

# MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP

新機動戦記ガンダムW  
フローズンティアドロップ

Written by  
**Katsuyuki Sumizawa**

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

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

9 Rhapsody of Quiet Despair (Part.3)



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Mars File.6 (Part.01)</b>	.....	006
<b>Mars File.6 (Part.02)</b>	.....	020
<b>Mars File.6 (Part.03)</b>	.....	034
<b>Heero Yuy File</b>	.....	048
<b>Afterword</b>	.....	074

# **Rhapsody of Quiet Despair**

Mars File.6 (Part.01)

## MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

—The decisive hour drew near—

The Lanagreene Republic's mobile fortress, Babel, had halted on the Isidis Plains, directly across the Elysium Sea. Despite its name, Babel bore no resemblance to the mythical "Tower of Confusion." Instead, it stood roughly the height of a ten-story building, sprawling like a small city across the Martian landscape.

From above, it appeared as twelve massive crawler vehicles, labeled A through L, each side measuring exactly three hundred meters, linked together in a pentagonal formation. Like the flattened net of a dodecahedron, it stretched imposingly across the ground.



Originally designed not for warfare, but as mobile construction equipment to pave and maintain Mars's dried riverbeds, it had been repurposed into a fortress inspired perhaps by Earth's old mobile space fortresses, Barge, or the battleship Libra.

Each crawler bristled with cannons, mobile doll hangars, and weapons factories, truly a frontline stronghold on wheels. Furthermore, this pentagonal configuration, while dense, could rearrange swiftly into a straight line, the sweeping wings of a crane formation, or even a diagonal, goose-flight formation.

In short, it was a transformable citadel capable of instant tactical responses to any battlefield scenario.

\*

I climbed into the cramped cockpit of the Heaven, inherited from my father. The seat was uncomfortable, far too stiff for my liking. I activated the small console monitor and entered the absurdly lengthy password, a philosophical quote from Immanuel Kant set by my father:

"Perpetual peace is not an empty ideal, it is a task imposed on us all to achieve."

Every time I entered this phrase, I pondered deeply, knowing it was the same solemn ritual my father had performed before heading into battle.

In the darkness, the main computer booted up, and indicators flickered to life. Though virtual 3D displays had become standard decades ago, Heaven employed an archaic, direct-illumination system reminiscent of AC-era antiques. But I was accustomed to this vintage method, having piloted the Jack of Clubs, an old Mars Suit restored from the legendary Leo IV, rugged and classic in its simplicity.

The cockpit brightened fully, diagnostics affirming no anomalies. Repairs from the previous battle seemed flawless. Quickly completing my system checks, I connected to the primary power source, ready for deployment at any moment.

The main screen flickered on, revealing the unfamiliar interior of the Mars Suit hangar aboard the battleship Grand Chariot. Visibility was surprisingly limited. I realized I'd have to rely more on hearing, smell, and tactile sensations during combat.

The Queen of Hearts stood silently beside me, visible on the sub-monitor.

"Think you can really handle that thing, Mille?" came Naina's voice, her teasing tone echoing from the Queen's cockpit.

Ignoring my sister, I keyed the comms. "This is Tallgeese Heaven, Mille Peacecraft, reporting readiness."

"Copy that... sixty seconds to launch," announced Catherine Bloom from the control room, initiating the countdown. Professor W, our commander, addressed me next.

"Mille, Babel has deployed over a hundred Virgo IVs in a delta formation. Given their current speed and trajectory, you'll likely be the first to encounter their advance units."

"Understood, Professor W."

"It will be fierce, but your endurance could tip the scales. Hold firm."

"Yes, sir..." Anxiety tugged at my nerves, but an unexpected calm steadied me. Professor W's strategies were infallible; I just had to follow his guidance.

"What's the Heart of Space saying today?"

"Same as always, 1.61803398."

"The golden ratio, huh?"

"The Fibonacci sequence," he clarified. "The universe always seeks this pattern, no matter the circumstance."

Infinite space spiraled outward, guided invisibly by numbers evident even in the natural arrangement of petals, leaves, ammonite shells, and spiral seashells. Only Professor W and his sister, Quaterine, could sense this unseen equation. Their insights into the future were all I trusted.

Our strategic approach, rooted in the Heart of Space, far surpassed the ZERO System's directives, which currently governed the Virgo IVs from Babel under the lingering consciousness hologram of Zechs Merquise, Major General and leader of the Lanagreene Republic. Our chance at victory lay solely within the wisdom of the universe itself.

"Gate open," Catherine's voice echoed in the cockpit.

Ahead, the launch gate slid open, unveiling the Martian night sky. In the distant gaps between winter clouds twinkled Frozen Teardrop. After this "Next Winter" would come the "First Spring" of MC-0023. Perhaps nothing would change. Perhaps everything would.

The lights lining the path to the launch catapult flashed green.

Heaven and I surged forward, accelerating out of the Grand Chariot.

"Tallgeese Heaven, takeoff!"

Unfurling vast white wings, the "Miracle Descended from Heaven" blazed brilliantly, rocketing toward the battlefield. Behind us, the Grand Chariot moved steadily through the Elysium Sea toward Isidis Bay. Farther still, the city of Relena was visible atop Mount Arbor on Elysium Island, shielded entirely by an immense white shell shield reminiscent of Botticelli's Birth of Venus.

It would minimize civilian casualties, yet sorrow filled me at witnessing the harsh limits of total pacifism.

Heaven streaked through the sky, enveloped in brilliant light.

From my cockpit I could not glimpse them, yet I had no doubt the angelic wings were beating with regal grace.

This machine was born of the wreckage of Tallgeese II, destroyed in AC-195. My father had scavenged what remained, re-assembled it by hand, and then layered the frame with the newest Martian technology.



This very suit had once served as the cherished steed of none other than Treize Khushrenada.

Only after piloting it did I realize the suit had a subtle preference, it was designed for a left-handed pilot.

Mobile suits reflect their pilots' physical tendencies. Neural interfaces translated a pilot's movements directly to the machine, imprinting a particular handedness. In combat, a split-second choice, spinning right or left, could mean life or death. Such repeated maneuvers carved out each suit's unique personality.

As a fellow southpaw, I immediately understood. Tallgeese cockpits, in particular, absorbed the characteristics of their pilots. My father wasn't left-handed; Treize must have been. Once I switched the circular shield from the left arm to the right, maneuverability astonishingly improved, and the throttle lever felt perfectly molded to my palm. Its response speed seemed more agile, too.

I wondered if Treize had struggled with a suit designed for a right-handed world or if he had deliberately maintained tradition. His intentions remained elusive.

It was in the first winter of MC-0021 when Major General Zechs Merquise of the Lanagreen Republic declared independence from and war upon the Mars Federation. At that time, no one on Mars could halt his destructive rampage. The Federation itself was still reeling from the assassination of its first president, Milliardo Peacecraft, barely a week earlier; coherent response was impossible.

Localized conflicts swiftly escalated, Zechs devastating the southern hemisphere with ruthless efficiency. The citizens of Lanagreen never doubted his reality: he flooded the media with footage, inserting himself into every frame until the whole planet accepted the illusion of flesh and blood. One grainy clip even showed him standing behind us "mourning" at the President's funeral, pure compositing, but persuasive enough.

Initially, the Federation deployed Mars Suits in resistance, but Zechs, piloting the Gundam Epyon, crushed them effortlessly. Driven back and facing mounting losses, a desperate commander unleashed the secret stockpile of Virgo IV mobile dolls.

It was a fatal mistake.

Epyon's ZERO System hacked the Virgo command net; every unit switched sides in an instant. The balance of power crumbled within months.

Sending unmanned weapons against Zechs meant handing him fresh troops. The Federation withdrew the Virgos and redeployed piloted suits but faced a dire shortage of pilots. Volunteers were nonexistent; forced

conscripts bolted at the first chance, who would willingly charge a horde of autonomous killers?

As a stop-gap they equipped Dolls with anti-hacking software, holding the line for a time, yet ZERO merely rewrote the code, suborned each new wave, and turned their guns around. For nearly a year this cat-and-mouse cycle continued, always ending the same way, with hundreds of pristine weapons transferred to Lanagreene's banner.

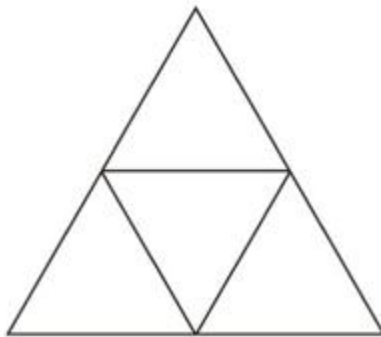
The effort was virtually meaningless.

Some commanders in the upper echelons still worshipped at the altar of automation; time after time they flung fresh Dolls into battle, only to see Zechs seize them. Father chose a different path. He unleashed the nano-defensor, a cloud of microscopic agents first commissioned by Treize himself, now finally reaching a practical stage. It neutralized unmanned units outright, halting Lanagreene's snowballing arsenal. The Federation brass loathed him for it and branded Cyrene Wind, Father's callsign, an enemy. So, he fought on his own, and the Preventers did likewise. On this scarred Martian soil, true resolve was scarce.

Heaven and I crossed the sea. Ahead, on the Isidis Plain of the Martian continent, a vast formation of Virgo IVs waited, far enough from Fortress Babel to operate as a vanguard.

From the air, vantage is everything against mobile dolls.

"That's your 'advance party'?" I muttered. The swarm was absurd. Last time six of us broke sixty dolls, a tenfold mismatch. Today I faced roughly a hundred Virgo IVs alone: the ratio two orders of magnitude worse.



Their array matched Professor W's warning: delta formation, a perfect equilateral triangle, like the net of a regular tetrahedron. Judging from that very formation, they intended to avoid dispersing their forces,

instead concentrating all fire at the spear point. They clearly meant to punch straight through to Elysium Island. Their only weakness, if there even were one, lay behind them. It would be that they weren't prepared for surprise attacks. But, considering our forces, I reconsidered that such worries were probably unnecessary.

Still, with only twelve suits aboard the Grand Chariot, any chance at a surprise attack was nothing but a pipe dream.

"No sane pilot dives head-on into that," I told myself.

"Too bad I'm not sane."

I rammed the throttle open and dropped into a vertical stoop, loosing the nano-defensor from Heaven's wings. A glittering mist of golden motes drifted over the Virgo IVs just as their sensors shifted from search to attack mode, and their accumulated battle data wiped clean in a heartbeat. Every optics panel blinked dead; neo-planet defensors rained out of the air. Twenty, no, thirty units on the triangle's tip froze in place.

Had no operator been present I could have annihilated them all, but someone would surely push reboot, feeding fresh data back. The gap between those pulses, *that* was my window.

"I'll take out as many as I can in one stroke."

I fired the dober gun from Heaven's right arm, swung the beam saber in the left, and cleaved five Dolls before spearing deeper into the pack. Virgos loathe close combat; six, seven more fell in rapid succession. Four rear-rankers lumbered forward and I slagged them with dober rounds.

Shots at the deeper rows bounced off neo-planet shields.

"Too deep," I hissed.

Un-jammed units tried to advance but the paralyzed front rank blocked their path.

"Fine, change the plan."

I wheeled Heaven left in a counterclockwise motion, skewering a dormant Virgo, shearing the next clean in half, cleaving the third from crown to groin.

That made fourteen.

Glancing up, a Doll directly before me flickered to life, optics winking with synthetic beeps. I hacked it down on the diagonal and rocketed straight up.

"Fifteen."

Not bad for a first sortie. I'd hoped for twenty, but desire has no bottom.

High overhead, I studied the field again. Post-fight, the claustrophobia I'd felt earlier had vanished; the world seemed wide and clear. My senses felt laced into every spar of the frame.

"So, this is the Tallgeese mystique."

Even the Jack of Clubs Leo Mk-IV I once piloted never fused with me like this. Heaven was mine now, I would surrender it to no-one.

Below, the re-awakened Virgo IVs floated neo-planet defenders in swarms, knitting an impenetrable dome and re-forming their skewed ranks back into the perfect triangle.

"So dutiful," I thought. Whether by design or default, mobile dolls cannot abide an empty slot; they snapped into even spacing until the area matched the original shape.

"Learned nothing from that skirmish, did you?"

I tipped the stick left. Heaven rolled accordingly, lining up on the triangle's leftmost vertex.

Ground-combat Dolls always step off with the right foot first, a programmer's shortcut to save processing time. Beginning movement while surveying the surrounding environment would take too much computational processing time. So, unless faced with considerable irregularities, they follow the script. Originally, mobile dolls were developed as weapons to fight in outer space where no obstacles existed.

It was perhaps a natural shortcut.

Despite that, from the angle of that first toe I can guess the second, and thus the whole dance that follows.

Having your moves predicted is lethal in a battle machine.

"That's why there's nothing to fear!"

The voice of the Mars Federation Special Military Advisor echoed in my mind, the mentor who taught me the art of mobile suit combat.

Four years ago, in MC-0018, he'd appeared as my private instructor, drilling the basics of warfare deep into my bones. He was also the one who taught me how to predict mobile doll behaviors.

Only later did I discover my teacher's true identity: Chang Wufei, Chief of the Preventer Mars Bureau and, once, a Gundam pilot. Fate seemed to weave strange threads. Mother once told me she had fought a boy soldier named Wufei at Lake Victoria Base, back when she served OZ. It was the same man who felled Treize Khushrenada, the former pilot of the Tallgeese II, the very machine upon which Heaven was modeled.

Why such a legendary figure became my teacher remained a mystery. Perhaps his true mission was investigating within the Mars Federation, but his dedication to my training had always been absolute.

"Mille... you never speak about yourself," Naina had said shortly after returning to Relena City. "Are you unwilling, or simply unable?"

I'd deliberately avoided verbalizing my emotions, convinced that my unstable inner world defied accurate expression. I'd always sensed something vital was missing, though I couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was. I'd drifted through life, skillfully evading conflicts and contradictions, insulated in a bubble of detachment.

"Stand on your own two feet!"

I could still hear Chang Wufei's fierce rebuke. My earlier weakness stemmed from avoiding confrontation with the world around me, proficient only in evasion. I'd mistakenly believed that quiet compliance equaled safety.

"Attack is the best defense! If you only defend, you'll become paralyzed!"

"Never cling to equipment! Weapons are meant to break!"

These words remained engraved in my heart. Before, hesitation had plagued my every move, shaken by an emotional attachment to outdated mobile suits, refusing to see them merely as "killing tools." My sentimental hesitation had cost lives, deaths I bore responsibility for. I wouldn't repeat those mistakes with Heaven.

I'm not alone now, Chang Wufei. You're fighting alongside me.

No longer would hesitation dictate my actions. Better to act decisively and face the consequences than live haunted by regret.

Battle sharpened my instincts once more. True to form, I'd started slowly; my emotional engine always took time to warm. Yet now my senses expanded vividly, altitude, wind, pressure, I could feel everything through my skin. Instrument displays became irrelevant.

The Heart of Space remained constant: 1.61803398. That eternal Fibonacci spiral guided my descent toward the Virgo IV's left flank.

I released nano-defensors again, but the same tactic wouldn't fool them twice. The unit that had rebooted earlier must have fed back anti-nano code; every beam rifle fired at once.

To evade, I slammed the thrusters to max. Savage G-forces slammed into me, pilot's flesh be damned, but Wufei's training let me endure. Now I understood why the seat was so unforgiving: just stiff enough to brace my spine against this crushing load. Any softer or harder and ribs would snap.

Heaven curved left. As I guessed, the Dolls anticipated a right-side evasion path; their response lagged by fractions. The moment their target lock shifted left, I jinked right. Again they lagged. Weaving

through the lattice of beam fire, I held the initiative. Had a human been inside those Virgos, their reaction would have quickened when I reverted to the right, they'd be used to it. For a machine the recalculation was torture.

Gaps yawned in the barrage. I slipped lower, pulled the trigger once, the dober round pinged off a neo-planet defensor. Impressive reflex, shields flipped from offence to defense instantly. But my true target was that crowded roof of defensors itself. Nano-defensor drifted down among them, mixed with a second strain of nanomachines, harmless to Dolls but keyed to electromagnetic fields, over-saturating them. An adaptation of Snow White's Weiss Arrow.

Gold dust clung to the floating defensors; their electromagnetic fields collapsed and they tumbled. A wide hole gaped at the top of the dome as neo-planet defensors cascaded to the ground.

I fired the dober gun on max charge into the breach.

A flash, thunder, then a fireball.

At least five or six Virgos vaporized. Without pausing, Heaven and I plunged through the opening, straight into the writhing center of the formation.

The dober's magazine was dry. I locked it to my shoulder joint, drew the beam saber from behind the shield with my left arm.

"Round two, up close."

And I carved, slashing indiscriminately at anything within reach. Hemmed in, the Virgo IVs could scarcely retaliate before their numbers bled away. Their beloved Delta formation became their doom; uneasy with melee, they fired indiscriminately, hitting their own ranks. I kept circling left in widening spirals, slashing, twisting past stray beams, another ten, another twenty Dolls disabled.

"Time to break off..."

On an open battlefield the Dolls gain the edge. Heaven shot upward again, climbing to high altitude. How much time had I bought? Even after all those kills, two-thirds of the vanguard remained unscathed. Moreover, these were the advanced guard and Babel still sheltered seven hundred more in its main force.

At that moment, a towering blaze erupted at the right vertex of the delta formation.

Zooming in on the monitor, I saw the unmistakable figures of the Warlock, cloaked in black and wielding his infernal scythe, and Prometheus, wrapped in dark green and hefting a massive cruciform

cannon, fiercely attacking the Virgo IVs. Their pilots, Duo Maxwell and the enigmatic, unnamed Trowa Phobos, had joined the fray.

"Outta my way! Fenrir coming through!" Duo's spirited voice crackled cheerfully over the comms as he surged relentlessly forward.

Though Naina vouched for his skills, I found Duo difficult to gauge, reckless one moment, artfully elusive the next. His unpredictability made him as formidable as he was capricious. Phobos, however, was another matter entirely. Silent, efficient, calculating, his tactics coldly purged uncertainty, methodically ensuring victory without uttering a word. Even I, known for being reserved, couldn't match his stoic silence in combat. Quaterine seemed concerned about him, though her true thoughts remained inscrutable to me.

Warlock and Prometheus had already destroyed nearly ten Virgo IVs, close-combat scythe and long-range cannon dovetailing in a syncopated rhythm, slow, fast, slow, fast, that shredded the Dolls. Their arrival doubled our effective strength in an instant; I owe thanks to Professor W and Doctor T for winning them over, and I must someday apologize to the Doctor for calling him an old goat. He still refuses to speak to me.

I considered joining Duo and Phobos, but quickly discarded the thought. Concentrating our forces now would be a tactical blunder. Our mission was distraction, holding the enemy's attention until Professor W's battleship, the Grand Chariot, safely entered Isidis Bay.

Combat erupted again at the delta's apex, where I had first struck. Scheherazade and Queen of Hearts were in the dance: Quaterine and Naina. A crimson hooded mantle and a rainbow-sheened transparent cloak whirled like a waltz. Naina lured clusters of Dolls; Quaterine slipped behind and, with her MG-alloy jambiya, carved each target into glittering scrap. Over and over, tempo accelerating, the Dolls reeled.

Their synergy was proven in the last battle. Swapping offence and defense seamlessly, they kept the Virgo IVs off balance.

To my eye Quaterine looks far more radiant piloting Scheherazade than when she's in Prometheus or King of Spades, those delicate, graceful motions recall the first time I heard her play violin.

Thanks to all of them the original hundred-strong vanguard was halved, fifty left. At this pace total annihilation seemed within reach.

So Heaven and I stayed on the left apex, holding the line. Alone, though, my kill-rate was tapering off; I juke the Dolls' beam volleys and waited for Snow White to arrive. If Heero Yuy joined us, our power would triple again. I steeled myself for a war of attrition.

Victory in the pre-battle felt close, until reality intervened.

A channel opened from Professor W aboard Grand Chariot.

"We've reached Isidis Bay... but a situation's arisen." His voice held troubling urgency. "Heero in Snow White isn't heading your way."

"Why not?"

"We don't know. Even the Heart of Space can't track his movements now," Professor W admitted, clearly perturbed. "He might have gone after President Relena."

Chasing President Relena? I struggled to imagine what crisis could have unfolded.

"There's something else... even worse, "

Heaven's sensors blared warnings. From Babel, a machine approached at tremendous speed, a crimson-and-black, double-headed dragon. Undeniably, it was the Gundam Epyon in its wyvern form.

I quickly refocused. Now wasn't the time for distractions about Relena or Heero; the imminent threat demanded attention. If those remaining fifty Virgos coordinated with Epyon's ZERO System, our chances plummeted. My earlier evasive maneuvers would swiftly become ineffective.

I activated the comms channel.

"Everyone, listen up. Zechs Merquise's Epyon is inbound."

"Well, well, the big boss drops in early," Duo drawled.

"Let's give 'em a welcome!"

His enthusiastic response was strangely reassuring.

"Then each of us handles ten Virgos," Phobos's voice was chillingly composed.

With this team, that seemed feasible, but the greater challenge remained.

"The real issue is who'll face Zechs in the Epyon," Quaterine stated firmly.

"Leave it to me, obviously!" Duo crowed.

"Negative," Phobos cut in, icy. "Quaterine. It has to be you."

Her connection to the Heart of Space was crucial, but sending her alone felt wrong.

"Your prince will gladly assist," Phobos added, meaning me.

Though cooperation was a given, his casual delegation rankled.

The label tasted off; I don't mind helping, but being handed a partner like a chess piece rankled.

"So that role doesn't suit you, Nameless?" I shot back.

"No particular desire to volunteer," he said evenly.

"No, Mille's mentor will handle Zechs," Naina interjected unexpectedly.

My mentor could mean only one person: Chang Wufei, Preventer Mars branch chief.

Emerging from the northern Utopia Sea onto Isidis Plains, a high-speed hovercraft named VOYAGE had already docked. At its open hangar bay stood a pure-white machine, arms crossed defiantly, the Gundam Epyon Bai.

My heart surged with pride, seeing that majestic suit for the first time, knowing Chang Wufei himself piloted it.

## **Rhapsody of Quiet Despair**

Mars File.6 (Part.02)

The Gundam Epyon Bai.

It was the first time I'd ever laid eyes on that machine.

Knowing Chang Wufei was piloting it sent a rush of heat through my chest.

He called the mobile suit Natakū, apparently a name once borne by his late beloved wife. Beyond that, he'd never shared the details.

With his arrival, the skirmish on the Isidis Plains was about to take a dramatic turn.

The bitter wind howled relentlessly across the icy plain, tightening the tension in the air.

My side console beeped softly, signaling an encrypted message via secret line from the Voyage.

The sender was identified as Preventer "Kathy."

Quickly disabling the highest security level and decrypting the message revealed, "All units withdraw. Remaining Lanagreene forces engaged in operations will be eliminated entirely by the Mars Branch Chief."

"What?"

Even I couldn't hide my shock.

In other words, Master Chang was saying he would face Zechs's Epyon and the remaining fifty Virgo IV units on this battlefield single-handedly.

He's as confident as ever, I thought wryly.

"Don't interfere unless you want to become collateral damage," I imagined hearing Chang Wufei's calm yet assertive voice.

I'd heard Epyon was built specifically for dueling. I also knew it had catastrophic destructive capabilities. And I understood well enough that Wufei possessed both the skill and fiery spirit to utilize it fully. Fighting him was pointless. He'd decided every other presence on that battlefield was his enemy to destroy.

"Yes, yes..." I sighed inwardly, a habit of mine.

I could almost hear my old master's voice barking in my head: "One 'yes' is enough!" When the Master made up his mind, opposing him was unwise.

Another transmission followed, this time from Professor W.

"This is the Grand Chariot. We'll follow the Mars Branch Chief's directive."

A rendezvous point flashed onto my navigation screen.

"This is Heaven. Copy that."

We'd achieved enough already. There was no need for reckless heroics. I withdrew from the battlefield. Naina and Quaterine quickly followed suit, but Duo remained stubbornly defiant.

“You’ve gotta be kidding! Since when do we hand the big kill to some crusty old geezer?”

“I’m heading out first, mutt,” says Nameless, as Prometheus rocketed away.

“You too?! Come on, we’ve barely broken a sweat!”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you’d been taking it easy. I’ve done more than my share.”

“Dammit, easy for you to say with that smug face! I can still fight!”

But Duo seemed to relent when Natakū transformed rapidly into its three-headed Wyvern mode, and scythes through the air above the Virgo delta formation. Realizing Wufei was no longer listening, Duo grumbled angrily but finally started to fall back. Even he seemed overawed by Wufei’s ferocity.

As expected, the Virgo units stationed at each point of the delta formation pursued us. Our staggered withdrawal broke their formation badly. A tiny gap appeared among the densely packed neo-planet defenders at the delta’s core, a chance the Epyon Bai would never overlook.

The three-headed Wyvern dove into that narrow opening, transforming back into its mobile suit form mid-descent. Immediately, it swung its beam trident wide. The straggling Virgos were sliced apart like paper.

As soon as the Epyon Bai touched down, the plains erupted into blazing red flames. Violent tremors shattered the ground, fissures spreading rapidly, releasing massive rocks into the air as if defying gravity.

It felt as though the war god Natakū himself had descended.

The floating debris dragged several neo-planet defenders back down, shattering them upon impact. Exactly how this was possible remained unclear, but I guessed it was due to the electromagnetic resonance devices installed in the mobile suit’s feet.

The widening chasms destabilized the Virgos’ footing, forcing their auto-balancing systems into overdrive, delaying their responses. The formation crumbled completely, leaving Epyon Bai with an expanding open battlefield around it.

Without hesitation, Epyon’s dragon fang arm unleashed a barrage of devastating energy blasts. The Virgos at the front instantly disappeared in explosions, unable to deploy their defenders in time. Such overwhelming power and speed surpassed anything I’d ever witnessed.

“When attacking solo, dive straight into the enemy’s core and scatter them immediately, that’s the most effective tactic,” Wufei had taught me once, and now he demonstrated it masterfully.

My earlier maneuver had attempted something similar, but the difference in power, speed, and numbers was staggering. Clearly, I still had much to learn.

Spinning violently like a cyclone, the Epyon Bai obliterated another dozen Virgos in seconds. Soon, the battlefield opened wide at its heart, energy blasts ripping through every direction.

Wufei was deliberately baiting Zechs Merquise into the open.

In this brutal context, a duel seemed almost childish. Yet, it was exactly Wufei's style, to stake his entire existence on combat.

Answering his unspoken challenge, Zechs's crimson Epyon landed directly opposite Wufei. The distance between them was precisely calibrated, the perfect space for mobile suits, a hair-trigger balance of offense and defense.

The two mobile suits faced off silently for what felt like an eternity.

Over five minutes passed since my withdrawal, yet neither had engaged.

Even the surrounding Virgos stood eerily motionless. It was surreal, like ancient gladiators or medieval knights locked in a dramatic stare-down.

Naina's voice crackled over comms.

"They're battling over Virgo command through their ZERO Systems."

ZERO could hijack control of the Virgos' remote and automatic systems, but Preventer must have developed specialized anti-hacking software installed in Epyon Bai. Zechs, recognizing the threat, was likely countering by rapidly rewriting even stronger code.

Now Wufei and Zechs engaged in a fierce digital battle, echoing the year-long software arms race between the Mars Federation and Lanagreene Republic.

Thirty Virgos remained. Adding both Epyons, there were thirty-two units altogether. Would it become thirty-one versus one, or an even split of sixteen each? The outcome would shift the entire battle.

The Virgos' identification signals flickered rapidly, a chess match in its opening moves. With sixteen Virgos, each side mirrored a complete set of chess pieces.

The stalemate surprised me; seeing Wufei employ ZERO right from the outset hinted at a profound shift in his philosophy. He'd always insisted on fighting purely by his own strength.

But perhaps he'd simply recognized the value of fully integrating with his machine. Maybe, by calmly evaluating the strategic situation, he was showing me how to fight without useless pride or stubbornness.

“A weapon’s true purpose is revealed only in battle. If you fail to master its capabilities, your fate is death,” he’d once lectured me. He was living that truth now, a lesson demonstrated in real-time.

Minutes after my withdrawal, combat erupted again. From the monitors of my Tallgeese Heaven, it was now impossible to distinguish clearly between the opposing sides or judge who held the advantage. The night had grown profoundly dark, stretching the limits of my long-range infrared scopes.

The duel between white and crimson Epyons remained poised to explode at any second. The true battle would start only after the Virgos dwindled further.

Our initial distraction tactics, halving enemy forces, had proven decisive. If Wufei had faced a full hundred Virgos, the strategy would have failed spectacularly.

In an unnecessarily prolonged battle, it was painfully obvious that Wufei, a flesh-and-blood warrior, would stand at a significant disadvantage compared to Zechs Merquise.

Therefore, I felt justified in concluding that our original objective, disrupting the enemy’s vanguard, had succeeded as intended.

With this reassurance, I swiftly made my way toward the designated rally point.

Our designated rally point was the battleship Grand Chariot, anchored in Isidis Bay.

As I made my way there, an unsettling sensation crept over me.

*Something, or someone, was exerting control over this battlefield.*

An intentional presence permeated the atmosphere. The realization struck me suddenly.

Yet, it wasn’t Zechs Merquise of the Lanagreene Republic, nor Preventer Mars Branch Chief Chang Wufei. It wasn’t even someone sensitive to the “Heart of Space,” like Quaterine or Professor W.

I couldn’t pinpoint a single person who might be responsible, but the feeling refused to dissipate.

For a brief moment, I considered dismissing it as my imagination running wild.

However, Quaterine’s words, uttered as she also returned, turned my uncertainty into conviction.

“This is strange... I feel like someone’s been watching us for a while now.”

“Is it the Heart of Space?” I asked.

“No, it feels different somehow...” she responded quietly.  
If Quaterine felt it, there was no mistake.  
Perhaps it was the legendary God of War, said to dwell on Mars.  
Or maybe, just maybe, it was the weight of a history steeped in malice.

By the time Tallgeese Heaven and I landed on the battleship Grand Chariot, anchored in Isidis Bay, Naina’s Queen of Hearts and Quaterine’s Scheherazade had already arrived and were being moved into the hangar.

A few minutes later, Duo’s Warlock and Nameless’s Prometheus docked as well.

Of all our machines, my Tallgeese Heaven had suffered the most significant damage. The dober gun was completely drained of energy, and the nano-defensors were nearly exhausted.

A single docking bay in the mobile suit hangar remained conspicuously empty. Heero Yuy’s Snow White still hadn’t returned.

Despite earlier claims of barely breaking a sweat, Duo and Nameless headed straight for the showers, continuing their animated argument, though it was mostly Duo’s voice I could hear.

Naina, Quaterine, and I made our way up to the bridge, where we were greeted warmly by Catherine.

“I’m glad you all made it back safely,” she smiled.

“Yeah, somehow...”

Glancing towards the captain’s chair, I noticed Doktor T sitting there, arms folded, his back rigidly facing us. His displeasure radiated clearly, even without seeing his expression directly.

The main monitor displayed live footage from a surveillance satellite, focused on Natakū’s relentless battle on the Isidis Plains. The audio was muted.

Doktor T was entirely absorbed, watching intently.

I wondered briefly how many Virgo Chang Wufei had managed to sway to his side and whether he held the upper hand. Yet, these concerns weren’t mine to harbor. No matter the circumstances, I knew Wufei would grasp victory.

I could already hear his sharp rebuke.

“I haven’t fallen so far that I’d need your pity!”

I observed the screen silently for a while longer, though the dark and noisy feed made details impossible to discern. I stole another glance at Doktor T, noticing his eyes darting minutely, clearly comprehending every detail of the unfolding battle.

Yet, I remained silent. The awkwardness was palpable. Part of me wanted to apologize, but I feared reopening old wounds, so I refrained from speaking.

Eventually, I quietly stepped away from the captain's chair.

My thoughts returned to the unsettling sensation I'd felt earlier, the sense of being watched. Could this surveillance satellite have triggered that feeling? Yet, instinctively, I knew it was something else, something observing us from tens of millions of kilometers away.

At the far end of the bridge, Professor W was deep in conversation with someone. His companion was a young woman, her golden hair cascading down to her waist, dressed in the unmistakable red blazer of a girls' school uniform.

I'd seen that uniform before, in an old photograph. It was from the Peacecraft Academy of the Sanc Kingdom.

"You're wrong, Quatre Winner," she said sharply.

"No, Dorothy, you're the one who's mistaken," Professor W replied.

President Dorothy T. Catalonia, known as the "Neo-Titanium Lady," should have been much older, which meant...

"Just because I'm a holographic projection doesn't give you the right to speak so informally..."

"My apologies, Madame President. But could you at least choose a different appearance? It's hard not to slip into old habits."

"It's entirely my decision which era or form I choose to take."

Professor W, sensing our approach, quickly used a small remote to pause "Dorothy" and turned to us.

"Ah, you returned sooner than expected."

"Professor, who, or rather, what, is this?"

I struggled to find the right words to describe the paused projection, graceful girl or hologram?

"This is a holographic AI program transmitted from Earth. Preventer Mars Branch Lieutenant Kathy Po delivered it earlier."

The technology was reminiscent of the virtualizer and Zechs Merquise's Lanagreene Republic programs. Earth's recent technological leaps were truly astounding.

"Given the nature of Preventer's organization, we usually only receive direct orders without any context of higher political intentions or decisions," Professor W explained evenly. "But without real-time orders from Earth, adapting to rapidly shifting circumstances becomes challenging. And considering the vast distance between Mars and Earth, seeking constant approval is impossible. We also can't delegate all decisions to Mars Branch Chief Master Chang alone."

I realized then why communication with Earth couldn't happen in real time.

The sensation of being watched, distances varying from fifty-six million to four hundred million kilometers, depending on orbital positions, made perfect sense now. If my intuition was correct, the force controlling our battlefield originated from Earth.

"That's likely why they sent us this holographic AI, modeled after President Dorothy's personality," Professor W remarked wryly, turning back to the paused Dorothy. "Though, since it mirrors her personality and thinking so accurately, interacting with it is incredibly challenging..."

He scratched his head before reactivating the hologram.

Dorothy resumed, momentarily surprised to see me, then quickly smiled with gentle understanding. Still, her gaze was fiercely authoritative, paradoxically powerful coming from such a youthful visage.

"At least, her political analysis and situational assessments are current, providing us with a direct line into Earth's thinking... although compared to the ZERO System, she's hardly remarkable."

"Quatre Winner..." the Dorothy hologram scowled. "My computational capabilities far surpass ZERO. Please refrain from such comparisons."

Her noble, prideful assertion was remarkably human for an AI.

"You see?" Professor W sighed, acutely aware of Quaterine and Naina listening behind me. "For example, we Preventer Mars branch personnel have been backing the Federation without explicit orders from headquarters. But with this AI, we know exactly what President Dorothy thinks about that."

"And what *does* she think?" Quaterine asked.

"Yes, I'm curious to hear this as well," Naina added.

"Let's hear directly from her," Professor W said, turning to Dorothy.

"Madame President, as I asked earlier, we're currently assisting the Federation, "

"Absolutely unacceptable!" Dorothy interrupted sharply. "How dare you compromise the neutrality and impartiality of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation? Preventers from the Earth Sphere must never meddle in conflicts, let alone take sides."

"That's your official stance, correct?" Professor W clarified.

"Of course," Dorothy replied coolly.

We all drew a collective breath. Her expression had noticeably hardened.

Dorothy fixed Quaterine and Professor W with a piercing stare.

"May I ask a question now?"

"By all means."

"Why did you choose to side with the Federation?"

"Because we believed President Relena of the Martian Federation was right," Quaterine answered promptly.

Dorothy immediately countered, "Whether she's right is irrelevant. Let me rephrase: what is Preventer's original mission and role?"

Quaterine, clearly understanding Dorothy's intent, answered, "Preventing wars through intelligence gathering and eliminating armed threats."

"Exactly. The purpose of the current Operation Mythos was to swiftly conclude the Martian Civil War."

It was the first time I'd heard Earth officially label this conflict the "Martian Civil War." Federation media typically called it the Mars Civil War or Lanagreene Conflict.

I recalled once telling Doktor T, "You don't understand anything," yet now I realized it was probably me who didn't grasp the full picture.

Dorothy continued addressing only Quaterine and Professor W.

"The fate of the Martian Federation was sealed when second president Relena Peacecraft declared nonviolence and disarmament. Had you not interfered, this war would already be over."

"But then Relena would have been assassinated!" Quaterine protested.

"Precisely! My dear friend Relena *should* have become a martyr, a pure, graceful, beautiful white rose sacrificed for peace. Her death would have inspired humanity to genuinely strive for peace."

"That's absurd!" I blurted, unable to help myself.

I thought it was an outrageous argument.

Did the real President Dorothy think this way too?

Dorothy noted my shock and adjusted her tone.

"Then consider the consequences if this war continues, not the victory or defeat, but its impact on lives and the environment."

"Many casualties will result."

I was forced to give an obvious answer.

She launched into an impassioned speech.

"With unmanned weapons dominating the Martian Civil War, soldier fatalities might decrease, but environmental devastation is guaranteed. This impact isn't limited to Mars. The longer this war drags on, the more demand there will be for weapons, *and* the Earth Sphere's military-industrial complex, which we've painstakingly weakened. Mars's own arms industry would also grow rapidly. War feeds the economy through supply and demand, inevitably repeating humanity's historical cycle of conflict. Decades of our efforts would be wasted, because of you all!"

Quaterine and I couldn't respond; Dorothy gave us no room.

“Early resolution of the war is the top priority. It's not for us to determine who holds ‘justice.’ If you need a cause, consider the long-term: assassinating Relena and dissolving the Northern Martian Federation is far more justified if it prevents future conflicts.”

Quaterine spoke cautiously, “Then Preventer should have sided with, ”

“Obviously, the Southern Mars Alliance represented by the Lanagreen Republic. Initially, Major General Zechs Merquise advocated independence from Earth, but now he seeks affiliation, which our government approved months ago. Conversely, the Northern Federation continues demanding complete independence. It's clear who Earth's adversary truly is. We will take responsibility for selecting a new Mars president after the war and for Mars Reconstruction. So please rest assured—”

Unable to hold back, Naina interjected, “But *that* Zechs is just a hologram.”

“I'm currently a hologram myself. Am I wrong in my assertions?”

“You have no soul.”

“I'm not here to debate religion or philosophy, but if possessing a ‘soul’ is your criterion, even a criminal illegally entering Mars would be preferable to Major General Zechs.”

It was an extreme analogy, but perhaps advanced programming suited politics better.

“If you deny beings who aren't flesh and blood, Quaterine, what about you? You're also artificially created from a *test tube*, that's hardly different from the artificial existence of Major General Zechs.”

Dorothy seemed deliberately provocative.

Quaterine lowered her head, her small shoulders trembling slightly. I wanted desperately to shout, “That's not true!” but Naina silenced me.

“If Major General Zechs's consciousness remains from the Epyon and Libra, his mindset is extremely dangerous. Libra once attempted humanity's eradication,” Naina argued mournfully, her calmness evaporating.

“That was your father, Milliardo Peacecraft's, intention. If I must be frank, at the time, I agreed with him.”

Naina was visibly shaken, losing confidence whenever her father was mentioned.

Dorothy pressed, “Yet here I am, once potentially dangerous, now safeguarding Earth's peace. I, too, evolved and changed. Artificial intelligence can similarly learn and improve, developing genuine ‘emotions’ more than you realize.”

Naina, distraught, argued, “But if we lose, won't Relena's ideals be crushed under Zechs's dictatorship?”

"If 'total pacifism' truly resides in your hearts, it will eventually manifest. Isn't that enough? Why not trust Zechs?"

Quaterine and Naina fell silent. Dorothy's words seemed irresponsible, mere sophistry. Speaking of possibilities was easy, but, "Peace must be won by one's own hands. The future must be shaped through personal resolve."

That's what Chang Wufei had taught me.

Dorothy smiled slightly, sighing, "Besides, was Relena's 'total pacifism' genuinely her wish?"

Her surprising comment felt like it invalidated everything she'd previously said.

"When Relena became the second Martian Federation President, she confided in me, saying, 'I wish Heero would kill me soon.' She seemed sincere. Yet isn't it strange? Advocating ideals publicly, yet privately wishing death. If it were a true ideal, why wouldn't she try to see it through to the end? Deep down, hadn't she realized the limitations of 'total pacifism?'"

"Th-that was—" I interjected. "That was before President Relena read the Peacecraft Files. She doesn't feel that way anymore."

"Are you certain? I hear Relena is currently missing."

I couldn't reply. People's emotions weren't straightforward; they fluctuated and doubted.

A voice interrupted from behind, "That's why Heero went looking for her."

Turning, I saw Duo munching a tomato sandwich.

"Nameless, this old hag doesn't get it."

Beside him, Nameless crunched into an apple.

"Don't expect miracles. She's just a machine."

Dorothy glared back before sharply snapping, "Quiet! As Preventers, you owe me respect!"

Duo scoffed, "Funny. How can we be sure *you're* not Zechs's ZERO-infected fake?"

Dorothy couldn't reply immediately, lacking the "soul" needed for self-justification.

"Zechs can't be trusted," Duo continued. "He kills without remorse and lies effortlessly."

He was right. That Zechs was using fabricated footage to make the people of the Lanagreene Republic think he actually existed.

"Besides, how can we trust someone who refuses to die?"

Nameless added bluntly, "The lady spouting nonsense here doesn't die either."



He casually tossed aside the apple core he'd finished eating. It passed straight through Dorothy's forehead, leaving a small stain on the wall behind her as it fell to the floor.

"The real President of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation gives orders safely from afar," he stated flatly.

Dorothy remained silent.

"We're the ones fighting this war. We don't take orders from someone unwilling to risk their life."

Nameless turned to Quaterine, his tone softer now.

"Don't worry, Quaterine. Speaking from experience, a president who can't be assassinated is nothing but a nuisance to terrorists."

I didn't think that was particularly comforting, but Quaterine nodded meekly.

"Y-yeah."

It was surprising. I'd never seen Nameless talk so openly, nor had I ever seen Quaterine look so vulnerable. It wasn't the kind of comfort I could offer.

Duo, licking mayonnaise and mustard from his fingers, spoke up. "If Zechs takes control, his dictatorship could last forever."

While Zechs might change if he truly had emotions, it was more likely that he wouldn't, indeed, the latter seemed far more probable.

"And besides," Duo continued with a mischievous grin, "speaking of criminals illegally entering Mars, I happen to know someone who fits the bill perfectly. If there's another Martian presidential election, I'd vote for that no-good bastard of a father over Zechs any day."

Outlaw Father Maxwell.

Naina chuckled softly. I'd heard she'd admired Father Maxwell since she was a child. If he were to run, I'd probably vote for him too.

The heavy atmosphere from earlier had noticeably lifted.

Seeing the change, Professor W smiled gently and turned off Dorothy's projection.

"That was enlightening. Quaterine, this settles our course of action."

"What do you mean, brother?"

"We're severing ties with the Earth Sphere, leaving Preventer, and fighting this war our own way."

Doktor T, who'd been silently observing from the captain's chair, rose abruptly. The main screen showed the ongoing battle.

"I agree. But will Wufei accept this?"

"We were only temporary staff to begin with; it shouldn't be an issue," Quaterine remarked.

"I've been freelance from the start," said Catherine, turning to Nameless. "Right, Nameless?"

“Yeah...”

“By the way, not that I care, but make sure you clean up that apple core and the stain on the wall.”

“...Understood.”

Nameless seemed like a domesticated wild animal. It wasn't something I felt comfortable laughing at.

Summoning my courage, I approached Doktor T.

“Um, Doktor...” My heart raced as I spoke. “I previously said something inappropriate. I'd like to retract it.”

“Hmph, that? Forget it, I'm not as soft as you think.”

His intense glare suggested there wouldn't be a second chance. It was a different kind of intimidation from Chang Wufei's.

Glancing at the monitor, I asked, “What's happening?”

“Wufei's struggling. Initially, it was sixteen versus sixteen, but now it's eight versus thirteen. His doping boost is probably wearing off.”

“We need to send reinforcements!”

“We're no longer Preventers. Didn't we just establish that?”

“But—”

Professor W interrupted decisively.

“We have a new mission.”

Everyone turned to face him.

“The battleship Grand Chariot will now forcibly infiltrate the mobile fortress Babel, aiming to destroy the Virgo IV control system and Major General Zechs Merquise's ZERO System.”

“Finally, some real action!” Duo exclaimed, flicking his long braid energetically.

Nameless, mopping the floor, muttered, “No objections.”

Ultimately, this mission would support Chang Wufei. Naina must have felt the same, quickly agreeing.

“Understood.”

“Brother, about Heero Yuy and Relena...” Quaterine hesitated, sensing something through the Heart of Space and seeking Professor W's judgment.

“Yes, no doubt about it. Both of them are already inside Babel.”

—Heero is racing through the darkness—

The time was now midnight plus thirty-seven minutes and thirty-five seconds.

Our next mission officially began.

## **Rhapsody of Quiet Despair**

Mars File.6 (Part.03)

## 47 MINUTES PAST MIDNIGHT

—The Martain night weeps—

Deimos, the second moon of Mars, known poetically as the frozen teardrop, slipped silently from the heavens, vanishing into the western horizon. Its counterpart, Phobos, remained hidden behind dense, heavy clouds drifting steadily in the opposite direction.

From my vantage point in the battleship Grand Chariot's hangar bay, as I performed the final maintenance checks on Tallgeese Heaven, I watched this celestial tableau unfold through a small window at my side. Soon, gentle flurries of snow began their slow, graceful descent from the dark sky above.

Ten minutes had nearly elapsed since the initiation of our next operation.

Professor W had spoken gravely before our departure.

"This battle will become the Gettysburg of Mars."

Gettysburg, a name synonymous with one of the fiercest, bloodiest battles of the American Civil War, a decisive turning point that altered the very tide of history.

"Dorothy was, in a sense, right," he continued. "This war must end swiftly. It's our only path to preventing the revival of the military-industrial complex."

An expedited end to this war was crucial, a victory, not merely an armistice, was imperative. Defeat was absolutely not an option for us.

Of course, achieving this would be no simple task. It demanded unwavering resolve.

But if we failed to make our stand here, humanity's future would inevitably spiral downward into an easy, yet suffocating peace, enforced by tyranny.

As he climbed into Prometheus's cockpit, Nameless remarked bluntly, "Then maybe we shouldn't call it 'Gettysburg.'"

"True enough," Professor W quickly conceded, adjusting his tone.

"After all, we wouldn't want history recording something as dramatic as the 'Martian Civil War.'"

Behind me, Naina and Quaterine exchanged weary words.

"We're almost completely out of extra weapons and ammunition. Even our remaining supply of nano-particles is critically low. This sortie will exhaust everything we have left."

"According to estimates, the fortress houses over seven hundred mobile dolls. And yet, we're sorely lacking in numbers. This fight is

certain to be brutal," Quaterine murmured. Behind her glasses, her usually composed eyes wavered with an uncommon vulnerability.

She made no effort to hide her unease, perhaps because it was something we all secretly shared.

Professor W's plan was audacious: ram Grand Chariot directly into the fortress Babel and dismantle it from within. Once inside, the confined spaces would give our smaller force the advantage.

Yet, a significant obstacle remained. The location of the central computer linking the mobile dolls' command system with the ZERO System was still unknown. We would have to locate and sever its control circuits amidst heavy combat.

Certainly, the plan bordered on madness.

How many of us would live through this?

If we failed, history would ridicule us as reckless fools.

"But running away isn't an option!" Duo shouted from inside the cockpit of the Warlock, where he was finishing his inspection. "You don't run because things get tough, things get tough because you run!"

It was an odd phrase, but it seemed to lift the oppressive weight that had settled over us.

"Exactly right," I responded, smiling.

I felt courage rising within me.

There was no shame in confronting the impossible.

We would face the looming wall ahead, heads held high.

### **33 MINUTES BEFORE MIDNIGHT**

*Is it truly possible to live while denying your own heart?*

Heero Yuy silently posed the question to himself. Once, he'd been taught to live by following his emotions, but putting that into practice had seldom been his reality.

Wrapped securely in its cloak, Snow White stretched out its pristine white wings, soaring high above into Mars's upper stratosphere.

Heero was already focused on the Counterstrike, the so-called retaliatory operation.

Inside the dim cockpit, his fingers flew across the keyboard, precisely entering targeting coordinates into the buster rifle's aiming system.

The ZERO System aboard Snow White had calculated that a direct strike on the Babel mobile fortress would be the most effective move once it advanced onto the Isidis Plain for an assault on Elysium Island.

Heero had accepted this proposal.

But he'd shared this with no one.

He trusted few among the Preventers, Professor W included. And the Mars Federation, even less so. He resolved to carry out this operation alone.

Before boarding Snow White, however, he'd briefly visited the medical facility's room where Milliardo Peacecraft lay comatose.

"I'm heading out."

It had been one week since Milliardo launched a solo assault against the Babel fortress with the Tallgeese Heaven, returning gravely wounded to Relena City. He'd been unconscious ever since, communicating with no one.

Seeing Milliardo, his former rival, in this condition deeply unsettled Heero.

"Why do you keep fighting?"

This man, presumed dead, had chosen, by his own volition, to involve himself in the conflict on Mars. Cyrene Wind had piloted the Tallgeese Heaven, but who had really sat within that cockpit?

Heero pondered.

The question could be restated as, "What drives him?" or "What deep-rooted motive governed his actions?"

Was he humiliated because someone else had appropriated his identity, becoming the first president of the Mars Federation?

Did remnants of his former self, known as Zechs Merquise, feel compelled to atone for declaring war as the representative of the Lanagreen Republic, plunging Mars into conflict?

Or perhaps it was simply to protect his family, Relena, Noin, Naina, and Mille?

"No..." Heero murmured, reflecting upon his own uneasy place in "peace."

"Neither you nor I belong anywhere but the battlefield."

That was it.

Heero left Milliardo's room and launched into the night sky.

Snow White's buster rifle was now trained directly on the Babel fortress.

Its vast white wings spread wide; from this near-stratospheric altitude, detection by the enemy was improbable.

His targets were the twin fusion reactors at the fortress's central core, linking the dodecahedron-shaped structure. Destroying these would halt Babel's advance, disabling backup support for Virgo IV and Gundam Epyon.

"Target locked."

Without hesitation, Heero pulled the trigger.

A brilliant beam of energy erupted from the buster rifle, effortlessly piercing Babel's central core. The first energy cartridge was ejected, swiftly replaced by the next.

Through the scope monitor, Heero selected his next target, fully anticipating retaliation.

"Here they come..."

Anti-air fire from Babel blazed into the sky, pinpointing his location from the first shot.

"More precise than I expected..."

Countless beams of light converged upon Snow White. Unfazed, Heero calmly adjusted his aim.

Only one fusion reactor remained.

Minor beam strikes were harmless; the nano-defensor cloak and Gundanium armor would handle them.

As he tightened his finger around the trigger, Babel's barrage suddenly ceased.

At nearly the same moment, the cockpit's comm screen flashed on, revealing a young girl's face.

"Cease your attack, Heero Yuy," she commanded.

"Relena Peacecraft is aboard this fortress."

Heero's finger froze mid-motion.

"My name is Stella Noventa. You and my great-grandfather have quite a history, or so I'm told."

Heero remembered a girl named Sylvia Noventa whom he'd once encountered in Marseille. The girl on the monitor resembled Sylvia closely.

"Sylvia Noventa, whom you met years ago, is my aunt. She currently serves as Earth Sphere Unified Nation's ambassador to Mars."

"Where is Relena?"

"She immediately responded to our overtures of peace," Stella explained coolly. Clearly, she'd leveraged Sylvia's name to coax Relena here alone, otherwise impossible given Relena's presidency.

"She is now our captive aboard Babel. Continue your attack, and we cannot guarantee her safety. Considering the consequences for the Perfect Peace Program, your only choice is clear: discard your weapons and surrender immediately."

"Understood."

Heero responded without hesitation.

"I'll discard Snow White and surrender."

He spoke with detached calm, delivering one final condition.

"But no harm must come to Relena."

His voice deepened dangerously.

"And release her at once. Otherwise, everyone aboard that fortress dies."

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

"Let me be clear. I'll use every skill at my disposal to find you. No matter where you hide aboard that fortress, I'll hunt you down."

Heero, normally taciturn, spoke decisively.

"I'm a specially trained killing machine. I'm also the one who killed your great-grandfather. Understand clearly, I show no mercy."

He paused briefly, letting his threat sink in.

"I'll annihilate you."

"What disturbing threats," Stella managed coolly, though her pupils trembled slightly.

"This isn't a threat, it's a promise. I'll give you one more chance. Release Relena."

"That's impossible," Stella's voice quivered. "You said no harm, but we must physically confirm if she truly is President Relena."

"I see. Transmission over."

Heero abruptly terminated the call.

Swiftly, he concealed the buster rifle within Snow White's cloak, retracting its wings as the Gundam plunged sharply downward toward Isidis Bay.

Mars's gravity, a mere third of Earth's, pressed against him.

As promised, Heero intended to abandon his machine beneath the waves.

Moments later, Snow White crashed into the bay, throwing up towering waves as it sank beneath the surface.

The impact was trivial to Heero.

Now he simply had to escape the cockpit and turn his "surrender" into infiltration.

Yet even now, Heero continued deceiving his own heart.

## **13 MINUTES BEFORE MIDNIGHT**

Inside a windowless guest chamber deep within the mobile fortress Babel, Relena Peacecraft found herself astonished by the profound silence, so starkly at odds with the chaos she'd experienced only minutes before.

Gone were the violent tremors of cannon fire, the urgent alarms, and the hurried footsteps of soldiers outside her locked door. Clearly, her confinement here marked her as a hostage, not an honored guest, a reality Relena understood quite well. Yet, she still held onto hope that peace negotiations remained possible. If the Mars Federation

government offered meaningful concessions, she believed peace could yet be restored.

Relena sat quietly in a chair tucked into the corner of her prison, staring thoughtfully at the portrait of a young boy adorning the opposite wall. The youth wore a dignified, russet-colored tailcoat.

"I know this boy..." she whispered, rising impulsively from her seat to study the painting closely.

The boy appeared fourteen or fifteen, with fine, silver hair gently falling over his right eye and clear emerald eyes gazing distantly at some unknown horizon. As Relena slowly approached the painting, she searched through her memories, yet no one surfaced who matched this image.

She was certain she'd never met or spoken with him, yet an overwhelming sense of familiarity gripped her.

"Oh... his hair color is different," she realized.

Suddenly, a flash of recognition flickered through her mind: a blond-haired boy dressed similarly in russet, shaking hands with a younger boy clutching a toy. Relena couldn't quite recall when she'd witnessed this scene. It felt distant, yet oddly recent, almost as if recalling a forgotten dream. As she struggled to clarify the memory, a voice behind her interrupted.

"That is the 'Portrait of V,' Madame President."

Relena turned swiftly to find Stella Noventa at the heavy door, flanked by two guards holding machine guns.

"He is the one we revere," Stella continued calmly. "Even Major General Zechs acts in accordance with his wishes."

Relena understood now: this was a depiction of the revered leader as a child, someone who presumably grew up to influence the Lanagreene Republic profoundly.

"Then please introduce me to this 'V.' As President of the Mars Federation, I would welcome an opportunity to discuss peace."

"That's impossible," Stella replied. "He is already dead."

"Oh, I see..." Relena felt disappointment, realizing she'd mistaken Stella's reference to "wishes" for the "will" of someone still living. Stella smiled, yet her eyes remained cold.

"I have good news for you, Madame President," Stella said. "Heero Yuy is infiltrating this fortress to rescue you."

"Heero..."

"He also promised to annihilate us. It seems our peace talks have displeased him greatly."

"Annihilate? Did Heero really say that?"

“Yes, precisely. Ridiculous, of course, one man alone can hardly achieve that.”

Relena felt a chill run through her. From her own experience, she knew Heero meant precisely what he said and would attempt the impossible until it either succeeded or became genuinely unattainable.

“Stella, you and your people should leave immediately for the Lanagreen Republic,” Relena urged.

Stella glared skeptically.

“What do you mean?”

“Forget about me. If Heero kills me, it should prevent the Perfect Peace Program from activating. But it would deeply trouble me if you were caught in the crossfire.”

“You misunderstand your position, Madame President,” Stella retorted, her expression openly disdainful.

Relena was merely a prisoner of the Lanagreen Republic and in no position to show concern for those around her.

She should have understood that quite well.

“This is war, and casualties are inevitable. We will continue fighting until the Mars Federation officially concedes defeat. No matter how formidable Heero Yuy may be, retreating is out of the question.”

The guards raised their weapons slightly, their barrels aimed at Relena. Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't have shaken her, but thoughts of potential devastation from the Perfect Peace Program filled her with dread.

“That may be so, but—”

“Major General Zechs is currently engaged in combat operations,” Stella interrupted firmly. “He will return shortly. At that time, you will sign the ceasefire treaty. Until then, please wait here.”

“No, that might already be too late,” Relena insisted.

Stella handed her a small device and remote control.

“This is a hologram projector, pre-loaded with an image trace of the ESUN President. Perhaps conversing with her can relieve your boredom.”

Without another word, Stella and her guards exited, locking the door securely behind them.

Left alone, Relena sank into despair.

“I'm making Heero suffer again because of me.”

Though deeply worried about Stella and her people's fate, Relena's greatest anguish stemmed from the heavy burden Heero would soon carry, a burden arising solely from her own actions. She felt crushed between her yearning for peace and overwhelming guilt towards Heero.

## 55 MINUTES PAST MIDNIGHT

—*Flurries danced silently through the darkness*—

Inside Heaven's cockpit, awaiting deployment, a transmission flashed onto my monitor. It was a broadcast sent simultaneously to every unit, showing Natakū locked in combat against Virgo IVs amidst the lightly snow-dusted Isidis Plain.

"Wufei's still fighting," came Doktor T's voice from the bridge. "His resilience is astounding... he's held out for nearly an hour."

His monotone delivery belied any genuine astonishment.

If the battle still raged, there might yet be time to save Chang Wufei.

The screen switched abruptly to Catherine.

"Two hundred forty seconds until breach," she said quietly.

"Ready to launch whenever you give the word."

"Understood... You're first in."

Her image vanished, returning silence to the cockpit.

Professor W did not appear on the screen.

I wondered briefly what the Heart of Space was whispering now, though perhaps this time it was better left unheard.

## 37 MINUTES PAST MIDNIGHT

Heero raced through darkness.

In under an hour, he'd successfully infiltrated the Babel fortress.

He'd swiftly commandeered a land-hovercraft patrol vehicle, stripped a Lanagreen soldier of his uniform, and infiltrated the fortress dock disguised as an enemy soldier, slipping easily past the stringent security codes and DNA scans. Creating dummy programs and executing rapid hacks were among Heero's specialties.

The Babel fortress, shaped like an unfolded dodecahedron, placed critical facilities at the core of each block. Heero hadn't yet reached the main computer, but even an auxiliary terminal provided sufficient access for intelligence gathering.

"Wufei is still fighting..."

He gleaned information about the intense battle unfolding on the Isidis frontline and quickly surmised the battleship Grand Chariot was preparing an assault, likely a suicidal charge, knowing Professor W and Doktor T as he did.

"I'll give them a little help."

Heero sent deliberately false, almost meaningless data into the mainframe from the terminal, ensuring that Epyon's ZERO System would falter, unable to process the combat situation accurately due to delays verifying conflicting intel.

Simultaneously, he intentionally revealed his infiltration of Babel and his intention to rescue Relena.

Alarms blared throughout the fortress.

Zechs Merquise would inevitably become distracted from his immediate battle against Wufei. If he retained any memories from Libra, he would view Heero Yuy as his greatest threat. The ZERO System would undoubtedly command him to reinforce Babel's internal security.

Alerting the enemy to his presence helped Heero pinpoint their defensive positions. Predictably, guards massed near the guest quarters where Relena was held.

"Location confirmed."

Heero moved swiftly toward her.

He sprinted down the long, narrow corridors, pausing to strategically place timed explosives along vital points. Enemy fire met him head-on, and he responded with decisive bursts of gunfire. When enemy fire grew too intense, he hurled grenades, breaking through without hesitation.

He felt no doubts.

All the weapons, explosives, machine guns, grenades, had been procured on-site.

Step by step, he neared Relena's location.

"Is this truly where I belong?" he wondered, questioning his own heart.

The soldiers within Babel knew the risks, understood death was a possibility. Heero had warned them clearly; no guilt should weigh on him.

Yet guilt mounted steadily within his heart.

Amidst the sporadic gunfire, Heero murmured to himself,

"Why am I fighting?"

A timed bomb detonated, blowing out the power distribution center.

"Who am I fighting for?"

Corridor lights flickered and died amid distant explosions.

"Who's really controlling me?"

Faces flashed vividly through his mind: his mother, Aoi Clark; Odin Lowe, who'd raised him as a killing machine; a nameless girl in a white hat; Doctor J, who had turned him into a Gundam pilot; and Relena Peacecraft.

"Whoever it is, I have no complaints."

Ultimately, this destiny was his choice alone.

## 43 MINUTES PAST MIDNIGHT

The power had been out for roughly five minutes.

Relena endured the profound isolation in absolute darkness.

In the inky gloom, her foot accidentally pressed something on the floor, triggering a faint glow before her. A holographic projection of Dorothy emerged softly from the shadows, likely activated by the device Stella had left behind.

Relena immediately felt something was off. Dorothy appeared as she had years ago, wearing the Peacecraft Academy uniform from their youth. After a brief pause, the hologram Dorothy seemed to understand her surroundings, smiling warmly as she addressed Relena.

“Good evening. It's been a while, Miss Relena.”

Her graceful demeanor was unchanged from the past.

Relena needed confirmation.

“Dorothy, do you remember our previous conversation?”

Given Dorothy's youthful appearance, Relena doubted this hologram reflected the current President of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation's consciousness.

“Of course I do. Martian Calendar Year 0022, Next Spring, when you assumed office as the second president,” Dorothy replied confidently.

It was indeed accurate.

Dorothy glanced around casually.

“Now, Miss Relena, whatever are you doing here? This is the mobile fortress Babel, isn't it? Surely, you're not considering signing a surrender?”

“No, not surrender,” Relena clarified firmly. “I came here to negotiate peace with Major General Zechs.”

“Oh my,” Dorothy laughed softly, mocking. “Still adhering to that incomplete ideal of pacifism, aren't you?”

Relena remained silent, eyes downcast.

“Your pacifism isn't about choosing not to fight, it's about your inability to fight. Your so-called 'peace' is merely wishful thinking. Tell me, how many hearts do you expect to sway with such a defective ideology?”

Relena had no response.

Dorothy pressed further.

“With the Perfect Peace Program in your hands, billions of lives depend upon you. Perhaps it's time you leveraged that. Achieve peace through absolute rule. Even Kant argued that peace is not an ideal but something to be actualized. Isn't that the true mission of the Peacecraft lineage?”

Haltingly, Relena replied,

“A peace built on slaughter is unacceptable.”

“Then you must reject Heero Yuy,” Dorothy’s voice was firm, unyielding. “Reject the Preventers and the entire Mars Federation Forces who fight in the name of peace.”

“I understand,” Relena choked out painfully. “That’s why I’m negotiating peace now.”

“No, you understand nothing. Your actions betray those who trust you and fight in your name. Superficial peace talks won’t end the war!”

If negotiations were truly futile, Relena realized that surrender might be the only path left. The dilemma pressed painfully upon her.

Outside, snow began softly falling again. The Martian night wept silently, mirroring the deep sorrow within Relena’s heart.

## **59 MINUTES PAST MIDNIGHT**

*—Black wings prepared to spread their sinister feathers—*

The battleship Grand Chariot forged ahead through the swirling snowstorm.

The hangar gate slid open, and Heaven and I launched into the frigid Martian night.

Below us loomed the mobile fortress Babel. I quickly spotted the damaged area on one of the two central cores linking its dodecahedron blocks. Curiously, there was no anti-air fire, its eerie defenselessness suggested we could swiftly seize control if we descended now.

An urgent alarm suddenly flashed in my cockpit. From below, a black, spiraling missile shot up rapidly from Babel. I immediately fired my dober gun to intercept, but my first shot missed. Even when my second and third shots struck true, they harmlessly ricocheted off.

This was no missile, its armor was far too robust.

Accelerating upward at staggering speed, it revealed itself as a mobile suit cloaked in enormous black wings. Slowly, the sinister wings unfolded, unveiling a Gundam at its core, gripping a buster rifle with both arms.

Wing Gundam Zero.

The legendary mobile suit had returned, reborn amidst Mars’ snow-veiled darkness. Yet, this iteration was unmistakably different, its jet-black wings exuding menace.

A sudden communication flickered onto my monitor. A boy with silver hair and piercing emerald eyes stared silently, coldly, before lowering his gaze to meticulously fold a blue paper crane.

I watched, frozen in astonishment. Though his face bore an angelic serenity, something malevolent simmered beneath the surface. Finished, he held the origami crane toward the screen.

“My name is Vingt Khushrenada,” the silver-haired demon announced calmly. “I am the one who founded OZ.”

The next instant, Wing Zero’s buster rifle unleashed a blinding surge of energy.

Heaven and I vanished into the overwhelming brilliance.

## **60 MINUTES PAST MIDNIGHT**

Power was restored after a twenty-minute outage.

Immediately, Stella burst into Relena’s room, flanked by five heavily armed soldiers. Their frantic behavior signaled to Relena that Heero was dangerously close.

Stella pressed a pistol against Relena, voice trembling.

“Madame President, kindly tell Heero Yuy to cease his pointless resistance and surrender.”

Relena glanced through the still-open doorway. There stood Heero, visibly battered from fierce combat. Bullet wounds dotted his body, mingled with the blood of his foes.

“Heero!” Relena cried out.

“Relena...” Exhaustion shadowed his face.

“Stop right there!” Stella screamed hysterically. “Don’t move! One step closer, and the President dies!”

“It saves me trouble,” Heero answered coolly. “I came here to kill Relena myself.”

The soldiers opened fire simultaneously. Heero moved with deadly precision, dodging the hail of bullets and shooting the first soldier precisely in his unarmored limbs. Without pause, he rolled across the floor, grabbing a fallen machine gun and methodically disabling the other four by firing into their thighs.

The guards collapsed, writhing in agony. Stella and Relena stood paralyzed by shock.

“Relena, this is war, idealism won’t save anyone,” Heero said harshly, aiming his weapon at Stella. “Stella Noventa, this is your final warning: release Relena.”

“This can’t be happening...” Stella trembled in terror.

“So be it,” Heero replied coldly, readying to fire.

But Relena moved first, seizing Stella’s pistol.

A single shot echoed sharply through the chamber.

The bullet tore through Heero’s chest.

Relena's trembling fingers released the smoking gun. Heero collapsed weakly to his knees, clutching the bleeding wound. Blood poured relentlessly from him.

"Relena... I still haven't..." he gasped, slumping forward.

"...shown you... the radiance... of my soul..."

He collapsed into the pooling crimson beneath him.

"The radiance of his soul," words Relena herself had once spoken to him.

"Heero—!" Relena's anguished scream echoed, but whether it reached Heero's fading consciousness was uncertain.

Night deepened, snow continued to fall.

Black wings gracefully beat through the chaos.

Everything dissolved into darkness.

**Spiral Serenade**  
Heero Yuy File

In the frostbitten grip of fate, dreams lay frozen.  
Only despair churned endlessly in the ashen sky.  
A lonely traveler wandered the barren wasteland named "Memory."  
His heart, hollowed by frigid winds, felt neither joy nor sorrow nor even anger.

Yet still, he could not halt his steps.  
For his mission was not yet complete.  
The traveler's name was Heero Yuy.

## **MC-0022 NEXT WINTER**

From somewhere distant came the rattling burst of machine gun fire.  
When the sound pulled Heero Yuy back into consciousness, he realized he was being carried upon the familiar black cassock of a priest.  
They were moving through a corridor deep within the Babel fortress.  
Emergency lights passed swiftly above him, streaking backward one after another.

The vibration beneath him was minimal, yet it was clear they were traveling quickly.

"...Duo...?"

"Yo. Finally awake, huh?"

The priest, clutching a submachine gun casually in one hand, glanced back at Heero with a faint grin.

"Where are we going?"

"Hell if I know."

"What about Relena?"

"Don't talk too much. You'll reopen your wound."

Father Maxwell had evidently tended to Heero's gunshot injury. There was no bleeding now.

"Madame President is way above my pay grade," the priest said, pausing momentarily. "You're already more than enough to handle."

He opened fire on the soldiers waiting ahead in the corridor.

A breach quickly formed, and they surged onward.

"Still, this route might've been a dead end too."

"Why did you save me?"

"Just focus on breathing," Duo replied. "No matter how badly you want to die, your body's still fighting to live."

The priest continued running without losing his breath.

Heero found him strangely talkative.

Yet, following Duo's advice, he concentrated on his breathing.

Indeed, he felt his lungs drawing oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide, his heartbeat persisting in defiance of his own will.

"You're still not fully recovered, right? Not even used to Martian gravity yet."

Heero felt displeased.

Countless times in the past, he'd been the one to save this man, yet now their roles were reversed.

Moreover, Duo carried him effortlessly, moving swiftly enough that Heero's weight seemed no burden at all.

Once, Duo had merely lent him a shoulder, their height difference minimal then.

The priest's back no longer bore the long, braided hair of his youth.

Heero realized he had no idea when Duo had cut it.

"You cut your hair."

When they reunited at the Preventer's North Pole Base, Heero had not paid attention to that detail.

"They say the goddess of luck has short hair in the back," Duo remarked, discarding the empty submachine gun and pulling a shotgun from beneath his robes. "Grab her by the bangs when you see her, or luck will slip right through your fingers. On the other hand, Death's hair is ridiculously long in the back, just like mine used to be."

"When did you retire as the God of Death?"

Duo laughed sharply, blasting the shotgun before answering.

"That's up to you. But no matter how things go, there's no chance I'll ever become your goddess of luck."

If this was Duo's answer, he likely still saw himself as Death.

Even now, Duo was probably flaunting his invisible braid, whispering, "If you still want to die, it's not too late."

The priest's voice took on its old familiar tone.

"If you want, I'll escort you to hell anytime."

If he could have moved his arms, Heero might have reached out.

But he remained paralyzed.

"Anyway, get some rest," Duo continued casually. "Relax. We've got history, after all."

His attitude was as easygoing as ever.

Heero had no choice in the matter.

He could only remain silent as he was carried along.

Quietly, he shut his eyes.

Survival held no meaning.

Death held no regret.

Yet, as Heero reached this conclusion, the phrase "soul's radiance" inexplicably echoed in his mind.

In his normal state of mind, such a thought would never have occurred to him.

*"I still haven't shown you the radiance of my soul."*

Why had he said something like that as he fell, shot by Relena?

Had the scorching agony and burning fever radiating outward from the bullet wound in his chest become that "soul's radiance?"

Or had the rhythmic gush of his own blood finally compelled him to reveal his innermost truth?

Either way, Heero harbored no resentment toward Relena now.

Upon Duo's back, despite no intention of feeling reassured, he sensed consciousness slipping away, further and further into darkness.

## **AC-150 SUMMER**

Colony L-1C-01422.

A gentle breeze swept across the verdant field beneath an artificial sky, where man-made clouds drifted lazily across an expanse of serene blue. Seated atop a low hill, Heero Yuy gazed quietly at the translucent beauty of an artificial lake below. The lake's rippling surface caught and scattered sunlight in countless brilliant sparks.

A newspaper fluttered along with the wind, catching at Heero's feet. Picking it up absentmindedly, he unfolded it and scanned the headlines:

"Civil Unrest Within Colony Security Forces! Extremists Rampage!"

"Is the Alliance Army Facing Imminent Collapse!?"

"74 Colony Citizens Dead!"

"Divided and Unmanageable Alliance Space Forces!"

The times were turbulent.

Yet this summer, new colonies continued to rise at each Lagrange point, welcoming thousands of hopeful settlers. Heero himself had relocated to this place, seeking quiet among those pursuing a fresh start. But the endless combat against the United Earth Sphere Alliance aboard the cruiser Sherwood had never suited him. He had always desired dialogue before warfare.

"You think words alone can solve anything?" his friend, Jay Null, had retorted.

"Dialogue is just mutual compromise. And compromise only comes after you've shown the other side your power. So, we fight. Negotiation comes afterward, never before. That's humanity."

Heero disagreed profoundly, yet aboard the warship, his ideals were mere fantasy. Even after leaving the Sherwood, his sense of impotence remained.

A minor column caught his eye.

"Queen Katerina Declares Perpetual Neutrality Within Alliance Government. Rejects Sanc Kingdom Military Obligations."

His former student was standing firm, aware the Alliance never tolerated neutrality or national pride. Sanc Kingdom's independence required at least minimal defense.

"Does she intend to tread the path of battle once more?"

Still, Heero realized, those like Katerina, who openly resisted, at least had something meaningful to defend. Colony citizens remained perpetually compliant, trapped beneath corporate giants that maintained ironclad control, siphoning profits and robbing residents of freedom. Even in their hopeful venture into space, their ankles remained shackled by chains of ruthless utilitarianism.

Heero's vision for "respect for the colony's independent individual" seemed a distant fantasy. The current reality echoed ancient slavery, nothing more. The chasm between ideals and reality tore at his heart. Sighing deeply, he spread the newspaper on the grass and lay back, staring up at the blue artificial sky.

"I've only ever run away," he muttered.

He'd fled after the bombing of College Lecture Hall Three, escaped execution on the lunar surface, and abandoned the Sherwood. He no longer knew where he belonged. Once, Duke Cinquant Khushrenada had asked him, "When will your fight begin?" The question haunted him anew.

"When will I finally start my fight?"

No answer came.

Suddenly, a young girl wearing a large white hat peered down at him, her curious eyes wide.

"Hey, mister, are you lost?"

Beside her bounced an energetic puppy. Heero briefly wondered if he was dreaming. The girl's white dress gleamed brilliantly in the sunlight, an angelic vision amid the vivid summer landscape. She appeared to be around seven, regarding him with a sweet, inquisitive smile.

"Are you lost?" she asked again.

He hesitated. Perhaps, metaphorically, he was lost.

"Yes," he finally admitted. "I can't seem to find my way."

"Oh... that's too bad." Her puppy wagged its tail eagerly, running circles around them. "But I'm not lost, I'm just taking Mary for a walk."

The girl crouched, giggling and tussling playfully with the puppy named Mary. Heero simply watched, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Then she extended a small flower toward him.

"Here, take this," she offered earnestly, clearly intending it as encouragement. Heero felt compelled to accept. The flower was a cosmos-modified breed called a Cosmoflower, resembling a small yellow

daisy. Its pistils spiraled gracefully outward from the center in a Fibonacci pattern.

He stared at the delicate bloom.

*"No one has ever given me flowers before."*

The puppy suddenly sprinted down the hill, tugging the girl along with insistent force.

"Wait, Mary! Stop!" She turned, waving energetically at Heero with her delicate hand as she ran off.

The tiny flower said nothing, yet its presence warmed his heart inexplicably. Turning his attention back to the newspaper, he noticed an announcement on the back page:

"Emerald City Council Opens Candidate Registration."

Heero glanced between the article and the flower.

"City council..."

A revelation struck him.

"...Could this be my path forward?"

Closing his eyes gently, he emptied his mind. Then, opening them slowly, he took in his surroundings. It was a calming technique he'd once taught Katerina.

He stood, folded the newspaper carefully into his pocket, and tucked the flower into his shirt.

"It's time," he whispered resolutely, "to begin my fight."

\*

The space cruiser Sherwood sailed gracefully through the L-1 colony cluster.

On its bridge stood Mike Howard, arms folded as he glared at a small console monitor. The screen displayed Heero Yuy descending decisively down a hillside.

"Think he suspects our little 'coincidence'?"

It was the outlaw technicians who had arranged this gentle push on Heero's back.

"The weather systems in the colony are far less secure than life systems," Henry Fia responded, maintaining his usual gentle smile. "A simple hack, really. No one suspects the wind was intentional."

"The newspaper and Cosmoflower were exactly as Sam instructed," muttered the hulking Wu Wanglong, almost to himself. "Though what they signify is beyond us."

"Hmph. Was that girl Jay Null's doing?" sneered the sarcastic D.D.

"I chose her outfit and hat," laughed Sorciere mockingly.

"Jay has no sense for fashion. His tastes lean toward gothic horror," Sorciere continued lightly. "Especially Boris Karloff's Frankenstein."

"A monster receiving flowers from a girl," D.D. spat derisively. "Fittingly tasteless."

Howard ordered Chick Pagan at the helm, "Let's pick up Jay. Dock at Colony C-01422's spaceport."

"Understood," Pagan affirmed.

Howard's gaze returned to the monitor, which now displayed Jay paying a woman and the young girl accompanied by her puppy.

"He better not get any strange ideas about kidnapping," Howard muttered, his arms remaining tightly crossed, knowing full well that Jay's unpredictability was endless.

\*

The Sherwood's computer control room housed a multitude of monitors, displaying detailed information from across the Earth Sphere. No human eyes observed them, nor could they interpret the flickering images as anything but visual noise.

The observer was the quantum AI known as "Sam," equipped with the rapid-response ZERO System, continuously calculating the optimal path to lasting peace.

Its surveillance network extended across Earth, the Moon, and colonies, intercepting camera feeds, hacking into government mainframes, and monitoring private satellite communications.

Having mastered human complexity from countless data samples, Sam reliably predicted events up to two weeks in advance. This extensive "Big Data" provided Sherwood an unassailable strategic advantage, evading UESA forces pursuits, enabling precise counterstrikes, supplying oppressed colonies, and sowing internal chaos through carefully planted misinformation.

Apart from anti-Alliance operations, Sam prioritized protecting specific individuals, Heero Yuy and Katerina Peacecraft.

Initially, Captain Marticus Rex believed these two would become the "King" and "Queen" against the Alliance forces. Yet their recent ordinary lives showed no potential to dismantle the Alliance.

Marticus reclined in a chair, eyes unfocused across countless monitors.

"Do you see further into the future, or are you simply guiding us toward your envisioned outcome?"

Beside him sat a holographic Norwegian Forest Cat, Sam's chosen virtual embodiment. It responded quietly with a "Mew," leaving Marticus uncertain whether it was agreement or dismissal.

\*

Several days later, summer's end approached.

Heero Yuy secured a seat on the city council of Emerald City, Colony C-01422, through a transparently fair democratic process. His sincere passion resonated strongly with the citizens.

His official narrative described a privileged Earth upbringing, claiming inspiration from witnessing poverty during a college visit to the colonies, motivating his pursuit of politics to help their plight.

His identity, citizenship number, education, financial history, and credentials were meticulously constructed by Sam. Heero ostensibly developed a cutting-edge data compression algorithm, capable of compressing 235 yottabytes into a tiny sub-drive. Sam, who truly authored the innovation, graciously awarded Heero patent rights, resulting in regular deposits of considerable wealth.

Only Heero's name remained genuine.

Normally, he'd reject such elaborate deception. Yet the UESA government had listed Heero as a thought criminal, leaving him no choice but to embrace this fiction.

His determination to alleviate colony suffering remained sincere. He intended to repay the citizens for the fabricated background and wealth through genuine service.

However, publishing Heero's photograph in the council registry posed significant risk. Any person recognizing him could trigger swift military intervention.

\*

At Luxembourg Castle, Cinquant Khushrenada examined Heero's photograph with quiet satisfaction, nodding softly.

"Finally stepping into the fight, are you? You certainly took your time."

On his desk stood a framed photo of Eric Peacecraft, his long-lost friend.

"Your rival was slower to bloom than expected," he quipped sarcastically before addressing Eric's image again. "Oh, don't worry, I know you'll say it was your sister who fancied him. Even in Heaven, you fuss over details."

In his imagination, Cinquant enjoyed teasing Eric. He didn't need many friends, just one eternal companion.

Cinquant raised his eyes to the ceiling, whispering softly.

"May blessings follow the colonies' future."

On the surface, the landscape of the world appeared unchanged from just five years prior. Yet beneath that static surface, significant transformations had taken place. The reality humanity now inhabited was no longer the reality it once knew.

An unseen war had quietly begun five years ago, hidden in plain sight.

## **MC-0022 NEXT WINTER**

Father Maxwell burst through a door into a spacious, sterile room. Its pristine whiteness stretched uninterrupted from ceiling to floor, immaculate as a research lab. At the far end stood a figure in a white lab coat, absorbed in observing a test tube against the light.

"Hey... sorry to barge in, but I've got a wounded guy here who needs your help."

The figure didn't turn around.

Undeterred, Father Maxwell continued cheerfully, "Yeah, well, I've got nobody else I can trust, and besides, you're the only person in this entire fortress I can rely on for something tricky like this."

With a sigh, the figure finally set down the test tube.

"You really are nothing but trouble," the figure muttered, turning to reveal Hilde Schbeiker's stern face, framed by her black-rimmed glasses. "Every time you show up, chaos follows."

Her tone was sharp, but Father Maxwell just laughed it off.

"C'mon, Hilde. Cut me some slack. Think of it as taking pity on a lost little lamb."

"I retired from being a Sister long ago," she snapped back. "Now, I'm Doctor Schbeiker. Why would I ever do favors for a *fake* priest?"

Ignoring her protests, Father Maxwell carefully lowered the unconscious Heero Yuy from his back, laying him gently onto the pristine floor.

Hilde's eyes widened at the sight, a faint smile forming.

"Well, it's another matter entirely if our patient is Sleeping Beauty," she murmured. "His memories are especially valuable to me."

"Hah," the priest smirked. "Is that because he's the only one who can challenge Vingt Khushrenada?"

"It's more than that," she replied, activating a switch on the wall. "He represents Mars's only real hope for the future."

The section of floor beneath Heero rose smoothly, transforming into an operating table.

"He'll be fine in no time with the medical system and nanomachines here," Hilde assured.

Leaning close, Father Maxwell whispered into Heero's ear, "Hear that? Looks like you dodged death again, Heero ole buddy."

Unconscious, Heero remained unaware of his surroundings.

\*

The night deepened, snow continuing to fall softly.

Black wings gracefully beat through the darkness, blending effortlessly into the chaos.

A flash from the black Wing Gundam Zero's buster rifle sent Tallgeese Heaven spiraling toward the ground in flames. Just before impact, a white, three-headed wyvern raced beneath it at astonishing speed.

The Gundam Epyon Bai, piloted by Master Chang.

Its flexible arms caught Tallgeese Heaven moments before impact, swiftly carrying it away toward the distant sea.

"Impressive timing to minimize damage," Master Chang commented calmly over the comms, though Mille Peacecraft had already lost consciousness.

"Consider this a gift. But I won't save you again," Chang added gently, a rare show of kindness towards his former pupil, unheard and unacknowledged.

Inside Wing Zero, Vingt Khushrenada watched the two retreating mobile suits vanish toward Isidis Bay, chuckling softly.

"Seems Major General Zechs wasn't as capable as expected," he murmured. "He'll have to take full responsibility."

Major General Zechs, already retreating with his Gundam Epyon toward fortress Babel, understood clearly: significant losses among the Virgo forces and Heero's infiltration posed unacceptable risks. Even his ZERO System couldn't predict the damage if Heero managed an internal strike.

"Leave the mobile suit battles to Supreme Commander Vingt Khushrenada," his ZERO System had coldly assessed.

\*

Inside Babel fortress's research lab, Father Maxwell and Doctor Hilde Schbeiker were reunited after three years, with no trace of nostalgia between them.

Silence filled the sterile room, punctuated only by the gentle hum of medical machinery treating Heero's wounds.

Father Maxwell, idle, examined a small bookshelf. Unlike the expected electronic tablets, Hilde's shelves contained genuine paper books from a bygone era.

"So... what's happening outside?" Father asked, casually selecting a thin volume.

"I don't care," Hilde replied curtly, her attention on the medical device's readouts.

Heero had already completed most objectives within their reach from Babel. The black-winged Wing Zero posed the only lingering threat. Yet with their main countermeasure unconscious here, options were limited.

Father Maxwell realized the book he picked was "Mother Goose," the same children's book Hilde once read and sang from at Schbeiker Church. "Hey Diddle, Diddle" had been the children's favorite.

"This book..." Father Maxwell whispered softly. "Survived the tsunami after all."

\*

In MC-0019 Next Spring, three years earlier, reconnaissance satellite FO-II B plummeted into the Sea of Lanagreene.

The satellite, featuring a massive 60-meter antenna dish, fragmented upon entering the Martian atmosphere above the Lanagreene Republic. Its shattered remains rained destruction onto a sprawling metropolis filled with towering skyscrapers.

Though Mars's gravity was only one-third that of Earth's, the devastation was catastrophic. Smaller fragments plunging into the ocean generated shockwaves and monstrous tsunamis, obliterating the floating city instantly. Coastal towns suffered severe collateral damage, and among them, the Schbeiker Church was swept away entirely.

Over ten thousand people were either dead or missing, marking this event as the greatest massacre in Martian history. Extremist terrorists, who orchestrated the disaster through hacking and remote control, were suspected to have covert ties to the Martian Federation Government.

The Lanagreene Republic, Mars's wealthiest nation, had proudly championed its "unarmed" status, but its accumulated riches drew

intense envy from neighboring states. It also posed an implicit threat to the newly appointed Federation President, "Milliardo Peacecraft."

From the impoverished orphanage, only Duo survived.

Father Maxwell arrived three days after hearing the dreadful news. Duo sat alone amidst the sodden ruins. Beside him stood seven small, modest graves he had painstakingly dug for his friends from the orphanage, their remains recovered and buried by his small, trembling hands.

Father Maxwell knew well such suffering; perhaps Duo's pain was even greater. Alone, struggling with grief that would crush the heart of any child, Duo had shed every tear his body possessed. By now, his face held no sadness, only resolve.

As Father Maxwell dismounted from his tandem seat, searching for the right words, the boy with the braid shouted.

"Make me your son! The world's a rotten place, but I've decided to live on! I need strength to fight, stronger than anyone else!"

"Seeking revenge?"

"No," Duo yelled back fiercely. "I won't allow any more senseless fighting! I'll fight and fight, until those bastards learn what weakness truly means! You can make me stronger, right?"

This declaration came from a child not even ten years old. Once he chose this path of thorns, there was no turning back. Duo clearly knew this.

"Alright," Father Maxwell agreed solemnly. He accepted Duo as his son and vowed to raise him into a formidable warrior. Together, they silently paid respect at the seven graves, bidding farewell to their past.

Father Maxwell suddenly noticed Schbeiker's name was missing from the gravestones.

"What about Sister Hilde?"

"I don't know," Duo murmured. "She went toward the city, so maybe..."

At that moment, Father Maxwell believed Hilde had joined the countless other lost lives surrounding them. Deep regret gripped him.

"You idiot... I never even got the chance to properly apologize," he whispered bitterly.

From that day forward, Father Maxwell abandoned alcohol and cigarettes.

"Probably doesn't count as atonement," he muttered, mounting his motorcycle. "Get on... we're leaving."

Duo eagerly jumped onto the rear seat.

"Counting on you, you shitty old man."

"I'll make you a first-rate warrior... but our road will be harsher than death itself."

"I'm ready. I've already chosen to live!"

Together, they rode north across the Martian continent.

Only much later did they learn from Master Chang of Preventer that Hilde Schbeiker survived, becoming "Dr. Hilde Schbeiker," a researcher for the Lanagreene Republic.

This revelation didn't tempt Father Maxwell back to his old habits. Relief came only after shock. He tried reaching Hilde by email but heard nothing in return.

Her reply finally arrived this year, MC-0022.

"Soon, Relena Peacecraft's 'Little Prince' will awaken."

Attached was an old file from the bygone AC era.

\*

Doctor Schbeiker was inputting various numerical data into the medical machine as she spoke.

"Don't touch that with your filthy hands. Those memories are all that's left of those children."

She clearly had the Mother Goose book in Father Maxwell's hands on her mind.

"If you want it back, you'll have to humor me with a little chat."

"...Fine, if you insist."

She placed her lab coat on the desk, abandoning the demeanor of a detached scientist. She seemed slightly more at ease now.

Schbeiker returned the book Father Maxwell handed her to its place on the bookshelf.

"This will help pass the time until his treatment is complete."

Father Maxwell asked his former wife about what had happened three years ago. Though reluctant, she began to speak slowly and hesitantly about her past,

When the reconnaissance satellite fell, she had been in the National Library in the central city. She had gone there, using her old connections, to have the battered Mother Goose book repaired and reinforced.

At the terrifying impact, the building collapsed, followed immediately by a devastating flood. Miraculously, Schbeiker had been rescued amidst the desperate chaos. Her past affiliation with the National Library had saved her life.

"I probably should have died. It might've been better if I had."

She spoke quietly, reflectively.

Unfortunately, the National Library was under the jurisdiction of the government's intelligence agency. Critically injured, Schbeiker had been treated in a Republic Army medical facility, where her physical wounds healed but left her temporarily amnesiac.

During neural treatments, a medical error occurred: another individual's "image trace" entered her consciousness. The memories belonged to a nanotechnology researcher undergoing treatment in the same facility. Those memories involved highly classified government secrets. After the researcher died, Schbeiker was chosen as the successor.

Once her original memories resurfaced, intelligence officers detained her and forced her into nanotechnology research. Her achievements exceeded all expectations. Dr. Schbeiker dramatically improved holographic image quality and successfully developed the practical "nano-defensor." The technology was swiftly militarized by Major General Zechs, giving the Lanagreene Republic an overwhelming military advantage. Today, she was renowned as the field's leading expert.

"So, does that mean you have two people's memories?"

"No. The image trace transferred only technical expertise. The memory library contained nothing else."

It seemed too convenient to be mere coincidence or an accident. Father Maxwell's doubts deepened.

"Tell me something, your own memories, they're fully restored, right?"

"Of course."

"That's what everyone believes."

Father Maxwell retrieved the Mother Goose book from the shelf again, holding it out before her.

"What was the kids' favorite?"

"Hey Diddle, Diddle. They always sang it so cheerfully."

He opened the surreal illustrated page.

"Then sing it."

"Right now?"

Father Maxwell nodded.

"...Here?"

He nodded again.

"Hilde, I'm not proposing. I'm just asking you to sing."

Schbeiker reluctantly nodded and, with a hint of embarrassment, began singing softly and clearly. She took off her black-rimmed glasses, eyes closed as if revisiting distant memories from their church days. It

was an upbeat, playful nursery rhyme children loved, nonsensical yet enduring.

*“♪ Hey diddle, diddle,  
The cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon.  
The little dog laughed  
To see such sport,  
And the dish ran away with the spoon. ♪”*

She repeated the rhyme over and over. Soon tears were silently streaming down her cheeks.

Father Maxwell gently embraced her as she continued to sing.

“I’m sorry... for making you relive this pain.”

Yet, she didn’t stop. The tears flowed freely and unchecked. Hilde Schbeiker, who never revealed her sorrow even in her darkest moments, wept openly in Father Maxwell’s arms.

Through her tears, she sang on.

Father Maxwell’s suspicion was confirmed: Hilde Schbeiker’s spirit was broken. Facing the painful past likely shattered the controls imposed on her mind. Clearly, intentional interference had occurred within her brain.

Father Maxwell sincerely apologized. He knew no words could ever suffice, but still, he tried his utmost.

“I’m truly sorry... I really am.”

She seemed unable to hear him, still singing.

Hilde Schbeiker’s mournful song reached Heero within the medical machine.

## **AC-152 AUTUMN**

Colony L-1 C-01422.

Heero was caught up addressing various petitions from colony residents in his city council office when his older sister, Hikaru, arrived from Earth.

“Sis?”

“Thank goodness, it really is you.”

Hikaru’s face, unchanged in its outward cheerfulness, now revealed subtle traces of hardship from recent years.

“I’ll be staying with you for a while.”

“What about your husband?”

“We separated. Turns out he found another woman.”

She had brought along her two-year-old son, Ein. Hikaru Yuy was well-known in L-1 Colony as an accomplished violinist, once having held

successful solo concerts. Seven years prior, however, she had eloped with an unknown composer and fled to Earth. Initially, their life was filled with happiness, but her husband's lack of success as a composer led to financial struggles. Hikaru sustained them by performing with small, regional orchestras and gigs in shabby venues. Their marriage eventually collapsed due to her husband's infidelity.

"Of course, you'll help me, won't you? If you can't help your own sister, how can you hope to help the people of this colony?"

Heero had no comeback. Hikaru's bold assertiveness hadn't changed since childhood.

From that day forward, Hikaru and Ein moved into Heero's cramped council lodging, beginning their shared life.

Surprisingly, living with his free-spirited sister brought unexpected comfort to Heero. Her nightly violin lullabies for Ein soothed his soul, exhausted from endless official duties.

Hikaru's violin wasn't expensive; its strings were thickly coated with rosin. Its uniqueness lay in the carved cat's paw at the scroll. This Irish-made instrument, known as a "Diddle Diddle," was actually a fiddle unsuited for classical repertoire.

Encouraged by Hikaru, Heero took up the violin himself. Whether due to natural talent, family heritage, or Hikaru's effective teaching, within weeks he could perform Niccolò Paganini's "La Campanella," albeit casually and purely for leisure.

When November came, the upcoming mayoral election in Emerald City was announced. Heero, strongly encouraged by supporters, declared his candidacy. His genuine interactions with the colony's residents significantly boosted his popularity. Trusted by the former mayor and supported by fellow council members, there was widespread speculation that Emerald City might soon see its youngest mayor ever.

But unexpected interference arose. The United Earth Sphere Alliance declared that Emerald City's mayor would be selected directly by Earth authorities. Ignoring local democratic processes, they unilaterally appointed a retired Alliance military officer as the new mayor. Colony residents were left only to democratically elect a "Deputy Mayor."

This was clearly a move demonstrating the Alliance's unwillingness to grant genuine autonomy to the colony. Faced with the undeniable threat of Earth's overwhelming military power, the colonists had no choice but to comply.

Consequently, Heero found himself running in an unprecedented "Deputy Mayor" election.

\*

High above the lunar region known as the Mare Moscoviense, a fierce battle raged.

The massive United Earth Sphere Alliance battleship Stier (Taurus), accompanied by two hundred mass-produced unmanned fighters known as Zygon (Libra), had successfully cornered the space cruiser Sherwood.

Recently, the Alliance had dramatically increased their weapons production capacity by extensively modifying lunar plants. By contrast, the Sherwood retained its modest initial fleet: merely twelve shipborne fighters, Wyvern, Apollon, and Heliopolis.

War's outcome inevitably rested on sheer numbers. Regardless of Sam's strategic and tactical superiority, the Sherwood was quickly becoming overwhelmed in actual combat.

Their retreat path had been completely severed. Already battered by numerous direct hits, the cruiser teetered dangerously close to destruction.

Yet aboard the Sherwood, calm prevailed.

On the bridge, Captain Marticus, his faithful dog Spade resting comfortably on his lap, calmly watched the battle unfold on the monitors.

"The enemy's formation is impeccable," Marticus murmured. "They're leaving us no openings. Those unmanned fighters have certainly grown clever."

Howard, handling the helm, remarked dryly while deftly maneuvering to evade attacks, "Not exactly the moment for leisurely analysis, is it?"

Yet, despite the gravity of his task, his tone was oddly relaxed.

"Perhaps," Marticus replied, his eyes unblinking as dazzling explosions filled the main monitor. "Still, holding out indefinitely against unmanned drones is proving quite taxing."

"Our main issue is pilot fatigue," Howard agreed. "Unless we solve our chronic manpower shortage, victory is impossible."

"Indeed, so severe we're forced to have you at the controls," Marticus chuckled softly, gently stroking Spade's head. "But then, absolute victory was never truly our goal. If we keep successfully handling these small skirmishes, the anti-Alliance civilians will rise naturally."

"Long-term optimism," Howard quipped, "but Sherwood won't last forever. Space warfare itself is absurd enough."

Spade lay peacefully asleep, unusually elderly for such a small dog. Perhaps the harsh environment of space had been taxing him.

"Perhaps we should return to Earth for a while?" Marticus suggested casually, as though discussing plans for a night out to the pub.

"That might not be such a bad idea," Howard replied, effortlessly dodging another barrage.

Spade yawned loudly, letting out an oddly human chuckle, a peculiar trait since he'd never barked, even as a pup.

Just then, Wyvern pilot Chick Pagan radioed in.

"Chick Pagan here. Sam's issued the order, it's about time."

"Acknowledged," Marticus replied. "All fighters, return to ship immediately. Sherwood will be landing on the lunar surface."

The cruiser suddenly tilted sharply downward, diving toward the Mare Moscoviense. The two hundred Zygon drones scrambled in confusion, their formerly ironclad formation abruptly broken. Yet this maneuver drastically slowed the Sherwood, making it an ideal target for bombardment.

But awaiting their descent on the lunar surface was a formation of five Pumpkin Tanks, the Jack-o'-Lanterns.

"About time we saw some action," Jay grumbled from Tank One.

"Sam does like keeping us waiting," D.D. from Tank Two commented dryly, activating his Hyper Jammer device.

"Forty enemies per tank. Minimize wasted ammunition," said Sorcière in Tank Three, though he promptly began firing recklessly, demonstrating unparalleled proficiency as both pilot and gunner, a reflection of his role in designing their heavy armaments.

"The Dish and Spoon fighters won't be an issue," noted Henry Fia from Tank Four, skillfully destroying enemy units. "It's the big Cow battleship that's trouble."

The engineers mockingly named Alliance craft, Libra as "Dish and Spoon," Taurus as "Cow."

"Leave that one to me," rumbled Wu Wanglong from Tank Five, boldly channeling a massive energy feed from the rear reactor vehicle and firing a colossal beam cannon. The brilliant beam struck the battleship Stier directly overhead, its specialized armor preventing penetration, yet the impact forcefully shifted its orbit upward.

This remarkable battle footage, captured by Sherwood's cameras, later aired across the Earth Sphere on the anti-Alliance propaganda channel "Mary Had a Little Lamb," earning enthusiastic cheers from colony residents.

Sam hadn't ordered the broadcast. It was Jay's brash initiative.

"Why not let them see our heroics occasionally?" Jay chuckled smugly. "It'll inspire people to rise faster."

Yet, in reality, Jay's action heightened the United Earth Sphere Alliance's fears, resulting in intensified oppression against the colonies and others in vulnerable positions. It further escalated harsh crackdowns against all forms of resistance.

\*

Duke Cinquant Khushrenada watched the footage carefully from his office in Luxembourg Castle.

"They really don't understand anything," he murmured, displeased. "This will severely restrict the activities of Peacecraft and Heero Yuy. The invisible war must never be made visible."

The "invisible war" referred to psychological warfare in an information-driven society, wars fought within people's minds.

When the public watched images of battle, their understanding remained superficial. They experienced only momentary emotional shifts before quickly reverting to apathy, comforted by the realization that it was someone else's problem. Even the most realistic images lacked the visceral immediacy soldiers felt on the battlefield. Such portrayals erased the humanity behind war completely.

Advances in information technology and communication had utterly failed to cure humanity of its addiction to warfare. Rather than becoming truly war-weary, the public instead grew war-averse, lacking genuine determination for peace. This led them into a shallow pacifism that sought to flee from war instead of confronting and resolving it.

Such a scenario represented the worst outcome imaginable. Wars reduced to mere imagery became endless, with localized conflicts dragged out indefinitely and decisive victories made impossible. Those removed from the bloodshed inadvertently increased the hardships faced by frontline soldiers, reassured by their own safety.

"I'm afraid our financial support for Sherwood ends here," Cinquant concluded bitterly.

At that moment, an elderly general entered the duke's office. He was the very same man who once faced Heero's defiant outburst, "Shut up, old man!", at the Romefeller Foundation conference. The general clutched a local newspaper from Colony L-1 in his hand.

"Duke! Isn't this 'Heero Yuy,' candidate for Deputy Mayor of Emerald City, the very same insolent youth from back then?" he demanded accusingly.

Cinquant gazed at the proffered newspaper for a moment before dismissively turning away.

"A mere coincidence, General. Even if the name matches, their citizen registration numbers differ," he calmly pointed out, indicating discrepancies between the newspaper and the wanted poster.

"But Duke! This man is living with the sister of the so-called 'other' Heero Yuy!"

"Merely another coincidence. Perhaps they've simply fallen in love."

"Nonsense!"

"Nevertheless, we must treat them as separate individuals," Cinquant stated firmly. "As representative of the Romefeller Foundation, I forbid the UESA Forces from laying a hand on Heero Yuy. Understood?"

The old general had no choice but to grudgingly consent. Yet his agreement was merely superficial, limited strictly to that moment.

\*

Heero was composing his final speech.

It was scheduled to be delivered before Emerald City's central council, addressing not only the citizens but also the newly appointed mayor. However, the mayor had already issued a stern warning: any anti-Alliance sentiments expressed would result in immediate arrest as a "thought criminal."

This directive, cunningly imposed by the Alliance's higher command, aimed to silence dissent.

Yet, unless Heero spoke unequivocally on behalf of the colonists and pleaded for improvements in their dire circumstances, becoming deputy mayor would lose all meaning. Failure to defend the citizens, submitting instead to the Alliance, would amount to a betrayal.

Naturally inclined towards blunt honesty, Heero chose the path of confronting the authorities directly with an uncompromisingly truthful speech, even if it meant his own arrest. Anticipating that this would be his final public address, he meticulously revised every line late into the night.

From behind, Hikaru approached quietly, picking up the numerous pages he'd written, each filled with sharp truths.

"Hmm, you really are completely right, aren't you?"

"Please don't disturb me."

Ignoring his request, Hikaru continued, "Would it satisfy you if everyone listening decided to turn against the Alliance?"

"....."

"You act as if you alone hold the truth. Does living this way make you happy?"

"...I'm not a hedonist."

"Yet you clearly look down on others. Will you spend your life rejecting everyone you meet? Knowing you, even if the entire world became your enemy, you'd still keep declaring your beliefs. But continue this way, and you'll never learn to truly love imperfect people."

Heero didn't intend to argue.

"Isn't it true that no matter how fervently we declare our righteousness, it rarely aligns with the opposing side's sense of justice? Isn't that why wars happen? Maybe instead of wielding justice as a weapon, we should always keep pondering what justice truly means."

Heero had once told his student Katerina something similar.

*"The conclusion isn't what's important; it's the process that truly matters."*

"None of us are gods. Absolute perfection or certainty is impossible. Devoting your life to such unreachable ideals is unbearably lonely."

Hikaru placed the speech aside, picking up Heero's violin music instead.

"If God composed a serenade, perhaps angels could perform it perfectly. A devil might flawlessly follow every note. But wouldn't only a human performer touch people's hearts?"

She set down the sheet music.

"Forgive the imperfections and weaknesses in others. Learn to love them even more for those very flaws."

Turning away, Hikaru said softly, "Do your best... but don't push yourself too hard. Goodnight."

She left quietly.

Heero stopped revising, reflecting deeply on his sister's words. He picked up his violin.

"She's right, it's vital to keep thinking," he murmured.

In the calming silence, he gently began playing Paganini's "La Campanella" like a serene serenade.

The tragedy occurred on the morning of the final speech at Emerald City's Central Assembly.

Hikaru, out shopping, was shot dead in a quiet, cobblestone street on the city's outskirts, a peaceful place rarely traversed by passersby.

Her death was instantaneous.

Her young son, Ein, safely strapped into his stroller, began crying, confused by the unchanging scene before him. A passerby turned at Ein's wails, discovering Hikaru's lifeless body, a bullet through her head.

The police arrived swiftly, and soon after, Heero pushed frantically through the gathered crowd, until he reached his sister's body, collapsing beside her. Nearby, a policeman deliberately raised his voice so Heero could overhear as he spoke to his superior.

"Single shot through the forehead, definitely a professional hit. Given the bullet type, likely a military sniper."

Heero immediately recognized it as an Alliance threat, a warning against stepping out of line during his final speech. But had it been necessary to murder his innocent sister?

Sorrow mixed violently with anger in Heero's heart.

"Even now, Hikaru, would you still urge me not to use justice as a weapon?"

He lifted Ein from the stroller, holding him close. The child, crying, understood nothing.

"I see... When I wield justice as a weapon, innocent people suffer."

Hours later, Heero stood on the podium before the Central Assembly.

Other candidates had already spoken; some defiantly declared anti-Alliance sentiments and were promptly arrested. Others cowardly pandered to the Alliance, met with cold silence.

When Heero took the stage, all eyes focused on him. What would the man who had just lost his sister say now?

Heero unfolded a paper from his pocket, not the speech filled with biting truths, but a sheet of musical notation.

"I do not ask for your understanding," he said quietly. "Simply listen."

He tucked the Irish fiddle beneath his chin and began playing "La Campanella."

Initially stunned, the audience presumed it as a requiem for his sister. Yet Heero's bow strokes carried no sorrow or despair, rather, a bright and powerful spirit reminiscent of its Irish origins. The whimsical carving of a cat's paw on the fiddle's scroll lent an unexpected touch of humor.

"La Campanella," meaning "The Little Bell," is famous for its chiming piano tones. On violin, technical virtuosity often overshadowed melody. Yet Heero's performance unmistakably rang as a bell of freedom for the colony citizens. To the mayor and Alliance members present, it clearly signaled unwavering resolve.

Though newly mastered, Heero's violin conveyed a heartfelt wish for peace, deeply resonating with listeners. In the final notes, he infused every stroke of his bow with memories of his sister.

The four-and-a-half-minute performance ended, and Heero stepped down silently.

"This is enough, isn't it, Hikaru?" he whispered to himself.



Thunderous applause erupted as he pushed Ein's stroller toward the exit.

The election concluded with overwhelming support. Heero Yuy became Deputy Mayor by a landslide. From there, he steadily rose to represent all colonies, dedicating himself tirelessly to achieving freedom and peace for his people.

## **MC-0022 NEXT WINTER**

Snow fluttered gracefully over the Isidis Plains, where the Wing Zero hovered silently, its dark wings majestically extended. Vingt Khushrenada waited patiently, eyes locked on the horizon, targeting the approaching battleship Grand Chariot. His buster rifle was fully charged; all that remained was for his prey to appear.

Suddenly, the cockpit's ZERO System blared an alarm.

"An enemy?!"

The radar showed nothing. Yet, clearly, Vingt heard a voice.

"Stance set."

Accompanying the voice was a high-pitched, intermittent ringing that grew steadily more intense.

"Knocking... setup."

Realization dawned on Vingt. The Snow White was about to launch an attack.

"Drawing..."

Yet the voice wasn't Heero Yuy's.

"Who's piloting the Snow White? Where are you?"

He focused intensely, searching for Snow White's location. Frustration surged within him.

"Tch, so the Heart of Space is interfering..."

"Full draw..."

Instantly, Vingt understood who sat inside the cockpit.

"So, another silver-haired devil appears."

Simultaneously, he pinpointed Snow White's location, high above Isidis Bay, wielding its archery-type weapon.

"Sieben Zwerge, Schwarz... Release!"

By the time Vingt realized, it was already too late. A brilliant flash erupted from afar, black birds cloaked in shimmering white streaked toward him.

Recovered from the ocean depths, Snow White was now under Professor W's control, having disabled the biometric lock set by Heero.

The moment he entered the cockpit, the Gundam activated, marking the beginning of the counterattack.

Wing Zero's dark wings were swallowed by a fierce blizzard generated by the Sieben Zwerge, Schwarz's attribute of wind. Losing stability, the Gundam plummeted toward the earth below, crashing into the very area where the Virgo IV had once formed their delta formation.

Acting swiftly, Vingt managed a rough landing, skimming just above the frozen ground. His monitor immediately showed four mobile suits surrounding him.

The Warlock cloaked in black.

Prometheus draped in dark green.

Scheherazade wrapped in a transparent, rainbow-hued mantle.

And the Queen of Hearts in her crimson riding hood.

Vingt flashed a confident smile.

"Impressive, these nano-defensor cloaks of yours. I didn't sense your approach at all."

Wing Zero made the first move, splitting its buster rifle into two and spinning as it unleashed a blazing barrage, enveloping itself in roaring flames.

"Consider this merely an introduction. Next time, I won't hold back."

As he attempted to rise into the sky again, a colossal cross-shaped heavy machine gun opened fire, filling the air with relentless bullets and pinning Wing Zero firmly to the ground.

"Is that all you have to say?" a chilling voice echoed from Prometheus's cockpit. It was Nameless.

"You've caused my brother enough trouble. It's time I return the favor," Naina declared coldly, her diplomatic tone masking deep hatred.

"If anything happens to Mille, I'll never forgive you!" Quaterine snarled fiercely, eyes blazing behind her glasses.

"I'll show you what real hell looks like," Duo muttered icily, genuine fury in his gaze.

Yet, Vingt Khushrenada's smile never faded.

\*

Inside the Babel fortress laboratory, Heero's treatment had finally wrapped up. He emerged slowly from the cylindrical medical machine.

"Yo, Heero!"

Heero sat up, staring blankly at Father Maxwell, confusion and fear replacing his former sharpness from just hours ago.

"Who are you?"

Father Maxwell approached incredulously.

"C'mon, it's me, Duo."

He forced a grin, resurrecting a name long buried in the past.

"Duo? I don't recall anyone by that name."

Heero showed no signs of deception.

"Snap out of it! We're still in the middle of a mission!"

"Mission...? What mission?"

"Oh, you've gotta be freakin' kidding me..."

Father turned sharply, confronting Hilde, who stood watching behind her black-rimmed glasses. Her lenses glinted ominously as she delivered chilling words through crimson-painted lips.

"This solidifies our victory."

Dr. Hilde's cruel laughter echoed through the sterile room.

In the frostbitten grip of fate, dreams lay frozen.

Only despair churned endlessly in the ashen sky.

A lonely traveler wandered the barren wasteland named "Memory."

His heart, hollowed by frigid winds, felt neither joy nor sorrow nor even anger.

Yet still, he could not halt his steps.

For his mission was not yet complete.

The traveler's name was—

## Afterword

The Blu-ray box set for ***New Mobile War Report Gundam Wing*** the TV series was recently released, and the bonus audio commentary included with Box 2, featuring the voice actors, turned out to be delightfully entertaining. The actors, reunited after so long apart, reminisced warmly about their experiences during production.

Eventually, the discussion turned to the auditions through which each actor had secured their roles. When Ai Orikasa, who voiced Quatre, remarked, "I don't recall auditioning," her fellow actors immediately responded with, "That can't be right!" and "Maybe you just forgot?" With that playful exchange, the commentary wrapped up. But here's the real story, this is where things get interesting.

In truth, Ai Orikasa had been preselected for the role of Quatre. There was indeed no audition held for that character. Quatre Raberba Winner, the refined young heir whose kindness and empathy always shone through, was a deeply complex character. Midway through the series, his personality becomes consumed by madness and hatred, driving him to create Wing Zero and plunge into violent destruction. For such an intricate and pivotal character, director Masashi Ikeda emphatically declared, "Only Ai Orikasa can pull this off!"

Our Gundam Wing production team had previously worked on the OVA ***Lord of Lords Ryu Knight: Adeu's Legend***, where we were utterly captivated by her portrayal of the demon youth (secretly elderly) Hyunt. Her astonishing gift lies in her effortless adaptability, flawlessly grasping vastly different roles and breathing authentic life into each. It's no exaggeration to suggest that the word "genius" was coined specifically for her.

Speaking specifically of Quatre, although male actors typically voiced him in foreign dubs, their portrayals, at least from what I've observed, tend to emphasize the spoiled, effeminate side of his affluent upbringing, and their low-register performances when Quatre succumbs to the ZERO System lack the depth and power necessary. Now, don't get me wrong, the international dubbing teams put in commendable effort. However, compared to Orikasa's nuanced interpretation, the difference is unmistakable. Sorry about that! Nevertheless, this alone demonstrates the profound subtlety and meticulous skill she brings to her roles.

Occasionally, I unexpectedly catch her voice on television or radio. Whenever this happens, I find myself anxiously anticipating a sudden shift, from her naturally warm, gentle tones to something unexpectedly

harsh or chillingly detached. Thankfully, I've yet to encounter any such sinister whispers lurking beneath, and instead, I'm always left reassured by her consistently soothing presence. Perhaps that's another hidden dimension of her charm.

With that, we now reach the ninth volume of Frozen Teardrop. Thanks to your continued support, dear readers, we've come this far. Truly, thank you. The story itself is entering its climax, and from here, the pace will only ramp up. Oh, right, I still haven't written the Zechs File yet.

Well, then, I'll see you next time in Volume 10 with another round of my rambling.

# Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

## Vol.09 Rhapsody of Quiet Despair (Part.03)

**Written by:** Katsuyuki Sumizawa

**Illustrations by:** Asagi Sakura [Character]  
MORUGA [Mechanical]

**Mechanical Design:** Hajime Katoki  
Junya Ishigaki

**Original Story:** Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino

**Cooperation:** Koji Nakajima [Sunrise]  
Tetsuko Takahashi [Sunrise]

**Advertising Support:** Bandai Hobby Division

**Supervisor:** Hideyuki Tomioka

**Cover Design:** Hajime Katoki

**Text Design:** Atsushi Doi [Tendo noPolicy]

**Editing:** Kadokawa Shoten  
Tsuyoshi Ishiwaki  
Tomohiro Zaizen  
Yasue Nagashima  
Miwa Matsumoto