, the remaining Heliopolis units, limited primarily to defensive capabilities, would inevitably fall given sufficient time.

Yet, the objectives of the rebel and Alliance forces were fundamentally different.

While the Alliance sought Sherwood's complete annihilation, the rebels' goal was singularly focused: securing Katerina's safe return to Earth.

In essence, their "goal nets" differed vastly in scope and nature.

Wyvern and Apollon's assault was merely a feint, intended to distract the Alliance's attention. The more intensely the enemy fixated on those two craft, the more easily Katerina's Heliopolis moved unchallenged into its atmospheric re-entry trajectory towards Earth.

"Heliopolis Ennead, beginning descent!" Katerina gratefully addressed her comrades. "Thank you for the escort."

"Take care, Six Merquise," rumbled Sedichi from the Apollon.

"Please avoid reckless actions," said Chick Pagan gently, accompanied by an "Al Sam" meow.

"Copy all! Stay safe, everyone!" Katerina responded.

"Glory to the Sanc Kingdom!" the outlaw pilots shouted in unison.

Katerina began singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," as she had once before descending to Earth.

"Somewhere over the rainbow—"

The rebels fought on, buoyed by her song. Having achieved their mission, their retreat was unhurried. Easily outmaneuvering twice their number, they activated powerful ECM systems, Hyper Jammers, rendering their ships invisible and effortlessly evaded Verseau's cannon fire, safely returning to Sherwood.

*

Unexpectedly, Heero appeared on the Sherwood's bridge.

Captain Marticus, commanding, was surprised by his sudden visit.

"Well, this is unusual..."

"Did Katerina safely reach Earth?" Heero asked directly.

"Worried, as a teacher would be?"

"Marticus, wasn't it? Perhaps I overestimated you."

"Meaning?"

"If I were you, I wouldn't have let Katerina go to Earth."

"I could say the same to you," Marticus retorted. "Shouldn't you have stopped her yourself?"

Heero said nothing.

"Well, no matter. We both carry burdens too heavy for our shoulders."

Their initial conversation marked the beginning of their shared path toward advocating total pacifism, one on Earth, one in space.

"As two men who've both been dumped, let's get along," Heero suddenly muttered in casual English, softly.

"I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

"What was that?"

"Ever seen the movie Casablanca?"

"Long ago. Katerina liked it, I hear."

"It's the final line, 'I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.'"

"Was that supposed to be your Bogart impression? It was terrible!"

"...Sorry about that..."

Their first meeting left neither particularly fond of the other.

AC-148 APRIL 25

Katerina visited the Sanc Kingdom Castle, recounting the events leading to her return. Initially, none of her close advisors believed her story. Only when Marquis Weridge testified as a witness and DNA tests confirmed her identity as Katerina Peacecraft did acceptance finally come.

In the throne room, she gazed upon baby Katarina sleeping innocently in her cradle, unaware of the tragedy surrounding her. For the first time, Katerina's eyes filled with tears. Through all previous hardships, she'd maintained her cheerful composure, never succumbing to tears. But now, she could not hold back, allowing herself to sob openly.

These overwhelming emotions needed to reach innocent Katarina, Sabrina's precious child. The palace felt empty and desolate, and the daunting task ahead, to rebuild the kingdom alongside her niece, felt suffocating. The weight of responsibility threatened to crush her.

Then, Heero's words returned clearly to her mind:

"First, quietly close your eyes and check if your heart is truly empty."

Slowly closing her eyes, Katerina listened closely to her surroundings.

She heard birds singing softly in the distance. She heard little Katarina's gentle breathing, sleeping peacefully. In the next room, she heard the faint scratching of Sam, the cat, at the windowpane, and the gentle rustle of lace curtains. Sam likely wanted to catch the birds outside.

The flutter of wings signaled birds taking flight from the nearby forest. Sam fell silent. Katerina perceived the sound of silence, not one of loneliness, but of serenity.

Opening her eyes, Katerina slowly took in the room around her. Time seemed to flow gently through transparent air. Suddenly, she knew exactly what to do next. Now was not the moment for grief.

A firm resolve settled within her.

"I will keep living," she whispered, "embracing all love and sorrow."

Smiling gently at the sleeping Katarina, she said softly, "Nice to meet you, Katarina... I'll be your new mother."

Her heart held no hesitation or doubt now.

"Watch over us from heaven, Sabrina. I promise I'll raise her into a worthy queen."

Warm spring sunlight streamed through the window, endlessly gentle and comforting.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Relena Peacecraft slowly removed the black virtual visor, her blue eyes holding a new, profound expression.

"How was it?" asked Heero, the Mars Federation President standing nearby. "Do you still want me to kill you?"

"No, Heero," Relena replied softly. "I realize now isn't that moment."

My wrists were still bound in cuffs, and I hadn't even had a decent meal yet. This was worse than any lousy torture.

"So, Duo, have you reflected on your actions at all?" Naina approached from behind, tea cup in hand.

"Reflect? Why the hell should I be reflecting? I haven't lost to you guys, nor lived with any regrets!"

"But you're planning to assassinate Relena, aren't you?"

"Well, same goes for Heero, doesn't it? This nonsense about 'total pacifism' is the real problem!" I shot back honestly. I wanted to ask how many lives had been lost for their so-called peace.

Just then, Mille and the Winner family's young lady rushed into the room.

"Sis! Father's Tallgeese Heaven, it's--!"

"It's approaching Relena City!"

Naina's father was now calling himself the Cyrene Wind, some wandering troublemaker.

"The unit looks severely damaged! Someone should go to meet him!" the Winner girl urged, manipulating the nearby communication device.

"I've opened a channel!"

On the monitor appeared a man with short blond hair and sunglasses.

"This is Cyrene Wind... forgive me, I couldn't hold them back... the main force of the Lanagreene Republic is coming!"

From what I could see of the footage, the cockpit showed red warning lights blinking everywhere with sparks showering from damaged sections. Clearly, the man had sustained serious injuries, his speech broken and painful.

"'Babel'... the mobile fortress 'Babel' on approach!"

I grimaced, hearing a name worse than "peace." Mobile Fortress Babel, that damned Zechs Merquise from Lanagreene must be coming too. That bastard had caused thousands upon thousands of deaths, including those of those poor siblings...

I would never forgive Zechs.

Afterword

My wife has "MS."

Not Mobile Suit. Not Mars Suit either.

She suffers from multiple sclerosis (MS), a neurological disorder affecting the brain and spinal cord, officially classified as an intractable disease by the government.

This condition manifests as recurring symptoms like motor paralysis and sensory disturbances, yet its cause remains unknown.

Reportedly, the prevalence is around one in ten thousand in the West, and even rarer in Japan, affecting roughly one in a hundred thousand.

My wife was born in Kanagawa Prefecture, in the year of the Snake, a Scorpio with type AB blood. That lineup alone is uniquely intense, practically a winning mahjong hand.

Interestingly, these traits perfectly match those of the legendary filmmaker Director Yoshiyuki Tomino. (Rest assured, Tomino does not have MS.) This might explain why, when conversing with Tomino, I feel uniquely in tune compared to others around me. My wife and Tomino share strikingly similar personalities, and on top of that, my wife battles the rare MS.

If life were a mahjong game, she'd be holding three concealed triplets with dora tiles underneath, extraordinarily rare indeed.

She had already been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis before we married, though she was in remission when we met, appearing outwardly healthy. Yet, signs were evident. Once, while we were walking shoulder to shoulder on a date, having a normal conversation, she suddenly vanished from my field of vision and collapsed forward with a thud. When I helped her up, she smiled bashfully and said, "Sorry, did I startle you?" Her nicely dressed clothes were covered in dust, her stockings had runs in them, and her knees were bruised and scraped, yet she didn't show even a hint of sadness. She brushed off the dust as if nothing had happened and started walking again. We bought bandages and stockings at a nearby drugstore and continued our date as if nothing had occurred.

Captivated by her resilience and cheerfulness, I proposed marriage.

Initially hesitant due to her illness, she eventually agreed after my persistent reassurances.

Later, I learned about "euphoria," a symptom of multiple sclerosis involving elevated serotonin levels in the brain. Another theory suggests it could be a side-effect of steroid treatments. Either way, her perpetual

cheerfulness, even amidst suffering, was immensely attractive. "One in a hundred thousand, doesn't that make me kind of special?" she'd joke, never lamenting her misfortune. Her radiant dignity was precisely why I chose to marry her.

Her smile gave me strength countless times, motivating me professionally. Basic caregiving was necessary, but her endless optimism made it manageable. While scripting episodes for Sailor Moon, our first daughter was born. Despite being a busy young writer, we shared housework and childcare responsibilities. At a writers' gathering, when I left early to bathe my child, writer Hiroyuki Hoshiyama teased me, "Sumizawa, are you henpecked?" I replied, "No, just a devoted husband." He laughed, saying, "No writer worth his salt isn't troubling his wife!" He then regaled me with his enjoyable tales of heroic exploits. I managed to get home at a reasonable hour, and when I told my wife about this, she said, "Well, other families might be like that, but our family is our family," and laughed heartily. When she heard Hoshiyama's name, what she immediately remembered wasn't Mobile Suit Gundam or GeGeGe no Kitaro, but Invincible Robot Trider G7. When I relayed this, Hoshiyama warmly responded, "Then you're indeed a devoted husband. She has good taste, liking Trider. Take good care of her."

After that, I worked with Hoshiyama on Ryu Knight and Let's & Go!!, and we also participated together in the planning stages of ♠ Gundam.

Doing household chores seemed normal to me, yet my wife always expressed gratitude. "Thank you for being kind to someone like me," she'd say. I'd reply, "That should be my line."

We were able to live a happy and fulfilling family life. This became nourishment, and screenwriting work came pouring in one after another. Looking back now, that might have been the most "smooth sailing" period.

In 1995, when Mobile Suit Gundam Wing aired, my eldest son was born. Director Masashi Ikeda, understanding my situation, graciously took on tasks from episode composition to plotting duties. During a drinking party, I foolishly let slip my wife's illness to Ikeda, whether out of pride or a need for sympathy, I no longer recall. Whatever my intentions, it was thoughtless of me, causing Ikeda unnecessary grief. That regret still lingers within me today, a debt impossible to repay. After Ikeda stepped down, I threw myself into an insane schedule, driven in part by this sense of atonement. Equally significant was producer Hideyuki Tomioka of Sunrise, whose unwavering trust kept me going through to the very end. My gratitude to both men remains undiminished even now.

Perhaps because of Gundam Wing's success, my regular workload expanded enormously, leading me to increasingly take charge of series composition and feature film scripts. As a desperate solution, my family moved in with my wife's parents, freeing me entirely from household duties and allowing complete immersion in my work.

While scripting Inuyasha, my wife's illness flared again. Around that time, she suffered a miscarriage with our third child, plunging her into emotional distress. Her appetite waned dramatically; she grew thin, unable to walk without a cane. She experienced numbness and paralysis in her left side and right hand, losing sensation to the point of being unable to feel pain. Visual impairments led her to constantly bump into things, leaving her covered in bruises. Her symptoms multiplied endlessly, requiring dozens of specialists to oversee her care. Because the illness was of unknown origin, medication piled up, and experimental treatments became commonplace. My wife described herself as feeling like a lab rat. Yet through all this, she managed to stay cheerful outwardly. No matter how strong the euphoric moments might have seemed, I knew deep down her sadness and suffering were beyond words. I couldn't leave it all to her aging parents any longer.

Determined to repay her brave smiles, I juggled work and caregiving duties, roughly managing household chores and looking after our children. Eventually, her medical expenses drained our savings, forcing me to take on even more assignments. In time, my own health deteriorated, with doctors diagnosing me with depression linked to diabetes. Ironically, despite lacking any real talent, I fell into a deep creative slump. Preparing my children's lunches brought me unexpected joy, yet afterward, my mind went blank, I couldn't write a single line. Apparently, my brain treats scriptwriting and making lunchboxes as the same task, much to my frustration.

By 2005, recognizing myself as a useless, worn-out writer, I began declining projects. Living vaguely day by day, the year 2007 brought devastating news: Hiroyuki Hoshiyama, whom I considered a personal mentor, passed away suddenly. I was engulfed by emptiness, feeling as if Hoshiyama, like a Newtype, had taken my scriptwriter's soul with him. I quit smoking and drinking, deciding instead to focus solely on household tasks and caring for my wife. Haunted by past regrets, I rarely mentioned her condition professionally, instead citing my own illness as a reason for leaving. Of course, the anime industry is merciless, under normal circumstances, I'd have faded into obscurity.

Yet, someone quietly supported me, refusing to abandon me, continually offering encouragement.

That person was Hideyuki Tomioka of Sunrise.

Our bond of trust stretches back over twenty years, not just from Gundam Wing but even earlier from Ryū Knight. Indeed, it was Tomioka who first introduced me to Yoshiyuki Tomino.

In 2009, Tomioka entrusted me with what he said would be my final assignment, writing for Inuyasha: The Final Act, pulling me from my self-imposed isolation in Yokohama. Despite a two-year hiatus, I accepted. Around this time, my wife was hospitalized long-term. Unable to stand, she relied completely on a wheelchair. Her doctor had informed us bluntly, "She probably won't walk again on her own." I struggled not to give in to despair. Perhaps sensing this, Tomioka thoughtfully offered me the job. When I mentioned it to my wife, she gave me a faint, melancholy smile and whispered, "Do your best." Determined to honor her expectations, I felt a renewed fire ignite within me. Fortunately, advances in appliances like dishwashers and washing machines made household chores less burdensome, and our growing children required less direct care. Resuming alcohol and tobacco, I poured every ounce of my accumulated experience and modest skill into writing, immersing myself entirely in my scripts. Age no longer mattered to me; health was trivial. Living longer than my wife seemed meaningless. All that mattered was creating something worthwhile. When the project concluded, I believed my career had also reached its end. No words of gratitude could sufficiently express what I owed Tomioka. With nothing left unsaid in my career as an anime screenwriter, I planned to retire quietly and dedicate the remainder of my days to caring for my wife.

Yet, early the following year, at a drinking party, Tomioka casually mentioned that Kadokawa Shoten had approached him about a Gundam Wing novel. Hajime Katoki and Koji Nakajima from the Gundam Division were spearheading a revival project. "Sure, I'll do it," I volunteered impulsively in my drunken state. "Don't push yourself," he cautioned lightly. "Just a quick, easy short story." "Piece of cake," I assured him breezily, thinking it a suitable pastime for my retirement years.

After drinking through the night, I visited my wife's hospital room and was stunned by what I saw. She was straining to stand, berating herself gently, rubbing and patting her atrophied thigh muscles. Her only wish was simple yet fervent: "I want to go home soon." She refused to accept defeat. No matter how much I pleaded, discharge depended solely on her doctor's approval. "The doctor says I can't practice walking unless you're here," she explained. When lunch arrived, she grasped the spoon with trembling hands, laboriously spooning tiny portions of bland porridge into her mouth. "I don't feel hungry, but I must eat to regain my strength," she insisted. Over two painstaking hours, she forced down every last bite, insisting that any leftovers meant more bed rest. After

each meal, I supported her as she took one tentative step. Resting for several minutes, she would then painstakingly take another. Half a day would pass to travel just five steps to the door. Eating, walking, sleeping, every small act became an exhausting battle for her. Yet within two short weeks, astonishingly, she improved enough that with my presence, the hospital granted permission for brief outings without a wheelchair.

That day was bright and clear; snow from the previous night glistened brilliantly under the sunlight. The permission was merely for a stroll around the hospital grounds, yet it felt farther than any overseas journey. Returning home, I began writing the Gundam Wing novel. My casual attitude felt shameful now. Inside the world of the story, Heero Yuy confronted me coldly, "Is that all you've got?" Wufei scolded, "Don't start if you're not serious." Their words were relentless and piercing.

Nothing had truly ended. I'd just convinced myself otherwise. What had my wife felt as she struggled to rise, what determination drove her steps? How had Hoshiyama perceived me in his final years? How deeply had Ikeda suffered before resigning from Gundam Wing? And how painful had it been for Tomioka to let Ikeda go, entrusting the show to me? The truth was, I didn't fully comprehend any of it. Yet, I understood that claiming misfortune or seeking sympathy was arrogant.

I confessed to Tomioka that despite not knowing how long it would take or acknowledging my own inadequacies, I wanted one final earnest showdown with Gundam Wing. "You're really going to do it?" Tomioka grinned knowingly. "Yes, I'm doing it," I replied firmly. "I figured as much. It's too early to retire. Let's go ahead," he encouraged. Sunrise had previously pitched several projects to me, including one set on Mars. "Mind if I use this for Wing?" I asked. "Go ahead, just knock it out casually," he said, his way of easing pressure. That night's drink tasted especially good.

Three years have since passed.

My wife successfully returned home. She now busies herself with household chores and even helps with my work. When shopping at the local market, we go together. She walks steadily on her own legs, needing only slight support from me occasionally. At night, we venture into town, sometimes drinking together at VOYAGE. Her bright smile greets me every day. While multiple sclerosis hasn't been cured, her doctor suggests it may have entered remission. Since the disease remains a mystery, I prefer to think her recovery stems from her unwavering will to live.

Lately, Ikeda, Tomioka, and I meet regularly for drinks. We never speak of our painful past; our hearts remain light, eyes fixed on the future.

Ikeda is as wildly imaginative as ever, full of boundless enthusiasm, though perhaps overly optimistic, a trait we share.

Life inevitably brings hardship, inexplicable contradictions, and disappointments. Still, I've resolved always to stand back up. Despair and self-pity are worthless. With my limited intelligence, agonizing over my troubles achieves nothing. Neither bitterness nor envy serves any purpose. My task is simply to write. Taking a hiatus embarrasses me, burdens others, and disappoints waiting readers, I'm fully aware I'm an amateur at heart (and apologize deeply!). But my sincerity is genuine. While perhaps presumptuous, like my wife, I strive forward by coaxing whatever rusted talents I possess. At a Kadokawa Shoten party, Tomino kindly encouraged me, "Writing is a good thing. If you stop writing, your life may as well be over."

Currently, I've accepted another new project from Tomioka. Now is the time to push forward, to rise once more.

Knowing the available space, I wrote extensively about these circumstances. As Frozen Teardrop reaches its midpoint, reflecting on my original intent seems fitting.

My apologies to readers expecting amusing anecdotes about the voice actors. Regular content resumes from volume nine, I promise! Thank you for bearing with my lengthy rambling. And truly, feel free to skip this part altogether.

Incidentally, isn't this cover fantastic? Snow White and Heero look beautiful, a testament to Katoki and Sakura Asagi's exceptional talents. Wait until you see the next cover, it's even better. As for the content...well, I haven't written it yet!

Until next time.

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.08 Rhapsody of Quiet Despair (Part.02)

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