

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP

新機動戦記ガンダムW
フローズンティアドロップ

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10 CONCERTO IN SERENDIPITY (Part.1)



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Dissonance in Forgetting

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

SNOW WHITE COCKPIT

Voice Recorder File Stored in the ZERO System's Internal Memory

Speaker: Heero Yuy

I had been lost for as long as I could remember.

I possessed nothing.

Space had stripped me of everything, my parents, the Leo model toy I once treasured, and in the end, even my sense of self.

I had become no one.

The first man I killed was a terrorist, a rival in trade. His bomb took the lives of Vingt Khushrenada, the young leader of the Romefeller Foundation, and his mother, Angelina. I could have stopped it before it happened.

But I didn't.

My heart was too weak.

That moment's hesitation condemned them both.

"Don't dwell on it," Odin Lowe had told me. "Everyone's first time is like that. From the second, it gets easier."

Since then, I've taken more lives than I can count. I learned to endure it, but it never became easy. To step beyond the sin of killing while knowing the weakness in my own heart required something more than instinct, it demanded a deliberate resolve.

I followed Odin Lowe, a freelance sniper, from colony to colony. He taught me every way there was to survive, and how to live unrestrained by anything but my own emotions. When he died and Doctor J found me, there was still no peace in my heart. A young girl and a puppy, both innocent, had died because of a mistake I made.

When I took the name "Heero Yuy," became a Gundam pilot, and descended to Earth, the missions I accepted were wretched things, and they repeated themselves without end.

I was deceived again and again, betrayed again and again.

The more I tried to live as myself, the more I brought misfortune to others. Until I met Relena Darlian, I had never truly been me.

Life is cheap, especially mine.

But this is the only way I know how to live.

War devours life.

Humanity has never forgotten that grief, yet it never stops fighting. Blood and tears spilled in war become little more than ceremonial decoration. History has its turning points that can only be told in the language of battle. Fighting for peace, those are tired, faded platitudes, repeated countless times over centuries.

The fighting grew more intense, and somewhere along the way I decided: protecting Relena would be my mission. It gave me a reason to live. When I finally found someone to protect, the hesitation that had always shadowed me in battle was gone.

I despised those who couldn't do the same. I hated the weak, those who flinched at the thought of attack, who were forever glancing around in fear, unable to trust anyone, unable to say what they truly felt. I could never forgive them.

Milliardo Peacecraft once told me, "It's the strong who make them that way."

He was wrong.

There are no strong. All of humanity is weak.

And I was weak too. I was a loser.

In the wars of this era, there were no victors. Knowing that, I still chose to live in this time.

In AC-196, Mariemaia Khushrenada led a rebellion against the newly formed Earth Sphere Unified Nation, a rebellion that invited the fragile peace into an "endless waltz" of conflict.

"To throw away weapons and seal away soldiers, that is not peace," Chang Wufei, another Gundam pilot, had said. He was right; peace built on sacrifice cannot be called just. But the truth is, we had already sacrificed too many. Someday, an age will come when soldiers like us are no longer needed. Peace will never be something granted from above, it will be chosen by people themselves, when they cease to be weak and afraid.

One day, a mature humanity, worthy of freedom and peace, will appear in this world. I believe that. And until then, I will keep fighting.

At the beginning of AC-197, Relena decided to run in the next presidential election of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation. I warned her, "If you run, do it as Darlian, not Peacecraft." The name Peacecraft was nothing but a heavy cross for her to bear. If she was to act by her own will, she needed to remain a Darlian.

Had nothing happened, perhaps her dream of a peaceful world would have been realized. But on April 7 of that year, reality crushed that

dream. Dixneuf Neuenheim and a group calling themselves the Epyon de Telos, the supposed “next government,” seized the Sanc Kingdom castle, taking two hundred hostages.

Wufei, now with the Preventers, gathered the former Gundam pilots. Two days later, on April 9, we took action. We drove Dixneuf out, but Relena was gravely wounded. Worse still, the terrorists had armed the castle with a nuclear time bomb.

Disabling the device would trigger another trap: the Perfect Peace Program, a forced obedience system that reacted to medical nanomachines.

Every part of this disaster was my mistake.

Only someone of the Peacecraft line could enter the password. With Milliardo absent, that left only Relena.

She unlocked it.

It was the only way to save me, stranded in Sanc Kingdom Bay, from the nuclear blast. But it also meant returning to the name Peacecraft. I told her to stop.

“Life is cheap, especially mine,” I said.

She didn’t listen.

“You haven’t lived your life to its fullest. Live more. And one day, show me the moment when your soul shines its brightest.”

“Is that an order?” I asked her.

“It’s my wish,” she replied.

The comm link went dead soon after. I never learned exactly what happened next.

April 9, AC-197, a day that ended in nothing but anguish. And that same day, the Perfect Peace Program was set in motion. Once active, it would slaughter much of humanity, triggered either if Relena herself gave the “SET” command, or if she met a death she did not choose.

A few days later, when Relena Peacecraft entered the cryosleep capsule known as The Little Prince, she never once looked back. Perhaps she had already frozen her tears.

I stood before that capsule, staring at her face, frozen in time.

Once again, I had failed to protect her.

I thought I would spend the rest of my life watching over her in regret and self-reproach, growing old, decaying alongside my own guilt. That was enough for me. If Relena remained preserved in that moment of brilliance, I would be satisfied.

Even in the endless silence, she would be the perfect conversation partner for someone as taciturn as I was. And I, someone incapable of making his own soul shine, could accept that.

Not long after, Doctor J summoned me and showed me the newly completed second cryosleep unit, Sleeping Beauty.

“Do you have the confidence to take on another mission?” he asked.

I didn’t nod.

“You have three choices,” he continued. “One is ‘inevitability.’ Another is ‘chance.’ The last is ‘choose neither.’”

“Is that about the future, or about fate?” I asked.

His mouth twisted into a faint smile before he answered.

“Both.”

I chose chance. It didn’t matter when Princess Aurora would wake.

One day, when Relena’s time began to move again and she decided she needed me, my time would begin again as well.

How many years passed after that didn’t matter. I couldn’t even say whether I had been dreaming. There had been no electrical storms in my brain like those of ordinary sleep.

The world I left behind had, it seemed, maintained a kind of peace while I slept, but only in the Earth Sphere. Here on Mars, the great gears of history had begun to grind out of alignment.

I awoke in Mars Calendar 0022, in “NEXT WINTER.” My location: the Preventer Mars Branch, North Polar Base. Around me stood Wufei, Duo Maxwell, a cheap Sally ripoff, and Duo’s half-trained, defective offspring who was only half-qualified as a warrior.

Mars terraforming had apparently succeeded. But the planet was now split between two powers locked in war. The Martian Civil War, pitting the Southern Mars Confederate States, led by the Lanagreene Republic, against the Northern Mars Federation government, whose second president was Relena Peacecraft.

I was told her wish was to die by my hand. Killing her, they claimed, would end the war with minimal bloodshed. The operation was called Operation Mythos.

Wufei, now head of the Preventer Mars Branch, gave me my mission: assassinate the second president of the Martian Federation.

Relena had awakened six months earlier, and had returned, inevitably, to the name Peacecraft.

I accepted the mission.

“Relena Peacecraft will die by my hand.”

Returning her to the name Darlian was something only I could do, and she wanted it as much as I did.

Yet in my mind, two conflicting memories fought, producing a cognitive dissonance I could not dismiss. Perhaps my true mission was to keep fighting that inner war.

On the very day I awoke, I boarded Snow White alongside Duo's failed son, deploying to hunt down a traitor.

Quaterine Winner, Quatre Raberba Winner's much younger sister, had defected from the Preventers to the Mars Federation. She intercepted us with a mobile doll known as "Family," or Maganac. Duo's son, in the Warlock, proved more capable than his "failure" reputation suggested. I could have left the mobile dolls to him, but Trowa Barton's companion, the one known only as "Nameless," was just as effective. It was Nameless who tore open the cockpit hatch of Quaterine's Rashid and climbed inside.

Quaterine escaped regardless, fleeing with the Peacecraft twins, Naina and Mille, who had come from the Federation to extract her.

My planning had been flawed. The Lanagreene Republic's "Zechs Merquise" had been tracking our movements. Snow White and Warlock were both targeted.

I knew this Zechs was a hologram, likely the same kind of projection I had seen aboard the battleship Libra during the Eve Wars, when Relena had been with him.

The holographic Zechs piloted Gundam Epyon, accompanied by three Virgo IVs. Wufei, in his Nataka, took them on. Somewhere in the chaos, I thought I heard The Ride of the Valkyries.

When Wufei engaged Nataka's ZERO System, I activated Snow White's ZERO in turn. Linked ZERO Systems double the flood of data into the mind, making communication nearly impossible. I left Nameless with instructions to brief Duo and the cheap Sally ripoff.

From point 02PX-78DY, in a prone firing position, I sniped at the Virgo IV's neo planet defensor fields, stripping their electromagnetic barriers. The failed Warlock threw me three spare cartridges, and I shot each one clean through.

Wufei destroyed the Virgo IVs. Only Zechs's Epyon remained, until the Federation's airborne divisions arrived, deploying hundreds of unmanned flight-type Mars Suits. The Federation high command had gone rogue; it was never Relena's will. Even light, air-combat mobile dolls, in numbers approaching five hundred, were a threat.

My buster rifle was out of ammunition. The beam sabers would have to do.

Then, from the Preventer North Polar Base, a transmission came through. On my monitor, Relena's face appeared.

"Heero... Heero, please respond."

Her voice, after so long. I fought and answered at once.

When I asked her purpose, her eyes glistened.

"I wanted to see you again, Heero..."

I barely heard the words, but I understood the meaning from the tear that fell from her eye.

“Heero... hurry up and come kill me.”

I told her the mission was already in motion, that I would carry it out as soon as this battle ended. But there was more I had to say. As long as she lived as a Peacecraft, she bore responsibility for starting this war. Being killed by me would only bring relief to her, it would not end the fighting.

The survivors would never stop.

For that, she would have to confront and overcome the cognitive dissonance in her own memories.

“Relena... you haven’t finished your own battle,” I told her, and cut the link.

When the Mars Suit count dropped to half, two hundred fifty remaining, Cyrene Wind, as Zechs now called himself, arrived in Tallgeese Heaven.

Freed from the Federation’s airborne divisions, the failed Warlock and I linked up with Trowa and Quatre aboard the submarine carrier Shawhook II.

They had changed.

Quatre was cold, decisive, without hesitation. Trowa had cast aside his mask of ice, no longer hiding his gentleness.

The failure behind me would not stop shouting. To test Trowa’s true nature, I told him to silence the noise. In the past, Trowa would have told me to handle it myself. This time, it was a woman, Catherine, I think, who acted. She struck the boy across the face, then placed a hand like a blade against the base of my skull.

I blacked out.

Later, I would admit I might have been careless, or simply exhausted past my limits.

When I came to, I was inside a medical capsule. The Shawhook II was in its self-destruct sequence. The situation was clear: the Peacecraft twins had hacked the ship and seized control.

I gripped Trowa’s hand, too kind, too unwilling to take the hard path, and said, “Stop. Offer no further resistance.”

“You’re telling me to let them take us?”

“It’s fine. Let them. We’ll go straight to Elysium Island, where Relena is.”

Catherine then asked me to confirm my mission again. Repeatedly being asked was tiresome. My mission in this time and place was fixed: Relena Peacecraft would die by my hand.

She had to.

And yet, in that moment, a discordant note rang through my mind.

Could I truly kill the one person I was meant to protect?

Could I really deny her the sight of the moment she had once asked for, when my soul shone its brightest?

Hours later, we were brought to Relena City on Elysium Island. Relena had not yet viewed the Peacecraft Files. I decided that if she could face it and bring her own war to an end, I would return her to the name Darlian.

She finished it, removed the virtual visor, and I saw it in her blue eyes, resolved light.

“Do you still want me to kill you?” I asked.

“No, Heero... I’ve realized this isn’t the time.”

The Peacecraft twins burst in then, bringing news from Zechs, now calling himself Cyrene Wind. The Lanagreene Republic’s mobile fortress Babel had advanced into the Isidis Plain. Zechs had attacked it in the Tallgeese Heaven and returned on the verge of death.

I went to him in the medical bay.

“I’m heading out there.”

Why was this man still fighting?

I understood well enough, at least I thought I did. For both of us, the battlefield was the only place we belonged.

The mission was simple: destroy Babel. I climbed into Snow White’s cockpit and took to the skies above the Isidis Plain.

Mars’s night was weeping. I cut through the darkness, wondering if it was possible to keep deceiving my own heart. I still possessed nothing, but I believed I had not yet lost hope. Relena, and humanity, must have realized it by now: they were never powerless.

That was where the voice recorder file ended.

Heero Yuy’s present self has been freed from the condition called “cognitive dissonance.”

The memories of his past have been reset.

Concerto in Serendipity

BABEL

In Hebrew, it means confusion.

Why did the Lanagreen Republic name their mobile fortress Babel? In the Book of Genesis, the great tower reaching for the heavens was called by that name. Thanks to the imagery of the sixteenth card in the Major Arcana of the tarot, people often assume it was destroyed, but the Bible never says God struck it down. Only that He halted its construction.

In the old interpretation, it was said that mankind, at the height of its prosperity, sought to approach the omnipotent God by building a tower to the sky. Angered by their arrogance, God took what had been a single shared tongue and confused it, scattering humanity across the earth before the tower could be completed.

That was the story, once.

But in the Space Age, as religion weathered away and human thought rooted itself in the axis of scientific rationalism, the meaning of that old tale began to change. The shift stemmed from a simple fact, humanity's sense of height had changed.

Rockets and orbital elevators surpassed the boundaries of Earth's atmosphere. Cities rose at the Lagrange points and on Mars itself. None of these feats provoked divine wrath. People began to doubt the "punishment for human arrogance" explanation, seeking instead a more universal reading.

One theory took hold, that the Babel story was not about hubris, but about humanity's response to disaster.

The descendants of Noah, survivors of the natural cataclysm called "the Great Flood" who had escaped aboard the Ark, built the great tower in preparation for the next deluge they feared would surely come. It would be a refuge high enough to avoid the waves, impossible to submerge, impossible to sweep away.

The Ark of their ancestors had drifted to Mount Ararat, some said to an altitude of 5,165 meters; others, to its middle slopes. Either way, the next flood would require something even greater, a colossal man-made structure to outlast a sea that rose beyond reason.

Was this "a challenge to God?" Perhaps. But it was far easier to sympathize with than the outlandish idea of "wanting to be close to God." It was the same obsessive drive that, in the nuclear-armed Cold War, had led nations to build underground shelters at their most vital sites.

And yet, the project failed. Why?

In this interpretation, the “confusion and scattering” is explained as a law of nature. All things move in cycles of dispersal and gathering. The universe expands without end. Cells, with their DNA, divide and replicate ceaselessly. From the moment humanity stood upright, it carried the instinct to expand its range and ensure the species’ survival for all time.

Diversification and fragmentation were not the problem. What humans truly resisted was forced unification, the flattening of all individuality under the rule of the powerful. So the descendants of Noah did not scatter because they had lost a “unified language.” They scattered because they had begun to doubt the doctrine they had believed in, and chose dispersal of their own will. In other words, they realized that the next great flood was never coming.

The religious overtones of divine will and heavenly punishment had faded almost entirely.

Doctrines enforced by the ruling class often carried the force of command, must or must not, and tended toward exclusion. Such unified societies easily grew inward-looking, brimming with domestic discontent and hypersensitive to outside interference. No ruling class could maintain such a system for generations. History had proven it: any society built on an ideology or creed eventually collapses.

Ancient China, though bolstered by the absolute doctrine of Confucianism, never finished its Great Wall, the longest structure in human history fell into ruin. The Soviet Union, which claimed half the Northern Hemisphere under socialism, disintegrated in less than seventy years. Even in the modern After Colony era, the United Earth Sphere Alliance, wielding the doctrine of “justice and peace,” held the world under military suppression for sixty-two years before resistance rose up and toppled it.

Today’s Earth Sphere Unified Nation has espoused similar pacifism for just over twenty years, a blink of history, too brief to judge.

For the Lanagreene Republic, Babel is an antithesis to the Mars Federation, a counterculture. Liberation from unification. From liberation, chaos and dispersal. From freedom, prosperity and growth. That is the symbolism of “Babel.”

Lanagreene, once unarmed and at peace, saw its central oceanic city destroyed in a terrorist attack. Had it been armed, it might have shot down the falling reconnaissance satellite and saved the tens of thousands who died. That tragedy drove the Republic to build its own military forces.

When the truth came out, that Mars Federation soldiers had been behind the terrorists, Major General Zechs Merquise was outraged. He

explained the facts to the people, then declared independence and war on the Federation.

At first, it was simply Lanagreene's own war of independence. Zechs had no designs on conquest or elevating his people's status. But the Federation's second president, Relena Peacecraft, called for total pacifism, nonviolence and disarmament, as if she had forgotten the war altogether. She called for peace while the fighting raged.

In answer, Zechs turned aggressively outward, invading neighboring nations, perhaps to teach just how dangerous fragile pacifism could be. Under his command, the Republic army won victory after victory, breaking every attempt at recapture. Each nation conquered was freed, each seceded from the Federation and entered an equal alliance with Lanagreene. The Southern Coalition, dedicated to "Overthrowing the Federation," was born.

Within weeks, more joined, until the coalition equaled the Northern Federation in power. It now calls itself the Southern Mars Confederate States.

The Southern Mars Development Consortium, long dissatisfied with the Federation's monopoly on Earth trade, saw its chance. The Federation's central government still clutched its privileges, controlling migrant labor, tariffs, and import/export quotas, even as it proclaimed "further independence" from Earth. Reform had been demanded for years, but every time the army crushed it. Zechs's uprising was the fight for freedom they had been waiting for, and Relena Peacecraft's self-righteous pacifism only spurred them on.

Most Martians did not believe her words. To them, her speeches were narrow and suffocating.

When the fortress Babel was ready to depart, Zechs stood before his Gundam Epyon, addressing the citizens who had come to see it off.

"Babel and the Gundam are symbols of our will to resist. This fight will sweep away meaningless dogma, correct false pacifism, and restore freedom to the beloved, chaotic soil of Mars. Every citizen must cast off the shackles of humiliation. Believe it, our victory is certain!"

The massive track belts that carried all twelve fortress modules began to move. The crowds roared their support as Babel rolled toward enemy territory.

Zechs File Prelude
Part.01

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Offshore, Isidis Bay

My name is Kathy Po.

I'm a lieutenant with the Mars Branch of the Preventers, under the Earth Sphere Unified Nation.

That night, after Master Chang took off in the Gundam Epyon Bai, Father Maxwell and I left the long-range high-speed hovercraft Voyage in a small hoverboat bound for the battleship Grand Chariot. Our mission was to deliver the holographic AI "Dorothy" to Professor W, the current field commander. We needed Earth Sphere authorization to respond to the shifting political climate.

When we reached the bridge and handed over the projector, Father noticed the shadow on the professor's face.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"It's... Heero," W said, breaking his words as if choosing them carefully. "At first, he was attacking Babel... then, for some reason, he abandoned Snow White. I believe he's trying to infiltrate the fortress to rescue President Relena—"

"Wait a damn minute. What the hell is she doing in the enemy's fortress?"

"Frankly, it seems like exactly the kind of thing she'd do."

"You telling me she's still spouting peace talks at a time like this?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"Heero's reckless enough, but that young lady's no better... Damn it, come on, Kathy."

He said my name so abruptly I froze, unsure what he meant.

"Um... where, exactly?"

"Where d'you think? To Babel, where those two idiots went."

It seemed he intended to rescue them both. In my opinion, that was reckless and foolhardy enough to match their own.

"Wait," said Professor W, saving me from answering. "Our objective is to halt Babel's advance, not to rescue those two."

"Yeah, yeah. You handle your mission your way," Father said, turning his back and leaving the bridge.

I caught up to him in the corridor toward the hoverboat docks.

"Father, what if Heero went after President Relena as part of his mission?"

"No chance. If he'd wanted to kill her, he's had plenty of opportunities before now. He's probably trying to bring her back."

"In that case, all the more reason to consult President Dorothy before we act."

"You think some hologram's gonna be any use? You make your own calls, or you'll regret it."

"I am still a Preventer."

"You're Kathy Po. You don't have to cram yourself into any other mold."

He wouldn't be swayed.

Master Chang had always told me: your life is your own to decide. Father was saying the same.

"Your mother, Sally Po, she always lived that way," he added.

"You knew my mother well?"

"Sure. She used to give me hell all the time."

He didn't know the real mother I remembered, the one who tried to shape me into something specific, who had forced me into the Preventers through relentless training. "You have a duty to keep the world at peace," she'd tell me. To a child, it had been suffocating.

"Understood. I'll go with you," I said at last.

I couldn't put it into words yet, but something inside me was moving.

We boarded the hoverboat and set out across the Isidis Strait. Here, the currents ran in clashing loops along the bay's coast, colliding and rising into higher waves. The advancing gray swells and the returning black swells struck in turn, their difference in height feeling several times greater than normal. Riding that cycle of surge and retreat seemed to magnify my unease.

The sky was starless, weighed down with thick, heavy clouds.

"Looks like snow," Father said lightly. "We'd better hurry."

Far astern, something white leapt from the sea into the clouds and vanished into the upper atmosphere.

"Father, what was that?"

"Snow White, the suit Heero abandoned."

"And who's piloting it?"

"Quatre, of course, he's the only one left who can."

It took me a moment to realize he meant Professor W.

"Him and Wufei... they all talk tough, but in the end they can't resist the call of their old blood," Father said.

I found myself smiling.

"That goes for you too, doesn't it?"

"Me? I'm like Trowa, I act after I've read the situation."

He used his comrades' names without thinking. His heart, too, must have returned to those younger days.

“Well, either way, we’d better do what we can,” he said, and in his profile I saw it: he was enjoying this, just a little.

Inside the Mobile Fortress Babel

Father and I slipped into Babel alongside a returning Virgo unit.

Just before we reached the mobile doll hangar, an encrypted transmission came through from Captain Sakai aboard the Voyage.

“Nataku and Tallgeese Heaven have returned to base. Both heavily damaged, both pilots unconscious. Re-deployment impossible. Awaiting orders.”

The situation was even more dire than I’d feared.

Far astern, out across the Isidis Plains, I could see the black-winged Wing Zero descending like some grim omen. Who was piloting it, I couldn’t tell. Opposing it appeared to be several Gundams launched from the Grand Chariot.

Following Father through one of the fortress’s long, echoing corridors, I asked what he intended to do about all this.

“Let my idiot son and the others handle that,” he said bluntly. “Our priority is finding Relena and Heero’s location.”

I sent back my reply to Sakai, “Command authority delegated to you.”

Not long after, Father and I split up. Using the data I’d pulled from a hacked terminal, he quickly pinned down Heero Yuy and President Relena’s last known location and set off toward it.

“You secure an escape route,” he told me. “Find something mid-sized, high-speed, an aircraft if you can.”

I followed orders, slipping into one of the fortress’s aircraft hangars. Four armed guards stood watch inside, but I filled the space with “Hypnotic” gas, colorless, scentless, until they all slumped into unconsciousness. Father had his own supply; I figured he’d use it during the rescue.

No suitable mid-sized craft was present. I had to settle for something larger, riskier, more conspicuous. Boarding, I bypassed cockpit security and hacked the onboard systems, inserting a dummy program to accept me as authorized crew.

Once that was done, I called Father, “Aircraft secured.”

His reply was immediate, “Change of plans. Heero’s been shot. I’m getting him treated before heading your way.”

“And President Relena?”

“She was already gone when I got there. Looked like someone had taken her.”

The rattle of a machine gun cut through the transmission, then silence.

I hesitated. Should I go to him? Or search for President Relena? Both options pulled at me, but both seemed wrong. The fortress's computer systems were a tangle of decoys and false data, no way I could locate her in this mess. And if I tried to back him up, I'd likely only get in the way.

All I could do was wait.

That was when I felt it, someone behind me.

I turned sharply. No one.

It's nothing, I told myself.

Then footsteps, muffled through the door. Not approaching, receding, slow and deliberate.

I stood, drew my pistol, pressed myself against the door. The sound traced downward, spiraling away, a staircase outside the cockpit.

The guards in the hangar were still under. No one should have been moving. No one could stay conscious after breathing Hypnotic.

I gripped the handle, wrenched the door open, weapon raised.

From the landing, I glimpsed him.

Long, straight blond hair down his back. I knew that hair.

Zechs Merquise, Major General of the Lanagreene Republic.

I moved after him, silent on the iron spiral stairs. He headed toward a passage leading to the aft engine section, the tails of a dark green coat sweeping at his legs.

Not Lanagreene military issue, older. The name White Fang flickered in my mind, the old AC-era colonial rebel army. Why would Zechs be wearing that?

Questions could wait. I called out, "Halt!" and leveled my pistol at his back.

He glanced over his shoulder. Smiled faintly.

Then, without a word, he turned away, opened the hatch to the engine room, and stepped inside.

If that was truly Zechs, it had to be a hologram. A warning shot would mean nothing. And yet... would a hologram make the sound of boots on metal?

If it was flesh and blood, was it Milliardo, the man calling himself Cyrene Wind? Impossible. He was supposed to be lying unconscious in a medical ward in Relena City.

I edged to the open hatch and peered in. Heat rolled out in waves, heavy with the stink of volatile oil. The low rumble of idling drives thrummed in my ears.

"Running won't help you. Come out," I called.

No answer.

In the dim light, I saw them, two shadows stretching across the deck. Zechs, and someone else.

"Who are you?" I demanded. "Both of you, identify yourselves!"

They said nothing. And then, in an instant, both shadows were gone.

I sprinted to where they'd been standing. Above me, boots clattered, two pairs, up a ladder. The second figure moved like a woman.

I gave chase. This was no time for subtlety; my own boots rang against the rungs.

The ladder led to an overhead hatch, an access route for engine maintenance. Crawling out, I found myself in a narrow, twisting passage lit only by sparse, yellowish work lamps.

Ahead, under one such light, they appeared again, Zechs, and the woman following him.

My breath caught. Her hair was done in long, vertical rolls.

"Mom?"

If that was my mother, Sally Po, I could only say I was seeing hallucinations and hearing phantom sounds.

My mother died when I was young, she met with an unfortunate accident while carrying out a Preventer mission. Yet here she was, not in Preventer uniform, but in the clothes she'd worn in her youth, during her time with the Resistance. Exactly as in one photograph I'd kept in an old album.

Why would I see her now? Why was she with Zechs?

The only logical conclusion, that I was losing my mind.

I closed my eyes, forcing my breathing steady.

No footsteps could be heard from anywhere anymore, only silence dominated the darkness.

When I opened them, the passage was empty.

At the far end stood a door. A slip of paper, maintenance notes, fluttered from the side wall in a faint draft. The door was locked, sealed tight. The draft had to be from the idle engines' heat. And yet, if they had gone through, this was the only way.

I opened the door.

Cold air rushed at me. Beyond was the exterior of the aircraft.

The Hypnotic would have long since dissipated from the hangar.

And outside, my mother stood there.

Smiling.

I stepped forward... and realized what I was seeing.

It was artwork, painted on the airboat's vertical stabilizer. A voluptuous woman in resistance garb, holding an old-style musket, cleavage bared. The face was nothing like my mother's, but the hair, golden, in long rolls, was exact.



Beside her, stenciled in French: La Liberté guidant le peuple.

Liberty Leading the People. Not the Delacroix painting, something else entirely. A name for the aircraft? A slogan for its crew?

Perhaps I'd glimpsed it earlier, boarding, and it had triggered the memory, made me see my mother's ghost. But then, what about Zechs?

That Zechs, the way I saw him, matched exactly the man in the Zechs Files from the Second Lunar War.

I stood there, stunned, understanding nothing.

The chime of my comm snapped me out of it. Father's voice, followed by a weary sigh.

"We've got a problem... You've secured the aircraft?"

"Yes. Section D, Hangar 7."

"I'm on my way. I've got two guests."

"Understood."

I ended the call, but the phrase "two guests" stuck with me. One had to be Heero Yuy. But the other?

I learned the answer minutes later, when Father arrived at the cockpit with Heero and a second figure slung over his shoulder, Dr. Hilde Schbeiker. She was unconscious, bound hand and foot.

"You kidnapped a high-value Lanagreene official?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it. She used to be my wife."

"But—"

Behind him, Heero Yuy stood watching me over Father's shoulder.

The man I saw was not the one I remembered meeting. His movements were uneasy, his eyes missing the sharp, honed edge I'd once known.

"What happened to Heero Yuy?" I asked.

"I'll fill you in later. Right now, we need to get out of here," Father said.

"Yes, sir."

"And Kathy, do you still have the microchip for the Zechs Files?"

"I've got the copy you gave me. Here."

"'Treize' and 'Peacecraft' were fine. But there's a problem with 'Zechs.'"

He set Hilde gently on the sofa at the back of the cockpit.

"She planted a bug in the data file. It has to be reloaded."

Reloaded? By whom? And was that connected to the Zechs apparition I'd just seen?

Heero stepped forward then, his voice low, weighted with grief.

"Is the 'woman I have to protect' you?"

I didn't answer. Couldn't.

He dropped to one knee in front of me, his voice breaking.

"I don't have the strength now. But I will protect you... I swear it."

His shoulders shook as he clutched his arms around himself.
And I, searching for words, found nothing to give him in return.

Isidis Plains

An hour past midnight, the powdery snow still fell, thin and ceaseless. It settled in silence, blanketing the vast plain in white. And there, at the center of that stillness, the Wing Gundam Zero stood tall, its black wings folded at its back.

Inside its cockpit, Vingt Kushrenada wore an easy, unhurried smile.

“Five against one... that does put me at something of a disadvantage, doesn't it?”

Encircling him were four machines, Warlock, Prometheus, Scheherazade, and Queen of Hearts. Far off, above the skies of Isidis Bay, Snow White waited, its next arrow drawn and ready.

“In this situation,” Vingt continued, “if you were to lose, the psychological damage would be considerable. I trust you're prepared for that?”

Duo and Naina said nothing, each matching the rhythm of their breathing to the moment they knew the fight would begin. Nameless and Quaterine were gauging their distance to Wing Zero, calculating the exact range where close-quarters assault and heavy fire could be brought to bear in tandem.

“My guess,” Vingt went on, “is that the close-combat specialists, Warlock and Scheherazade, will strike first. Once I take to the air, Prometheus will open up with that oversized cruciform autocannon of his to bring me down. If I dodge to either side, Queen of Hearts will be there ahead of me to keep the net closed. Something like that, yes?”

Wing Zero sank to one knee, not the posture of surrender, but the coiled crouch of a sprinter at the starting line, muscles ready to explode into motion.

“But I,” Vingt said softly, “intend to exceed your expectations. And you... will suffer a humiliation you've never known.”

The Gundam's right fist pressed to the frozen ground.

“And now, Duo... the next line out of your mouth will be, ‘If you think you can—’”

Warlock lunged. The great beam scythe swept upward, Duo's voice a shout:

“If you think you can, then try—!”

“—then try,” Vingt finished with him, the words overlapping in the cold air.

Wing Zero's dual eyes flared. Vingt's smile vanished.

"On your marks," he said. "Set—"

Power gathered at the point where his fist met the earth, a density so great the snow swirling in the breeze vaporized in an instant.

From that single point, resonance waves pulsed outward. The ground split in radial cracks. A blinding light surged from Wing Zero's frame.

"Start!"

The thunderclap rolled across the plain.

Warlock's beam scythe fell, and in the space between beats, Wing Zero was gone, vaulting skyward at a speed that defied belief.

The black wings stayed closed. No thrust from the wing-mounted flight engines.

Prometheus's cruciform cannons spat fire, but the target was already too high, already beyond range.

"Damn..."

Nameless clicked his tongue.

"That speed."

Above them, the great black wings twisted into a spiral around Wing Zero's body, driving it faster still. The air cracked, one sonic boom, then another, as the machine tore through the sky.

Quaterine in Scheherazade and Naina in Queen of Hearts both assumed its next move would be to retreat toward the fortress Babel. They shifted position, ready to block the way.

Instead, Wing Zero veered toward Isidis Bay, toward Snow White.

"No, he's after my brother!" Quaterine's voice cut across the comms.

"Snow White?" Naina couldn't help but ask.

In Zero's cockpit, Vingt's mouth curved again into a smile.

"Your weakness is lack of coordination. In future battles you'll try to compensate for that by relying on a 'brain.' Which is why you always take that brain out first, in the opening round."

In Snow White, Professor W felt the pressure of that intent like a physical force.

"Tactically sound," he murmured. "The old me might have crumbled under this kind of killing intent."

He slid a microchip into the console's ZERO System.

The display shifted, 'ZERO' replaced by Astro Boy.

"Heero... I'm borrowing a little of your power."

The residual consciousness of Heero Yuy within the cockpit systems downloaded into him, traced into thought and instinct. Heero's skill and resolve poured into his mind.

"Mission acknowledged," W said in a voice suddenly low, cold, uncannily like Heero's own.

“Now... with Seven Zwarg, Silber, I’ll shoot him down.”

He fixed the target scope on Wing Zero, the machine hurtling toward him at impossible speed.

“Stance, set...”

In the Snow White’s hands, the great bow-shaped weapon was already nocked with a silver arrow, its tip sparking with static.

“Nocking... set up.”

The bowstring drew back, every millimeter taut with lethal force.

“Drawing...”

The Snow White’s frame strained as the string reached its limit.

“Full draw... release!”

The silver light leapt from the string in an instant, an arrow screaming toward its mark.

Inside the Mobile Fortress Babel

On the topmost floor, Relena Peacecraft was escorted into the commander’s office of Major General Zechs Merquise.

The spacious room’s ceiling was set with panels of reinforced bulletproof glass. Through them, she could see the snow drifting down from the starless night above. The glass frosted over in moments, only for the flakes to melt almost instantly under the room’s high heat.

For a while, Relena stood gazing upward at that snow falling from the lightless sky. The sight was strangely dreamlike, almost enough to make her believe the fortress was ascending into space itself.

If only I could simply be taken into heaven like this, she thought.

Her heart swayed like a lone, withered tree on a barren plain, thin and brittle in the wind.

Is Heero still alive?

The leafless branches shivered under invisible gales, ready to snap at any moment.

What have I done?

An agitation she could not name roiled in her chest, tangled with guilt that stabbed like a thorn.

Stella and the others left immediately after bringing her here.

Relena lifted her gaze.

Zechs was there, his back turned, eyes on the war analysis monitors. Only the two of them occupied the room.

She watched him in silence.

I mustn’t break.

I have to face this.

Noble, passionate, and strong.

She repeated it to herself like a mantra, forcing the will back into a body that felt moments away from collapsing.

She drew on the memory of her grandmother Katarina and of Sabrina, two women who had lived with unyielding strength. She would not betray their example.

Zechs turned toward her at last.

“Well met, Relena...”

The words slipped out before she could stop them, “Brother.”

The smile on his face was gentle, unchanged from long ago.

She knew this was a hologram. But the image before her was far more vivid than the Dorothy she had seen before, so clear she could believe he was truly there.

Relena straightened her spine, corrected herself.

“Major General Zechs Merquise. Forgive me, but I will forgo any ceremonial greeting and come directly to the point.”

Even if he wasn't flesh and blood, he was still the representative of the Lanagreene Republic.

“End this war. Now.”

Her voice carried the full weight of the second President of the Martian Federation.

“Name your terms for a cease-fire. If it will bring peace to Mars, I will spare no effort.”

“Relena.”

His tone was that of a brother, not an adversary.

“I'm relieved to see you unchanged.”

He stepped closer, extending slender fingers to tilt her chin upward.

Somehow, even as a hologram, he could touch her. She felt the warmth of his skin, thought she could hear the faint pulse through his veins.

He looked into her eyes.

“No... there's more sorrow in them now. Is it for the people of Mars, or is it a private grief you carry?”

It wasn't mockery. His clear blue eyes seemed to hold genuine sympathy for her pain.

And deep down, part of her wanted to step forward, bury herself in that chest, and weep.

I shot Heero.

Tell me what to do.

She wanted to tell it to the smiling brother before her. Again and again, the temptation rose. But she forced it down and answered.

“Both.”

Zechs chuckled softly, then said nothing more.

He breathed quietly, like any living man.

Was he aware he was only a holographic AI? Or was he meeting her as the man who believed himself her brother in truth?

"You and I," he said, "are like Hansel and Gretel. Children abandoned by their parents, lost in the forest of chaos, who at last found a gingerbread house called peace. But the house... belonged to a witch."

Relena didn't immediately follow the metaphor.

"Peace is a sweet trap that leads people to misery. Taste it once, and you can never leave. Eat it until it's gone, and there will be nothing left."

His words remained even, deliberate.

"Eating sweets makes a child happy, more so for the very young. But you can't live on sweets alone. The diet becomes unbalanced, growth stops, and one day the flavor itself dulls. As an adult, you crave something richer, game with spice, perhaps, and a glass of Barolo. Dessert is enough at the end of the meal. I think perhaps the 'witch' in that gingerbread house was really a dream-filled girl who had become unable to leave the outside world. Perhaps she, too, was a lonely Gretel once, abandoned by her parents."

"You mean me? You think I was the 'witch' in the gingerbread house?"

Another faint laugh, and he fell silent again.

Recalling the fairy tale, Relena spoke slowly, confirming her memory.

"But Gretel wasn't alone. Her brother Hansel was with her. Together, they killed the witch."

"I believe 'total pacifism' is the witch."

"That's..."

"Disarmament and nonviolence only lead to new wars. History makes that plain."

"The Earth Sphere is at peace now."

"You know that peace isn't 'total.' As long as the Preventers exist as an armed organization, it's no different from a surveillance state under a dictatorial regime."

"..."

"Peace should accept its place as dessert, never as humanity's main course."

"I don't want you speaking of peace in such terms. You—"

Her thoughts blurred, memory clouding.

"You're wrong."

Katarina and Sabrina seemed to fade from her mind.

"Peace isn't something born from war—"

And then the déjà vu hit, sharp as vertigo. She had said these words before, back in December AC-195, aboard Libra. The scene then had been much like this. Milliardo had told her, "If you don't fight, you'll never understand the folly of it."

The Zechs before her wore the same expression, a face hiding a grim resolve.

"I'm speaking of peace's value," he said quietly. "Humanity needs both, war and peace. If you deny the hardship of living, you'll never gain true peace of mind."

"You..." She hesitated, but forced the question out. "Are you alive?"

"I am alive," the AI answered instantly.

"More alive than any other human. I have a soul, a heart. I feel people's joys and sorrows. And I take pride in being alive. I affirm my own existence. It is you, Relena, who may not be alive."

The words pierced her.

I'm not alive. I advocate ideals but can't affirm my own existence.

She had wanted Heero to kill her, not to harm anyone else. Shooting him had been only to protect Stella at her side. No reason could erase that guilt. She claimed to reject war, yet could not escape it.

Her head dropped.

Perhaps I'm the hologram, ephemeral, fading, insubstantial.

The past she had leaned on to hold herself together was eroding, piece by piece.

A voice broke in.

"No, President Relena. You are alive."

At the same moment, cracks spiderwebbed through the glass overhead.

Specialized microcharges using electromagnetic resonance detonated. The glass shattered, fragments raining down.

Six armed women descended on ropes, surrounding Relena in a tight guard. The outside air poured in, biting cold.

They all wore black combat uniforms, each with a spade on one sleeve and ranks from "10" to "A" marked below it. Five were the Merciless Fairies, an RSF, Royal Straight Flush, unit. The sixth was their commanding officer, the President's aide.

Zechs addressed the older woman at the front.

"Noin?"

"I now go by Lucrezia Peacecraft," she said, aiming her pistol at the enemy commander who looked like the husband of her youth.

In her eyes, there was less hatred than longing.

"To see that face again... even I can't remain entirely composed."

A faint smile from him.

“People lose their way, Zechs,” she told him. “They live on, hesitating, suffering. Affirmation and denial, over and over. The journey matters more than the conclusion. And so Madame President, no, Miss Relena, is without question alive.”

By the end she was speaking to Relena behind her.

“You still love Heero Yuy, don’t you?”

Relena’s head jerked up.

“Major General Zechs Merquise, can you love someone? Can you say without doubt that it isn’t just a program’s calculation?”

“Of course. I still love you, Noin.”

She pulled the trigger.

The bullet struck Zechs between the eyes.

“Unfortunately,” she said flatly and dismissively, “I don’t feel the same.”

The mark remained on his brow. No blood flowed. He stayed on his feet.

“The President will be coming with us,” she said.

As the RSF led Relena away, she looked back once.

The ageless hologram of Zechs murmured a single word.

“Nevermore.”

She didn’t understand it. Only that his motionless face seemed somehow lonely, somehow inexplicably sad.

Over Isidis Bay

Ancient folklore from old Europe spoke of a silver bullet, a weapon endowed with divine power, capable of felling werewolves and vampires alike.

Professor W did not necessarily subscribe to such superstitions, yet even he could recognize that no other weapon could be more fitting, more poetic, than a silver arrow to pierce the devil known as Vingt Khushrenada.

Snow White drew the string of its great archery rig to full extension.

“Full draw... release!”

In that instant, a silver arrow blazed forth, accelerating until it split the night sky like a shaft of lightning.

It flew straight for the black conical spiral of the approaching Wing Gundam Zero.

Perhaps sensing imminent danger, Wing Zero decelerated slightly.

Or perhaps it slowed out of sheer arrogance, confident its defenses would be more than sufficient.

Sure enough, mere moments ago, Wing Zero's distinctive spiral-shaped wings had effortlessly deflected the dober gun blasts from the Tallgeese Heaven, an armor of exceptional resilience.

But the silver arrow's tip was already spinning, a drill of light boring forward as it met the black wings head-on.

The impact burst in a flare so bright it bled across the clouds.

The arrow's rotation bit into the wing's leading edge, forcing the tightly curled spiral open against its own rotation. In a heartbeat, Wing Zero's main body was exposed.

The silver arrow drove on, punching from shoulder to chest, straight through to the cockpit. At that depth, no pilot could survive.

"The arrow's special trait is 'pierce.'" W said coldly. "Nothing can withstand its penetrating force."

The arrowhead was forged of MG alloy to maximize its armor-piercing capability, its surface meticulously coated with nano-particles designed to corrode any known metal.

Wing Zero faltered, spiraling downward like a wounded raven, its shattered wings useless as it descended rapidly toward Ishidis Bay.

Watching its fall, Professor W murmured calmly, "Checkmate."

Silver Arrow, Silberpfeil.

Of the Seven Zwarg armaments, none could match it for bringing a mobile suit to a dead stop and killing its pilot outright. It was, for its purpose, the ultimate anti-mobile suit weapon.

But it had limits. At long range, diminished sharply over distance, as did its penetrating power. Moreover, an even greater limitation was the psychological burden it placed on its wielder.

Fighting in a mobile suit blunted the weight of killing. But to use the Silver Arrow to its full effect, one had to aim for the cockpit, to deliberately take a pilot's life. Even on a battlefield, where killing the enemy was a given, this one-shot kill demanded both precision marksmanship and an unflinching will.

That was why W had loaded an image trace of Heero Yuy's residual consciousness into the ZERO System. With Heero's skill and resolve, the mental burden would be greatly diminished.

Professor W exhaled heavily, regaining some composure, and carefully withdrew the microchip from the ZERO System.

Instantly, the image-traced consciousness of Heero Yuy dissolved into nothingness.

And then a voice cut into his ears, a voice like a blade of ice.

"Nevermore."

"What?!"

He scarcely believed what he'd heard.

"Impossible..." was all he could muster.

"I think I overestimated you," the voice said.

It was unmistakably Vingt Khushrenada.

"Did you seriously think you could defeat me with something as trivial as this? And relying on Heero Yuy's power no less, don't you feel even the slightest shame?"

Vingt was in complete psychological control now.

"How far into my thoughts has he reached?"

Panic surged through Professor W as he frantically scanned his surroundings.

"If I don't locate him quickly, I'll be caught by his counterattack."

The swirling snow made visibility poor; there was no sighting on optics. He pushed the search parameters to maximum.

A return ping.

Wing Zero had not fallen into the bay. It skimmed the water, black wings spread, buster rifle charged.

"Too late."

Zooming in, he saw it clearly, the silver arrow still jutting from its cockpit. By every design standard, a pilot in that seat should be dead. There was no possibility of moving a cockpit elsewhere in the frame.

That left only one explanation, "Hologram..." W breathed.

There was precedent, Major General Zechs Merquise, the AI "Dorothy."

But Vingt's reply cut in, cold and laced with mockery.

"Unfortunately... I'm quite real. And right now, I am most definitely sitting in this cockpit."

And then, again, "Nevermore."

The word, taken from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, in which the black bird utters it again and again to the doomed narrator.

W's hands moved on instinct, working the controls, forward, back, side to side, up, down, but nothing responded. He was locked in place, just as the poem's narrator was trapped beneath the raven's shadow.

The next instant, Wing Zero fired its buster rifle.

Snow White was swallowed whole by a blinding maelstrom of searing white light.

Over Isidis Plains

The aircraft carrying us shot out from Babel's Seventh Hangar, roaring into open skies.

My hands gripped the control stick tightly.

Over the comm, the control tower barked repeated demands for flight clearance confirmation, but I deliberately ignored every last one.

We were clear of the fortress, free, but not out of danger. A cluster of small craft moved to intercept, loosing missiles without so much as a surrender order or a warning shot. Either they thought it pointless to talk, or they were unmanned drones, the kind the Lanagreene military favored.

"In hindsight, a smaller, more agile craft would've been better," I muttered. The big craft wallowed in the turns, making missile evasion sluggish. My earlier choice felt like a mistake.

I briefly contemplated broadcasting the fact that we had Hilde Schbeiker as a hostage aboard, but quickly dismissed the thought. The enemy would doubtless conclude it safer to obliterate us rather than risk Hilde, keeper of vital secrets, falling into enemy hands.

Instead, I armed the aft intercept missiles and brought up the jamming system Father Maxwell had hastily loaded aboard. Against unmanned drones, this "blinder" worked beautifully.

Sure enough, the pursuing craft wavered, slowed, and fell back. We slipped beyond their missile range.

I glanced over my shoulder.

"Thanks to you, Father, we might just make it."

"Yeah, sure—*wonderful*," he muttered irritably, barely disguising his frustration.

Behind me, Father was furiously debugging the Zechs File, frantically combing through virtual screens, poring over endless streams of data, searching for the source of a critical anomaly.

"Dammit! Who is it? Who's missing here?!"

His tone was tight with urgency.

According to him, the file had intentionally omitted the existence of a specific person. In a downloaded memory, when a person who should exist is missing, the brain instinctively erases related people and events to avoid the stress of contradiction. It was a psychological defense, but as time passed, contradictions intensified exponentially. The deletion spread, eventually causing total memory collapse.

Relena Peacecraft's emotional instability had likely stemmed from precisely this confusion and contradiction when she'd awakened from cryosleep, with only the incomplete "Zechs File" uploaded into her memory.

His extraordinary mental resilience prevented him from outwardly showing emotional instability, but beneath the surface, severe inner turmoil must have brewed. When Hilde Schbeiker treated the gunshot wound to his shoulder, she had simultaneously stimulated the neurons in

his hippocampus, speeding signal transmission and, intentionally or not, resetting his memories.

Lost in thought, I became aware of Father's intense stare fixed upon me.

"You've seen the file yourself, right?"

"Yes."

"And yet, you show no emotional instability, no memory issues. Correct?"

"That's right."

Father fell silent, yet his unwavering gaze remained locked on me.

The silence dragged on painfully. It dawned on me that he wasn't looking into my eyes, nor my face exactly, but rather my ears, or more precisely, the small, ruby-red earrings dangling from them.

These earrings had been given to me by Master Chang on the day I'd transferred to the Mars branch. At the time, he'd gruffly said, "A memento of Sally Po."

I'd worn them ever since.

Uneasy beneath Father's relentless stare, I finally broke the silence.

"Father... is something wrong?"

"I see. Sally Po."

"What?" I asked, confused. Surely he hadn't mistaken my mother for me.

Father turned back to the virtual monitor, scrolling rapidly through data, then announced, "As I suspected. Sally Po doesn't exist in this 'Zechs File.'"

His smile was equal parts vindication and certainty. "That's it, I've figured it out. Now I can make a stable file."

It was true, my mother wasn't there in what I'd seen.

"I have questions, Father," I said. "Would my mother's absence alone really cause such severe instability?"

The Zechs File detailed events surrounding the "Second Lunar War" from AC-186 to 191. At that time, Mother had been younger than I was now, little more than a teenage girl.

"And," I went on, "when Heero woke from cryosleep at the North Polar Base, he called me a 'cheap Sally ripoff.' President Relena called me 'Major Sally.' They confused us. How could they know about my mother if she wasn't in the file?"

"They saw you," he said simply. "And that pulled her out of the depths of their real memories. Both of them met her outside the file."

He continued, addressing my initial question: "To answer your first question, Sally Po was, to my knowledge, a critical figure during the timeframe the file covers."

A past about my mother I knew nothing about...

Then it occurred to me, I'd seen a vision of Mother just before we'd launched, a version of her involved in resistance activities I'd never witnessed.

I'd yet to mention this vision to Father.

He murmured thoughtfully, almost to himself, "Should've realized sooner. We must quickly integrate Sally's existence into the file and reload Heero's memory properly."

At that moment, Heero Yuy sat in the back, silently watching over an unconscious Hilde. Though he still held a pistol, I doubted he was prepared to fire.

"The first to review the new file will be..."

Father finally turned and looked straight at me.

"...you, Kathy. Her daughter."

"But Father, I've never heard anything about Mother's activities back then. And surely that old data doesn't even exist anymore."

"Those earrings," Father pointed firmly. "Didn't you say they were your mother's keepsakes?"

I nodded hesitantly. At least, Master Chang had told me as much.

"I've seen similar gadgets among Preventer's gear," Father said, a knowing grin spreading across his face. "Tell me, in the last few hours, have you seen some kind of vision of Sally Po?"

"How do you know that?!" I gasped, startled.

"Thought so. Those earrings, they've been softly glowing every few seconds. They still are."

Instinctively, my fingers flew to my ears. Indeed, a faint red pulse reflected gently against my palm.

"That's an ultra-compact mobile storage device. It sends pulse signals directly into your brain."

That explained the vividness of the visions, the clarity of the footsteps I'd heard.

"Sally's image data is stored inside. Let me use it."

Removing the earrings, I wondered if Master Chang had foreseen this moment when handing them to me.

Knowing that taciturn old man, he'd never answer even if I asked.

Father accepted the earrings and began analysis at once. Suddenly, the communications console buzzed.

An incoming transmission made me tense, at first I feared a pursuit squad from Babel. But the encryption was a Martian Federation Special Forces code.

"This is Merciless Fairies. Use secret line A to K to respond."

I locked the line.

"This is Preventer Water. The line is secure, go ahead."

"We're executing a presidential rescue mission."

"Did you secure the president?"

"Switching to the Chief Advisor."

Lucrezia appeared immediately.

"Madame President is safe. We heard you have Heero Yuy. What's his condition?"

"His wounds have fully healed!" Father shouted from behind. Then, in a calmer voice, he added, "But Heero's memories are completely erased. He likely won't recognize Relena at all."

"Lieutenant Kathy. Madame President wishes to apologize to Heero."

"I'll bring him over."

Turning, I found Heero already standing there, alongside Hilde, now awake.

"What're you doing, Heero?" Father blurted. "Why'd you let her go?"

Heero stammered defensively, almost childlike.

"Dr. Schbeiker helped me. And since she has no intention of resisting, guarding her seemed pointless."

Hilde smoothed her lab coat and adjusted her glasses. "Relax. I won't cause trouble. So—" She glanced at Father's monitor. "Is the perfect Zechs File ready?"

"Just finished," he said curtly, shutting down the display.

Relena's face filled the comm screen.

"Heero..."

I stepped aside to let him face her.

"I'm sorry, Heero. I don't know how to begin to apologize..."

He stared at her, voice low and halting.

"...You're... Relena?"

"What's happened to you, Heero?"

"I'm sorry...I've lost all my memories..."

"So have I," she whispered, tears spilling. "My past is fading away, piece by piece."

They gazed at each other in silence, a stillness that felt like a world apart from the rest of us.

"I can't watch this," Father said, cutting in. "Let's get both of them their memories back. Name the rendezvous point. We're coming. Right now it's not about the Federation or the Preventers."

He turned to me.

"Kathy, check the file. Finish by the time we get there."

"Yes, sir."



From behind us, Hilde spoke, a trace of scorn in her tone. "Sorry to disappoint you, but this file isn't perfect yet. You'll only end up repeating the same mistakes again."

She had opened the virtual monitor without permission, calmly checking through the data.

"What?" Father demanded.

"Why do you think I reset Princess Aurora's memory in the first place?"

I didn't know the details of their past interactions, but Hilde's voice took on a faintly disdainful tone whenever she addressed Father.

"What exactly are you implying?"

A cryptic smile crossed her lips.

"You're correct that Sally Po is a key figure. After all, I deliberately planted that bug. But there's someone else, another critically important individual."

"Who?"

"The data for Chang Wufei's beloved Natak, or, more precisely, the woman who was his wife, Meilan Long."

I was aware that Master Wufei had lost someone he deeply loved, but I'd never heard her name spoken aloud until now.

Father fell silent, seemingly lost in thought for several moments. Then, still staring intently at the virtual monitor, he asked me without turning around, "Kathy, where is Wufei now?"

"He's aboard the high-speed hovercraft Voyage. However, Master Wufei is currently unconscious."

"Doesn't matter. Contact Voyage anyway. You know their exact location, don't you?"

I nodded, quickly relaying Captain Sakai's current coordinates to Father. After confirming the data, he immediately shouted into the comm monitor linked to the Merciless Fairies.

"Sorry, but we'll decide the rendezvous point from here. Set course immediately for Ishidis Bay, point XRT-0507."

As instructed, I tried to establish contact with Captain Sakai, but the connection was blocked. Even encrypted text transmissions elicited no response.

A cold premonition crept in. Then, another incoming transmission appeared on a separate channel. Once again, the sender ignored all proper security protocols.

"Hey, old fart! We've got trouble!"

It was Father's son, Duo Maxwell.

Father barked back in my place, "Shut it! We don't have time for your nonsense right now!"

"Like hell not now! Professor W's Snow White just got taken out!"

“Quatre did?”

“Yeah, and Wing Zero’s already moved onto its next target!”

After hearing this, Father sighed heavily.

“Heh, so that’s how it is...” he murmured, strangely calm. “He decided to take out the easier prey first.”

“That’s right! The bastard didn’t come after us! That guy, that black-winged Zero, is targeting Mille and Chang at Isidis Bay!”

Father slowly crossed his arms, calm as stone.

“Understood. Then drop the Mars Limiter on Warlock.”

A confident, almost defiant smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

“No matter what it takes, you have to protect the Voyage at all costs.”

“You sure about this? Don’t blame me for whatever happens next!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Father responded calmly. “We absolutely need Wufei right now.”

In that instant, gazing at Father’s resolute profile, he seemed more dependable to me than ever before.

In fury, Warlock became Erbkönig.

Across the white wilderness, a wolf dark as midnight ran.

Behind it, the snowstorm fell away.

In the deep green of its eyes, golden pupils burned,

pursuing the phantom full moon that hovered low.

Twain scythes of the underworld arched upon its back.

Bat’s wing-bones spread wide.

From the thunder of supersonic speed it leapt high, landing on the jagged cliffs, baring platinum fangs, and roaring into the ashen sky.

Behold, the beast of chaos.

Zechs File Prelude
Part.02

Offshore, Isidis Bay

Five minutes had passed since the stern helmsman aboard the high-speed, long-range hovercraft *Voyage* first spotted a glowing blip rapidly closing on their position via radar.

Upon receiving the alert, Captain Sakai wasted no time ordering an immediate shift into underwater submersion mode.

He deliberately refrained from sending out any distress signals. Excessive communications could easily be intercepted by the enemy's ZERO System, inevitably escalating the danger.

"It's those Black Wings, isn't it?" the helmsman asked, his face taut with dread.

"Their first target was Heaven. There's no doubt about it," Captain Sakai replied, his voice calm and steady.

He surmised the enemy had doggedly pursued the Tallgeese Heaven, convinced its pilot was the elusive Cyrene Wind. To the Lanagreene Republic, the genuine Milliardo represented a dire threat, an obstacle severe enough to utterly undermine even Major General Zechs Merquise's legitimacy. Captain Sakai used this assumption as the anchor point of his strategic assessment.

"Eliminate the greatest threat first, the Snow White. Then proceed to pick apart the remaining units individually, starting with those least capable of defending themselves. A classic tactical doctrine."

They had almost no viable fighting force left to counter such an assault.

The returned *Nataku* and *Heaven* were both critically damaged, neither suit was remotely combat-ready. Even with their onboard automated maintenance systems working at maximum efficiency, repairs would take several hours. Worse yet, both pilots, Master Chang and Mille Peacecraft, lay unconscious in medical capsules, undergoing emergency treatment.

Escape was their sole option for now. But escape alone solved nothing.

"What if that machine pursues us even into the deep ocean?" the helmsman asked apprehensively.

Captain Sakai flashed a grim, defiant smile.

"In that case," he said with cool assurance, "we'll just have to greet it with the burning ice of Isidis."

As if reassured by this answer, the helmsman promptly activated the seabed geological sensors on his console. Simultaneously, he sealed the

hover ports along the ship's underside and opened the bow ballast valves.

With that, Voyage transformed into a submarine and descended silently beneath the waves.

Isidis Plains

The snowfall had entered a brief lull.

As soon as Duo received the order from Father to provide escort protection for Voyage, he sprang immediately into action.

"Warlock, disengage Mars Limiter! Engage Quadruped High-Speed Maneuver Mode!"

He reached upward, pulling hard on a lever mounted above the cockpit.

This machine had originally been built back in Earth's sphere. Its current humanoid bipedal form had been specifically recalibrated for Mars's gravity, barely one-third that of Earth's.

With the limiter off, the unit's mobility would triple. However, the stress placed on its joints and actuators would sharply limit how long it could sustain combat.

Beneath its black cloak, the Warlock began its dramatic transformation.

At that exact moment, rising slowly above the distant horizon was an enormous crimson full moon, exactly as one might see from Earth.

It was a holographic projection Duo had generated himself.

"My partner always looks best beneath a full moon!" Duo shouted to no one in particular, eyes sparkling brightly.

Perhaps he was forcing himself to ride high on adrenaline.

Beneath the ghostly scarlet moon, the entire frame of the Warlock trembled violently, even its cloak rippling as if alive.

The machine lurched forward onto all fours, its back arching grotesquely upward.

The transformation resembled nothing so much as a werewolf twisting from man into beast beneath the spell of a full moon.

The black cloak steadily shrank, its fabric drawn up along the Warlock's lengthening neck, half of it disappearing as it formed a thick mane reminiscent of a Siberian wolf's lush fur.

The twin-beam scythes Duo wielded folded at their joints and attached to the unit's shoulders, taking the form of bat-like wings.

"Activating Fenrir Mode command!"

The spherical cockpit capsule embedded within the Warlock's chest split open at the top, smoothly sliding upward and back until it protruded externally at the mech's spine. Now encased in reinforced bulletproof



glass, the cockpit resembled that of a two-seater fighter jet, significantly broadening the pilot's field of vision.

Staring directly into his artificial moon, Duo let loose a feral howl.

"Awoooooooooooooooooo—!"

It was indistinguishable from the call of a wild wolf.

The beast standing there now conjured the savage image of a Úlfhéðinn, the wolf-skinned warrior of Norse legend, the incarnation of the monstrous Fenrir himself, a dark beast-type mobile armor born from the depths of myth and shadow, destined to devour worlds.

"Another damned full moon, eh?"

Doktor T's dry voice echoed through the cockpit speakers. It was an incoming transmission from the battleship Grand Chariot.

"We're currently focusing all resources on locating Professor W's Snow White. Regrettably, I'm entrusting the task of driving off those Black Wings to you."

Doktor T's words carried their usual razor-sharp barb.

"Try proving you're not just some deranged Cheshire cat."

Duo's smile faded instantly.

"Heh! Watch and learn what a wolf cloaked in devil's hide can do."

"Your operation code," Doktor T said matter-of-factly, "is Operation BB."

"Roger that," Duo shot back quickly before adding suspiciously, "What kinda weird codename's that, anyway? Got some hidden meaning or something?"

Suddenly, the cockpit's canopy hatch swung open without warning, someone had disengaged the external lock.

"Beauty and the Beast,' or so I hear."

The speaker was Quaterine, her eyes hidden behind her goggles. She'd slipped aboard uninvited, settling casually into the rear seat.

"I can't keep wandering lost through Wonderland forever, you know."

"Quaterine? What're you doin' here?"

It was Doktor T who replied in her stead.

"Quaterine volunteered as your navigator and weapons officer. And I approved it. After all, taking down the Black Wings will require the Heart of Outer Space."

"Quit decidin' things on your own! If I needed a navigator, Naina's way better company, and if we're talkin' firepower, I'd rather have Nameless watching my back!"

Ignoring Duo's protests, Quaterine calmly secured the hatch lock.

"Let's just get going. We don't have much time left."

Naina Peacecraft's face appeared on the communications monitor.

“Duo, be nice to girls, okay?”

“I know that already! But—!”

Another monitor flickered to life, revealing Trowa Phobos.

“If you’re whining that much, Pupper, I’m more than happy to take the pilot’s seat instead.”

“As if I’d ever let a punk like you—!”

Duo slammed the throttle lever forward.

“My partner belongs to nobody but me!”

Fenrir leapt forward, erupting into explosive motion.

“Here we gooooo!”

The shadowy beast accelerated in a surge of graceful fury, vanishing into the distance in mere moments across the vast snowy plain.

Fenrir moved with speed unimaginable for any ordinary mobile suit.

Not even the Virgo IV mobile doll, fully equipped with its high mobility shoulder booster pack, keep pace with this beast.

Yet even more remarkable was how silent Fenrir was at this astonishing pace.

There was virtually no mechanical hum from the joints, no impact vibrations as its four massive limbs pounded the icy terrain. This profound silence was the result of Fenrir’s contactless drive-transfer systems, but it felt less like cutting-edge engineering and more like the effortless grace of a wild predator, swift, quiet, deadly.

Despite its imposing form, Fenrir seemed weightless, ethereal, as it raced across the snow-covered expanse.

The only sounds audible were the whispering wind whipping across the plains and the faint rustle of Fenrir’s cloak-like armor rippling in its wake.

“It’s so quiet,” Quaterine murmured softly, gazing out at the passing silence.

“Yeah... Nothing but the wind,” Duo acknowledged.

The snow had stopped, but fine white crystals danced on the air currents beyond the cockpit canopy.

“Looks like the snowfall stopped, too,” Quaterine observed.

“Forget about that!” Duo snapped impatiently, irritated by his navigator’s casual conversation. “How about those Black Wings? You sure we’re heading the right way?”

“No need to worry,” Quaterine replied confidently. “I synchronized their coordinates with that full moon of yours.”

Duo glanced at the crimson moon floating ahead.

“Not bad...”

She'd turned his purely decorative hologram into a practical navigation beacon. Grudgingly, he had to admit Quaterine had skill.

"Looks like you've got things under control, at least."

"Naturally. I pride myself on competence."

Duo didn't respond, already weary of her smug attitude.

After a pause, Quaterine spoke again.

"If you're bored, we could sing something. Schubert's Erlkönig, perhaps? It matches the atmosphere quite nicely."

"I'll pass."

"Then how about Mozart's The Magic Flute? We could do Papageno and Papagena's duet together."

"Sorry. I've never liked 'duos.'" Duo muttered sharply, uncomfortable with the pun on his own name. He'd disliked the name since childhood.

"And besides, unlike you, I'm not into refined tastes. So do me a favor and pipe down."

"How unexpected," Quaterine replied smoothly. "I always thought you and I were alike."

"Alike?" Duo scoffed sarcastically. "We couldn't be more different. Aren't we supposed to be Beauty and the Beast?"

"Oh, there's hardly a difference between beauty and beast. Only appearances, really."

"She sure can spout nonsense with a straight face," Duo thought irritably. But admittedly, they had something in common: unlike the others, these two never stopped talking.

"I was simply trying to establish good communication before battle," Quaterine insisted.

"Look, the fighting's between me and my partner! I'll handle fire control!"

Quaterine abruptly changed the subject.

"Shall I lower the heat? You're sweating quite a bit."

Clicking his tongue, Duo reflexively wiped his forehead.

Fenrir Mode didn't include automatic attitude control. Its cockpit design, unchanged since the Second Lunar War over three decades prior, had been deliberately left in its original form. At that time, manual control was paramount, as the uneven lunar surface had made automatic balancing systems unreliable. Perhaps the developers had simply delighted in forcing pilots into precision manual maneuvering.

Duo, unfamiliar with the mode, was already near his limits simply keeping Fenrir on course. With over fifty sequential steps for precise posture adjustments, high-speed traversal required extraordinary piloting skills.

"Bet Heero could pull this off without breaking a sweat, damn it..."

He had absolutely no spare attention for gunnery controls. Suddenly suspicious, Duo glanced at his arm and clicked his tongue again.

His arm was dry, not a single drop of sweat. She'd been bluffing.

"She's messing with me!"

He fumed inwardly, stunned by how Quaterine had seen straight through his struggle with manual operation.

After several moments running mental simulations, Duo finally relented. Realizing he could be free from weapon-system control allowed him to fully concentrate on maneuvering Fenrir. Immediately, the machine responded, accelerating smoothly.

Duo focused sharply, expertly navigating the constantly changing terrain, pressing harder on the thruster pedals.

The icy wind shrieked at higher and higher pitches around them.

"Well, what do you know... She might just have me beat this time."

Duo acknowledged inwardly that this blistering pace was his partner's true potential.

"This isn't the time to keep stubborn pride."

He sighed, then broke the ice again.

"Fine, you win. My hands move better when my mouth's moving anyway. You handle fire control."

"Looks like we're both skilled multitaskers," Quaterine answered, amused.

"Just tell me, have you even read the weapons manual for that rear seat?"

"Of course!" she replied brightly. "I'm studying them as we speak."

From the shifting presence behind him, Duo realized Quaterine was seriously reading the cockpit's digital manual on her display.

"Are you sure you'll manage?"

"Well, there's one thing I'm not sure about. There's this odd unreadable command."

She pointed out the characters displayed on-screen: 飛必冲天.

"Oh, those weird four Chinese characters. I have no clue what they mean, either."

The command was also accessible from Duo's seat.

"Is it a Chinese poem or idiom? Why'd someone put Chinese characters in this cockpit, anyway?"

Ignoring her musing, Duo jumped on the chance to tease her back. Payback for the fake sweat comment earlier.

"There's something I've been curious about for a while... Mind if I ask?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Still carefully navigating Fenrir's shifting terrain, Duo adopted a sarcastically playful tone.

"So tell me, who does our beautiful lady prefer? The 'prince' or the 'clown'?"

Quaterine burst into sudden laughter.

"How long have you had that misunderstanding?"

"Huh?"

"From the start, perhaps? If so, Duo, maybe you're not cut out for romance after all."

"What?!"

"I'm not as gentle as I appear."

"What's that supposed to mean? Just what exactly did I misunderstand?"

Quaterine leaned forward toward Duo's seat, whispering mischievously.

"You're the beauty. I'm the beast."

Somehow, a single red rose now rested in Quaterine's fingertips.

"I thought I'd hidden my emotions well, but it seems Doktor saw right through me."

Her smug expression clearly said, "See? I can do your favorite slight-of-hand trick, too."

"Red roses suit a beauty perfectly, don't they?"

She tucked the rose neatly into Duo's jacket pocket.

"Now, it's hunting time!"

Duo turned briefly to glance behind him.

With a spirited, fierce smile, Quaterine added, "I'll take him down myself. For my brother and for Mille."

Duo saw a quiet, smoldering fury behind those goggles.

"She's more motivated than I am."

Turning forward again, Duo refocused completely on piloting.

"Those eyes of hers... That's definitely the gaze of a predator."

He plucked the rose from his jacket and placed it gently atop the console.

"Still, how the hell am I the beauty here?" he wondered silently, his hands effortlessly executing Fenrir's manual controls.

"I'm a guy, for cryin' out loud."

Before he knew it, Duo had begun controlling Fenrir as naturally and effortlessly as if it were an extension of his own body.

Isidis Bay, Coastline

The distant roar of the ocean reverberated through the air.

“Almost time,” Duo whispered cautiously.

“Yes,” Quaterine quietly agreed.

The rhythmic crash of waves breaking against the coastline grew steadily louder. Fenrir had reached the shores of Isidis Bay, and now it came to a halt, perfectly silent.

In a hushed voice, Quaterine announced, “Target, tally-ho, visual confirmed.”

Framed by the scarlet full moon, Wing Gundam Zero soared on its black wings.

A magnified analytical image appeared on the cockpit monitor, revealing that Wing Zero’s external armor was virtually unscathed, except for a single silver arrow embedded firmly in its chest cockpit.

“How the hell is that thing still operational?” Duo wondered.

Wing Zero abruptly turned toward their position.

Tension rising, Duo hissed, “Has it spotted us?”

“No,” Quaterine replied calmly. “Not yet.”

Wing Zero appeared absorbed in scanning beneath the water’s surface, descending gradually as its black wings gently beat the air.

“At least we have the Heart of Space and the nano-defensor cloak on our side.”

Even though Fenrir’s cloak had shrunk to less than half its original size, its stealth capability was still exceptional. Furthermore, Wing Zero’s ZERO System was unlikely to have anticipated Warlock’s transformation into Fenrir. With Quaterine’s Heart of Outer Space, though perhaps not quite matching Professor W’s mastery, they could still surpass the ZERO System’s predictive capabilities.

This gave them the edge they needed to strike first.

“Make sure your shot counts,” Duo warned gravely. “No pressure, but we’re screwed if that thing returns fire. Fenrir’s armor is way too thin to withstand its buster rifle.”

Quaterine maintained her composure.

“Additionally, Fenrir’s cannon has a surprisingly limited effective range, and no rapid-fire capability either.”

“This thing’s built too damn much for speed,” Duo sighed.

“In this scenario, accuracy matters more than speed,” Quaterine added. “We’ll need to get closer.”

Duo studied the terrain data, then offered, “There’s a cliff formation jutting into Isidis Bay just ahead. We could use it as a jump-off point, though it means a slight detour.”

“Understood.”

Just as Quaterine said this, an embarrassingly audible rumble came from her stomach.

"Sorry, awful timing..." she muttered, blushing deeply and lowering her gaze.

"Hey, don't sweat it," Duo chuckled gently, easing her embarrassment. "Honestly, now I trust you even more."

"Why's that?"

"Because the only two people I can't trust are those who never get hungry and those who never die."

Fenrir restarted silently, pivoting smoothly and leaving only a blurred afterimage before bolting toward the sheer cliffs of the peninsula.

Isidis Bay, High Overhead

Vingt Khushrenada watched intently, frowning slightly as troubling data began emerging from the ZERO System's predictive analysis.

"The battlefield in ten minutes... The heat map is shifting from Isidis Plain to Isidis Bay. Expected, of course, but..."

Two crucial points drew his attention: one was the northwest seabed where the Voyage was attempting to evade detection; the other was the southern waters, currently occupied by the battleship Grand Chariot lay anchored as it conducted search-and-rescue operations for the downed Snow White.

Vingt's objective was straightforward: first eliminate the Voyage, then swiftly descend southward to sink the Grand Chariot. With these gone, nearly all significant threats vanished. Warlock, Prometheus, and Scheherazade could easily be picked off individually afterward.

"A scattered force without supply lines poses no real threat," Vingt mused confidently.

The only remaining uncertainty involved two aircraft rapidly closing in on the Voyage. Judging by their size, neither craft likely carried mobile suits. Vingt reasoned they must be transporting Heero Yuy, recently escaped from the mobile fortress Babel, and Relena Peacecraft, freshly rescued by the Mars Federation.

"But why would those two head straight for the Voyage?"

Vingt ran a quick systems check from his cockpit controls. ZERO confirmed he could pursue the Voyage even underwater.

"Better wrap this up quickly, then," he murmured, his lips curling into a confident smirk.

Isidis Bay, Coastline

Wing Zero folded its black wings into a tight spiral and plunged beneath the ocean surface.

Just moments after, Fenrir reached the cliff-edge at the cape's highest point, but by then, Wing Zero had already disappeared into the sea.

"Damn it! Just a second too late!" Duo cursed in frustration.

But Quaterine calmly continued charging Fenrir's beam cannons.

"No, we're still on schedule," she assured.

Fenrir's bat-winged shoulder blades, formed from its twin beam scythes, now served as formidable beam cannons. Yet, firing beams into water would normally disperse the energy, drastically reducing effectiveness.

"On schedule? What do you mean?"

"Those Black Wings will surface again," she explained patiently. "When they do, I'll target the silver arrow my brother already lodged in it, firing at maximum beam intensity."

"And what about the Voyage?"

"They'll escape unharmed," Quaterine assured him confidently.

Duo let out a low whistle.

"The Heart of Outer Space really sees everything coming, huh?"

"But this entire plan hinges on your timing with the jump," Quaterine added urgently. "Counting on you, Duo."

"Leave it to me," Duo replied confidently, before hesitating slightly.

"But could you do me a favor? Call me Fenrir when we're piloting this."

Quaterine laughed gently at his earnest request.

"Understood, Fenrir."

Isidis Bay, Northwestern Seabed

As it silently maneuvered beneath the waves, the Voyage had already detected the rapidly approaching presence of Wing Zero.

"It's here, range, five hundred astern!" Tael, the helmsman, announced, grinning sharply.

Captain Sakai acknowledged him with a silent nod, then calmly gave the order.

"Deploy standard depth charges and electromagnetic resonance charges."

Without hesitation, he continued, "Full speed ahead."

"Aye, sir! Let's get the hell out of here!" came the swift reply.

Crew members pulled down two separate deployment levers simultaneously. The Voyage's belly slid open, releasing more than a dozen electromagnetic resonance charges, cascading gently downward

into the darkened seabed. At the same instant, several conventional timed charges drifted softly onto the ocean floor.

Engines roaring, screws spinning at maximum revolutions, the Voyage accelerated northeast at breakneck speed.

Upon contact with the ocean floor, the electromagnetic charges detonated violently, unleashing powerful resonance waves identical to the hyper-electromagnetic disruptors mounted on Epyon Bai's foot modules. Hard rock cracked, fissures raced across the seabed, and violent tremors propagated deep into the subterranean layers.

In an instant, vast reservoirs of methane hydrate, known as "burning ice," that had been lying dormant beneath the continental shelf erupted into visibility. Ferocious torrents of bubbles surged upward through Isidis Bay, causing a massive undersea upheaval.

Back when unmanned probes first surveyed Mars, it had once been concluded there was no methane present, at least not detectable in significant atmospheric amounts. Yet beneath the Martian crust lay immense deposits, a combination of volcanic-produced inorganic methane bound in subterranean water and organic methane from ancient microorganisms thriving alongside European algae.

The Voyage's helmsman had meticulously identified these methane hydrate reservoirs using the craft's seabed geological sensors. They had patiently waited, deliberately holding position until Wing Zero approached.

Now, released into the seawater, the methane rapidly sublimated into a microscopic, combustible mist, forming clouds of fiery ice crystals suspended in the depths. Seconds later, the timed standard charges detonated, igniting the volatile mixture.

The entire sea erupted in a fiery cataclysm.

Wing Zero had no chance.

Caught in the cascading chain of underwater explosions, the Gundam's systems shut down instantly, overwhelmed by destructive turbulence.

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Until this very moment, Vingt Khushrenada had never once faltered since launching. Yet, now, he felt true fear for the first time.

Every sensor screamed error messages; cockpit monitors dissolved into static-filled chaos.

"Tch!"

His teeth clenched involuntarily, frustration briefly surfacing.

He realized immediately that the cause of this sudden defeat was his failure to anticipate geological anomalies at the battlefield. The ZERO System had its limits, though supremely adept at predicting tactical and strategic maneuvers in human warfare, it had no dedicated protocols for accurately predicting natural phenomena. Doing so would exponentially overload the system, slowing response times and overwhelming pilots with irrelevant data, making reaction impossible in critical moments. Predicting every nuance of nature was, after all, virtually impossible.

Only one entity possessed the capability of perfectly anticipating all possibilities.

Vingt now clearly understood this fact.

“Outside these waters, the Heart of Outer Space awaits.”

Wing Zero, propelled upward by the explosive currents, would inevitably be hurled out of the ocean. Vingt braced himself, awaiting the moment his cockpit system rebooted.

“That’s when the real battle begins.”

Isidis Bay, Coastline

Duo and Quaterine watched intensely from atop the cliff as the boiling sea churned below. Breathlessly, they waited for Wing Zero’s resurfacing.

“There it is!” Duo’s shout cut through the tension.

A towering column of water erupted skyward, and within that turbulent spray appeared the unmistakable silhouette of Wing Zero.

Quaterine knew this was their moment and signaled Duo instantly.

“Fenrir!”

“On it!”

He slammed the control levers forward and crushed the booster pedals to maximum. Fenrir leaped gracefully from the sheer cliff, hurtling straight toward the rising torrent.

Wing Zero, wings still folded tightly around itself, spiraled upward out of the surging foam. Surely the pilot had no chance of regaining control immediately under these conditions.

Yet, against all expectation, Wing Zero managed to slow its spinning momentum, the black wings gradually beginning to unfurl.

Quaterine adjusted the targeting scope, training her sights on the cockpit, knowing the silver arrow should still be embedded there.

“Preparing to fire!”

She waited, heart pounding, for that single, critical moment when the cockpit would finally rotate into view.

Milliseconds dragged on. Wing Zero spread its wings wide, dramatically slowing its rotation even further, but the cockpit hatch bearing the silver arrow stubbornly refused to face them.

Quaterine's nerves frayed with mounting anxiety.

A troubling premonition flickered through Duo's mind, but logic insisted Wing Zero had no choice but to rotate fully, exposing itself head-on. Fenrir, locked in freefall, was rapidly widening their distance. At last, the chest armor of Wing Zero rotated into clear sight.

There, below its spherical combat-analysis unit, was the cockpit hatch, with the silver arrow firmly lodged within.

For the briefest instant, Quaterine thought she glimpsed her brother, Professor W's face, reflected in the targeting reticle.

Yet she felt no hesitation.

Her finger squeezed the trigger.

"Please, Brother, guide this shot true."

Her heart whispered a desperate prayer.

Brilliant beams lanced forth from Fenrir's shoulder-mounted cannons, streaking through the sky along an impeccably precise trajectory toward the cockpit of Wing Gundam Zero.



Inside the cockpit, as all of Wing Zero's systems flickered back to life, Vingt allowed himself a sinister grin.

"Nevermore."

Simultaneously, he pressed the trigger of the buster rifle. He, too, had been waiting for this precise moment.

Isidis Bay, Northwestern Sky

Wing Zero's buster rifle unleashed a dazzling flash of devastating energy.

Two beams, two unstoppable lances of energy, passed through each other without canceling out, each hurtling relentlessly toward their respective targets.

Mutual annihilation appeared certain.

But in the split second before impact, Duo had instinctively triggered one particular command.

"Eat THIS, asshole!"

It wasn't tactical finesse; it wasn't even instinct. It was pure, reckless desperation.

The command read: 『飛必冲天』

"Fly, and thou shalt surely reach the heavens."

Thrusters ignited simultaneously across Fenrir's body, launching it into another burst of acceleration mid-air. Narrowly, barely, it managed to evade the devastating wave of energy from the buster rifle.

As Fenrir rocketed clear, it shed ten armor panels in rapid succession, dramatically reducing weight and transforming into its streamlined flight mode, its bat-like wing bones emitting buoyant particle beams that spread like membranes, stabilizing it in flight.

Meanwhile, the shot Quaterine had fired struck true, not at the silver arrow lodged in Wing Zero, but directly at the lethal buster rifle. The rifle detonated spectacularly, obliterating Wing Zero's greatest weapon in a fiery explosion.

Yet the Gundam itself remained largely unscathed.

Duo saw the damage report flash across his screen and clicked his tongue sharply.

"Tch... Bastard's tougher than I thought."

"You used that strange command, didn't you?" Quaterine remarked softly from behind.

"Ah, yeah... kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing," Duo admitted sheepishly.

"I finally understand the meaning behind that Chinese phrase, and I think I know who previously occupied this seat."

"Oh? Who?" Duo asked.

"Do you recognize the name Long Meilan?"

"Nope, never heard of her."

"It doesn't matter right now," Quaterine replied briskly. "Let's turn the tables, shall we?"

Quaterine's fingers flew confidently across the console, selecting a newly displayed command: 『乾坤一擲』 "All or Nothing."

Duo cast a skeptical glance her way.

"Think we can pull that off?"

"Just look around."

Surrounding Fenrir flew the ten discarded armored segments, matching its speed perfectly, forming a silent escort around the beast.

Smiling gently with newfound confidence, Quaterine said, "Exactly ten pieces. If this beast of ours remains the wolf, then these ten companions can surely be our Seven Little Goats and Three Little Pigs, don't you think?"

With deft movements, she inserted a new model virtual chip into the console, instantly manifesting a holographic piano keyboard before her.

“And of course, there’s no better accompaniment than Schubert’s ‘Der Erlkönig,’ wouldn’t you agree?”

“Just spare me the singing, ‘kay?” Duo muttered dryly.

“Relax. I’ve got my hands full just playing it. This piece is harder than it sounds.”

“That’s great and all, but what about weapons? Fenrir lost both its beam scythe and its beam cannons!”

“Forget about everything except extreme close quarters combat,” Quaterine warned firmly. “Our beast’s only remaining weapons are its platinum fangs.”

Eyes sparkling with reckless anticipation, Duo grinned fiercely.

“Ha! Now you’re speakin’ my language!”

In perfect unison, Fenrir and the ten armor fragments wheeled sharply in midair, hurtling straight back toward their waiting enemy.

“This really is ‘All or Nothing,’ isn’t it? Let’s entrust our fate to the stars, and go for broke!”

Quaterine began playing, fingers dancing expertly across the virtual keys. Immediately, the ten armor modules surged forward, gracefully weaving complex trajectories around Fenrir’s accelerating form.

Awaiting them imperiously, Wing Zero hovered with its black wings fully extended, its beam saber blazing defiantly, poised, proud, and ready to meet their desperate charge.

Isidis Bay, Northeastern Sky

My name is Kathy Po.

I’m a Lieutenant with Preventer, the Earth Sphere Unified Nation’s intelligence bureau, currently assigned to the Mars Branch.

Our flying craft approached the airspace directly above the Voyage, which had just surfaced from the bay. At this range, secure encrypted communication was easily possible.

“This is Preventer Water,” I spoke, using the codename I’d inherited from my mother. “Calling the Voyage, please respond. Is everyone alright? Has Master Chang regained consciousness?”

The face appearing on the responding monitor was not Captain Sakai’s, but rather my ever-irritable superior.

“Lieutenant Kathy Po...” came his perpetually gruff voice, “this vessel’s accommodations leave much to be desired.”

“It’s usually quite comfortable, actually,” came Captain Sakai’s voice from off-screen, seemingly standing close to Master Chang.

“So?” Chang snorted impatiently. “Did you have something you needed from me?”

“I’ll hand you over to Father Maxwell—”

Before I’d even finished speaking, Father Maxwell leaned eagerly into the monitor.

“Wufei! I need data on Long Meilan, immediately! Her memories are missing from the Zechs Files!”

Father rushed through a rough explanation. I doubted Master Chang understood anything clearly from such a disjointed summary, yet surprisingly, he nodded curtly. “Naturally,” he growled.

“I warned you it was dangerous. That’s precisely why I never counted on you to begin with.”

“Enough with the attitude, just tell us! Where’s Meilan’s memory? You’ve got it, don’t you?”

“Do I look that sentimental to you? I’m not like you, still bitter over some woman.”

The jab instantly brought Father Maxwell’s usual coolness roaring back.

“Yeah, my mistake,” Father replied evenly, gathering himself. “But unfortunately, you’re the only person I could think of who piloted Nataku. Unless you happen to know someone else?”

Chang remained sullenly silent. His expression darkened further, clearly searching desperately for a sharp retort.

These two always resorted to childish insults whenever they crossed paths. Yet somehow, these exchanges seemed necessary, helping each man reaffirm where he stood.

After a long stare-down, Chang finally relented.

“Hmph.” His voice softened slightly. “You need the memories from ‘that era,’ correct? Then they should still be intact within the console of the unit’s sub-cockpit.”

He broke eye contact, glancing at a secondary monitor. He stiffened.

“Wait, are they fighting right now?”

“Fighting?” I asked. “That machine, is it possibly?”

“Warlock,” Chang said grimly.

Father paled, clearly startled.

“What the hell is Warlock doing out there?”

“Don’t ask me,” Chang shrugged bitterly. “Blame the developer for sloppy work.”

Professor W had been Warlock’s designer. That very suit, now reconfigured into Fenrir, was currently locked in an aerial battle with the black-winged Wing Zero. Father had inadvertently issued the worst possible command at precisely the wrong time: removing its limiters. Despite the horrific timing, Father remained remarkably composed, turning to me calmly.

“Kathy, send an immediate recall order to that idiot son of mine.”

“Yes, but—”

Father cut me off, confirming each word carefully.

“The order I gave them was to protect the Voyage. Since the Voyage is safe, their mission is complete. Their orders never included engaging Black Wings. Right?”

“Yes, sir. You’re absolutely correct.”

Reluctantly, I opened a communication channel to Fenrir. But as expected, no answer came, likely due to the ongoing battle.

“Give me that,” Father snatched the communicator from my hands, took a deep breath, and roared fiercely.

“Pull back right now, you damned brat! Mission’s over!”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” replied Quaterine’s calm, composed voice. In the background, tense piano music surged urgently.

“My performance ends in two minutes. Withdrawal isn’t an option.”

Father, caught off guard by Quaterine’s unexpected presence, lowered his voice, somewhat embarrassed by his outburst.

“Finish your song later. That wasn’t a request, it’s an order.”

“Then kindly clarify the chain of command, because Doktor T—”

Father cut her off sharply.

“We’ve hit an unforeseen complication. I’ll explain later. Your highest priority now is to bring that machine back intact.”

The monitor abruptly switched to his son’s furious face, yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Shut it, you stupid old fart! Let the people on the battlefield decide! We’re risking our necks out here, not babysitting your goddamned agendas! Duo out!”

The transmission ended with a rude snap.

Nervously, I glanced sideways at Father’s face, fully expecting him to tremble with anger. But to my surprise, he looked amused, wearing a satisfied smirk.

“Well, well... that little punk’s finally talking like a grown-up,” he murmured softly. “Fine then, boy, show me exactly how stray dogs fight.”

Panic rose in me.

“If they’re defeated,” I said carefully, voicing the terrible fear I couldn’t suppress, “we’ll lose the data stored on that machine forever. That means Heero and Relena’s memories will never come back.”

“Don’t worry. He won’t lose,” Father replied confidently, his gaze distant and thoughtful. “He won’t lose. He’s made up his mind to keep living.”

He looked every inch the proud father calmly watching his child's coming-of-age.

Suddenly, a loud noise startled us from behind—the rear hatch had been opened abruptly. My immediate suspicion was that Hilde Schbeiker had fled.

Yet when I spun around, Hilde was still reclining calmly on the sofa, idly watching the open hatch.

Surprisingly, Father Maxwell calmly asked, “Just now, who left the ship?”

“That would be our sleeping ‘Princess Aurora,’” Hilde answered nonchalantly.

She shrugged softly, eyes detached.

“He’s still missing his memories, and yet he dives straight into battle. Still, he’ll probably be far more useful out there than you would be.”

“So Heero moved of his own accord?” Father mused quietly.

“Looks that way,” Hilde sighed. “His consciousness may still be dormant, but it seems his body fully remembered what it was built for.”

Father muttered quietly under his breath.

“That damned brat.”

Somehow, even without conscious awareness, Heero Yuy had already sensed what was unfolding. Instincts ingrained deeply into his very bones, the battle instincts of a warrior, had already determined his next action.

Father Maxwell's expression softened again into one of thoughtful nostalgia.

“Reminds me of when Trowa lost his memory back then. He said the exact same thing: ‘My body remembers.’”

Isidis Bay, Northwestern Sky

At last, the storm-ravaged surface of the bay began to settle.

Yet high above, the aerial duel between Wing Zero with its sweeping black wings and the airborne Fenrir still raged on.

Quaterine's piano performance continued without pause. The ten armored segments darted relentlessly, unleashing precise beam attacks from every conceivable angle, steadily hemming Wing Zero into an ever-tightening cage.

But the ZERO System continuously churned out countermeasures. Wing Zero's ebony wings shifted gracefully, switching effortlessly between offense and defense, expertly repelling the attacking modules each time they drew close.

No matter how skillfully Fenrir and its armor fragments launched their coordinated assaults, Wing Zero slipped free through instantaneous bursts of acceleration and deceleration, retaliating with pinpoint bursts from its shoulder-mounted vulcans. There was an unmistakably graceful elegance in every calculated move it made.

Fenrir repeatedly charged forward, attempting desperately to bring Wing Zero into close combat, but each time it did, a blazing beam saber barred its path. There was no opening to slip inside its formidable defense.

The aerial duel had evolved into something reminiscent of a bull and matador locked in an endless duel.

Wing Zero surpassed Fenrir in raw combat prowess, sheer aerial speed, and maneuverability. Duo loathed admitting it, but the enemy pilot clearly had superior skills. Even his own formidable stamina was being rapidly depleted by the intensity of the dogfight.

A single mistake, a glancing blow, would shatter Fenrir's thin armor to pieces. Duo strained every nerve and muscle, employing precise maneuvers just to evade Wing Zero's ruthless counterattacks.

He was nearing his mental breaking point.

"Dammit, how much longer can you hold on, partner?"

Wing Zero's casual evasions shredded what was left of his pride. But something deeper and stronger in Duo's heart pushed back against despair.

"But if I let my spirit break first, we're finished."

"Let's hang in there, partner!" he shouted, rallying himself and his machine once again.

The music, Schubert's "Erlkönig", had reached its dramatic crescendo. Quaterine continued her virtuoso piano performance, fingers dancing gracefully across the holographic keys as she maintained her composure.

"I've finally deciphered his patterns," she announced steadily. "We can end this with our next attack."

"If you can just get rid of that damned beam saber," Duo growled determinedly, "I'll rip that silver arrow right out of him!"

With the cockpit exposed, even a pilot as formidable as Vingt would lose his aura of invincibility. Quaterine agreed.

"That's indeed the most effective approach. But as soon as we do, Wing Zero will undoubtedly hack and seize control of our armor modules."

"So he's gonna play that card after all," Duo muttered.

"Yes. But that moment of hacking will create a brief opening in his defenses. That's exactly when we'll launch our decisive gamble, our All or Nothing maneuver."

Quaterine intended to deliberately sacrifice control of all ten armor segments to the enemy, using them as bait for that single, fleeting instant.

“Understood,” Duo acknowledged, wiping sweat from his forehead. This time, his arm was unmistakably damp.

“Tch...” Duo grimaced, cool-headed but undeniably nervous.

An urgent high-pitched alarm sounded sharply from the console. Fenrir’s remaining energy reserves had dropped into the red zone. On the main monitor, the countdown timer that had previously appeared small now expanded several times larger, flashing ominously: 100:00

And it was counting down, not in minutes, but in mere seconds.

Warnings appeared rapidly across the display, signaling multiple frame segments nearing their structural breaking points.

※

In Wing Zero’s cockpit, Vingt fought silently and meticulously.

The relentless armor fragments whirling unpredictably around Wing Zero, directed with obvious precision, had become a severe nuisance. These clearly were not automated drones, only someone with the Heart of Outer Space could wield them so deftly.

“The only way to deal with those plates is to wrest control from her—” Vingt considered quietly. But as long as Quaterine’s piano continued, her heightened focus made hacking next to impossible.

“—after all, she is remarkably gifted.”

Vingt’s usual combat approach was to disrupt the enemy’s morale by establishing direct communication, destabilizing them psychologically with carefully chosen provocations, gaining an immediate mental advantage. Yet Quaterine refused to play along. No matter how many times he attempted contact, she maintained unwavering silence.

“Perhaps her Heart of Outer Space surpasses even her brother’s,” Vingt reflected with begrudging admiration.

From somewhere distant yet clear, the piano music reached him, prompting a brief smile of admiration.

“And she’s quite the performer, too.”

※

Quaterine’s performance surged toward its finale, and Fenrir launched its decisive assault on Wing Zero.

Yet even now, the black-winged Gundam moved with inhuman grace, far exceeding their expectations. Its beam saber seamlessly transitioned between attack and defense, deftly evading every beam fired from the orbiting armor plates while maintaining a vigilant stance against Fenrir's repeated attempts to close in.

Grinding his teeth, Duo waited desperately for an opening. Charging head-on was suicide; Fenrir's paper-thin armor offered no protection against the blade of Wing Zero's saber. One clean hit and they'd be cut to pieces.

"If only it'd slip up, just once, even for a split second!"

He had never struggled like this before. The feeling of overwhelming inferiority gnawed at his resolve, threatening to break his spirit.

"No! Screw that, I won't lose! I swore to myself I'd survive!"

As he rallied himself internally, Vingt's smooth voice suddenly echoed through Fenrir's cockpit speakers.

"Impressive. Truly, I commend your tenacity."

He paused briefly, before continuing with thinly veiled amusement.

"Yet there's something I must ask you. Why continue this futile fight?"

Quaterine offered no reply, her fingers flying resolutely across the virtual keys.

Undeterred, Vingt continued.

"Why throw yourselves so recklessly into a battle you can't possibly win?"

"Because we're alive!" Duo shouted fiercely, translating his inner defiance into words. "We're nothing like you!"

Vingt laughed softly.

"Then allow me to rephrase: Why do you choose to live?"

Quaterine struck the final notes and answered calmly as the keyboard vanished.

"My life," her voice steady and sincere, "is insignificant in the grand scheme of the universe. That's why I choose to dedicate it to the happiness of others. I fight because I can't bear to see anyone suffer."

"How noble," Vingt replied dryly, a faint trace of ridicule seeping into his voice. "You must truly love your dear brother. Or perhaps, you simply push yourself to these extremes to mask your own weakness."

"I won't deny it, not right now," Quaterine replied softly.

The countdown on the monitor flashed under sixty seconds.

"I've gotta get stronger!" Duo shouted fiercely, eyes blazing. "If only to shut down arrogant bastards like you!"

"Oh?" Vingt began smoothly, preparing his next words, but Duo cut him off mid-sentence.

“And the next line you’ll say is—”

Both voices overlapped simultaneously.

“Go ahead, if you think you can.”

“Go ahead, if you think you can!”

The ten orbiting armor plates simultaneously unleashed a storm of concentrated beam fire upon Wing Zero, their combined strikes focusing squarely on its right arm, the limb gripping the deadly beam saber.

The hilt exploded violently, extinguishing the glowing blade instantly.

“Now’s our chance!” Duo shouted, seizing the opportunity.

Fenrir surged forward at blistering speed.

Yet Wing Zero remained poised, unshaken. Suddenly, the ten armor modules spun around, unleashing their beams directly toward Fenrir, ZERO System had successfully hijacked Quaterine’s control. The Seven Little Goats and Three Little Pigs had inevitably turned against their wolf.

Dodging desperately between lances of deadly light, Fenrir weaved through the barrage. Wing Zero’s movements slowed, operating the modules and maneuvering the Gundam simultaneously demanded impossible precision.

This was the moment Quaterine had anticipated, a single instant of vulnerability.

Still, even in that fleeting weakness, Wing Zero’s reactions were faster than any ordinary Mars Suit. Fenrir zigzagged furiously, accelerating even more, using feints and jukes to close the distance, finally leaping directly at Wing Zero’s exposed body.

“Get inside! Now’s our chance, inside that impenetrable defense!”

Driven by raw determination, Duo closed in on Wing Zero’s cockpit.

“Got you! Sink your fangs in, partner!”

Fenrir answered his plea with a fierce roar.

In that split-second melee, time seemed to slow to a crawl.

The platinum-fanged beast seized the silver arrow embedded in Wing Zero’s cockpit hatch, wrenching it free at point-blank range.

The moment Fenrir and Wing Zero crossed paths and separated again, Duo and Quaterine stared in shock at the sparking, exposed cockpit of their enemy.

No one was inside.

The cockpit was completely empty. Control sticks and levers jerked erratically on their own, manipulated by invisible hands, a chilling, ghostly spectacle.

“I knew it,” Quaterine breathed. “He was never piloting it directly!”

“Damn it!” Duo cursed bitterly. “He was controlling it remotely from somewhere else!”



During the Eve Wars of AC-195, Dorothy Catalonia had remotely commanded hundreds of mobile dolls from aboard the battleship *Libra*.

Vingt's control over *Wing Zero* operated on a similar principle.

Now, seated comfortably in a spacious, distant cockpit, Vingt chuckled quietly to himself.

"So, they've finally figured it out."

Yet his clear emerald eyes held not even a hint of mirth.

"Perhaps this violates every principle of chivalry," he mused aloud, a faint, humorless smile forming. "But then again, I never had a soul to begin with."



Fenrir had scarcely pulled away from *Wing Zero*, silver arrow still clamped between its fangs, when the captured armor plates unleashed a relentless storm of beams against it.

Duo put every ounce of his piloting skill to the test, weaving narrowly through the relentless barrage.

"What now? How the hell do we fight something without a pilot?!"

"Can we close in again?" Quaterine asked calmly.

"In these conditions?!"

Less than forty seconds remained. To approach again, they'd have to burn their last scraps of energy in a steep vertical ascent, then trust their survival to a controlled freefall.

"Think you can handle it, partner?"

The cockpit displays flashed madly, the shutdown countdown now below thirty seconds. Duo narrowly dodged another beam volley, committing himself.

"Fine, leave it to me and Fenrir!"

"Good. I have an idea."

"An idea?" Duo asked skeptically, locking the controls for a vertical ascent. "What exactly?"

"I'll jump across and commandeer that *Black Wings* cockpit."

Duo's breath caught sharply in his throat. Even with Mars' one-third gravity, it was borderline suicidal.

"Then I'll trigger the self-destruct mechanism," Quaterine added casually, adjusting her goggles with remarkable ease, as if she were merely preparing to feed a kitten.

“The self-destruct—” Duo’s voice cracked, struggling to confirm her resolve. “You mean... you’re gonna die?”

“Just pray I don’t,” Quaterine replied lightly, her voice carefree despite the stakes. “I’d rather like to see that ‘Prince’ and that ‘Clown’ again.”

Duo glanced briefly over his shoulder, finding her eyes behind those goggles brighter and more alive than ever.

“Heh,” Duo chuckled softly. “I don’t pray, I don’t believe in God.”

“Neither do I,” Quaterine agreed.

At that precise instant, the timer hit zero. Fenrir’s energy reserves completely ran dry. The machine began its inevitable descent.

Yet it was not a reckless plunge into oblivion. Duo guided it skillfully, controlling its glide with delicate precision, reading every gust and current of wind.

Meanwhile, the armor modules continued firing mercilessly, beams slicing through the air. Duo maneuvered Fenrir left and right with practiced expertise, slipping gracefully between blasts. His arduous mastery of manual balance controls from earlier was paying off beautifully now.

Fenrir spiraled silently downward, approaching Wing Zero’s position with eerie grace. Its descent was completely soundless, as though magic held it aloft in silent defiance of gravity.

The final gamble, the ultimate All or Nothing, drew near.

Quaterine swiftly unlocked and flung open the cockpit canopy. The single red rose, lying forgotten on the console, fluttered away into the void.

No longer did a beauty inhabit this cockpit.

Instead, two fierce beasts, Beast and the Beast, prepared to sink their fangs into their prey’s throat, determined to deliver a killing blow.

Tightening the straps of her emergency parachute, Quaterine rose gracefully from her seat.

“Here I go!” Her determined cry was lost instantly, stolen by the roaring wind before it reached Duo’s ears.

Wing Zero’s cockpit loomed ominously ahead, impossibly close. The second and final zero-range encounter was about to begin.

Amidst the raging tempest, Duo swore he heard Vingt’s quiet voice again, whispering mockingly, “Nevermore.”

“Screw you!” Duo roared defiantly. “If it can be done, we’re gonna do it!”

At that instant, Wing Zero’s shoulder-mounted vulcan cannons spat out a barrage of bullets.

Duo had been so fixated on evading the deadly beam saber that the vulcan barrage caught him momentarily off guard.



“So that’s your trump card!” he growled through clenched teeth.

In any other moment, panic might’ve overtaken him. But now, Duo’s concentration was absolute.

“Hold together, partner, we can take this!”

He tracked the incoming projectiles meticulously, rocking Fenrir side-to-side to slip through the hailstorm of bullets, desperately urging both himself and his partner forward.

“You’ve got this! Just keep pushing through!”

Yet several shells slammed brutally into Fenrir, detonating in flashes of searing light and violent turbulence around the cockpit. Even as explosions buffeted the frame, Quaterine stood calmly, unmoving and poised behind Duo.

“We’ll make it through this, both of you will.”

Duo repeated to himself, though whether this reassurance was meant for Fenrir or Quaterine herself, he wasn’t sure.

She fired her cable-launcher, the magnetic anchor snapping firmly onto Wing Zero’s hull. Before confirming its grip, Quaterine leaped boldly into open air.

“Don’t you dare die, Quaterine!”

It was the first time Duo had called her by name.

She soared through the storm of vulcan rounds, her flight so precise it seemed she saw every bullet clearly. Perhaps Duo’s voice had been lost entirely in the roaring winds, never reaching her ears.

Miraculously, or perhaps by her own perfect calculation, Wing Zero’s vulcans abruptly ceased firing, ammunition depleted at precisely the moment she needed it most.

“Impossible...” Duo thought in awe. “I couldn’t have timed that any better myself.”

A brief, eerie silence settled over the sky.

As Quaterine reeled herself swiftly toward the unmanned cockpit, she shouted defiantly into the void.

“There might be countless others exactly like me out there! But I’m the only ‘me’ who exists! I’m irreplaceable, that alone gives my life meaning!”

Gliding gracefully under Mars’ gentle gravity, she landed neatly within Wing Zero’s cockpit, rolling forward and slamming her palm onto the clearly marked self-destruct button next to the console.

The self-destruct mechanism was standardized across all Gundams, wired mechanically for remote activation but deliberately lacking any circuit that could halt the countdown once activated. If Vingt had anticipated this scenario, perhaps the circuit would’ve already been severed.

But this fear was unfounded.

The system activated flawlessly.

“Thank goodness...”

Red lights flashed urgently across Wing Zero’s displays. As the cockpit erupted in blinding flashes of crimson, Quaterine smiled contentedly, diving out once more from the shattered cockpit.

It was still too early to deploy her emergency parachute.

“Still... this is as far as my Heart of Outer Space will take me.”

She gazed downward, scanning the vast expanse of Isidis Bay. But nowhere below could she see even a glimpse of Fenrir’s form.

※

Vingt stared quietly at the glowing monitor, which now flashed an uncompromising red: ACCESS DENIED.

“So,” he murmured softly, “this is what it feels like to lose.”

Removing his leather flight gloves, he tossed them aside carelessly.

“My very first taste of defeat...”

Yet how had it come to this? It wasn’t carelessness or oversight, he’d made no obvious mistakes. Yet, the enemy had clearly outsmarted him. Professor W’s silver arrow had laid the groundwork, and Quaterine’s desperate gambit had sealed the final blow. Vingt realized now that his critical error was in viewing the battle as two isolated confrontations, instead of one continuous maneuver.

“Those siblings’ teamwork is truly impressive,” he admitted, half-amused.

He hadn’t expected the silver arrow to become such an effective setup. He should have recognized both phases, the opening strike and the final decisive move, as part of one integrated strategy. This oversight was undoubtedly his fault.

Had Quaterine’s Heart of Outer Space guided them to realize Wing Zero’s cockpit would be unmanned? If so, it meant Quaterine’s strategic foresight had surpassed even his own meticulous planning.

“That brother-sister duo is truly formidable,” he mused, though his voice carried no trace of bitterness or humiliation.

Instead, an odd satisfaction played on his lips.

“Not bad... not bad at all.”

He gently picked up the blue origami crane resting atop the console. It was the same crane he’d folded after meeting Mille Peacecraft aboard the Tallgeese Heaven, back on the battlefield of Isidis Plain. Back then, Vingt had proclaimed himself “The founder of OZ.” As he gazed

thoughtfully at the crane, a distant memory stirred, he could clearly recall Treize Khushrenada's dignified features.

Holding the delicate paper shape, Vingt's voice took on a self-mocking tone.

"I think I understand a little now, Brother, why you longed to become a loser. However..."

Standing from the pilot seat, he dimmed the lights and strode leisurely from the spacious cockpit.

"Nevermore," he whispered. "It won't happen again."

Left behind on the console was the crumpled blue crane, crushed and forgotten.



High above Isidis Bay, Wing Zero erupted violently into flames.

Its fiery silhouette resembled a giant raven screaming its death throes into the darkening sky.

The blast struck Quaterine from behind, spinning her wildly as she fell toward the dark waters of Isidis Bay. Her emergency parachute deployed in mid-descent.

Gazing downward at the gray waters below, she spotted Fenrir plunging ahead of her. Black smoke poured from multiple damaged areas, leaving a dark, winding trail in its wake.

"Mission failed, I suppose," she murmured softly.

Father Maxwell's directive to return with the machine undamaged had clearly gone unmet. If Fenrir sank into the bay, critical damage was inevitable.

From Fenrir's cockpit, Duo ejected safely.

"Maybe we failed," he shouted defiantly into the roaring wind, "but we gave it our damned best shot!"

Clutching a rotary descent thruster, Duo triggered its jets, spinning swiftly toward Quaterine like a miniature helicopter.

Fenrir, now unmanned, continued its twisting, uneven descent toward the waves below.

Quaterine whispered gratefully, "Thank you, Meilan... You saved us."

Duo shared the sentiment aloud, watching his beloved machine fall.

"Partner, hang tight, I promise I'll come get you soon."

Going down with his machine was never an option for Duo Maxwell, he'd chosen life. Survival was his only mission now.

"Even if I have to drain every last drop of this ocean, I'll find you. Just wait for me, partner."

He offered a silent farewell as Fenrir sank slowly toward the waves below. The uncontrolled armor modules splashed first, disappearing beneath the surface.

Just then, from the northeast horizon, a new machine approached at high speed.

Duo tensed.

“Another enemy?”

But Quaterine’s calm voice quickly assured him over his comms, “It’s an ally. Seems someone’s come to finish what we started.”

The newcomer was none other than Tallgeese Heaven, visibly battered yet bravely flying straight toward the falling Fenrir.

“Our prince finally showed up?” Duo joked lightly.

“No,” Quaterine replied gently. “It’s not Mille. He wouldn’t fly that recklessly.”

Indeed, Tallgeese Heaven banked sharply to the right, sliding deftly beneath Fenrir’s battered frame.

“See? Mille’s left-handed; he would’ve approached from the opposite angle,” she observed confidently.

Tallgeese Heaven caught Fenrir just meters above the waves.

A familiar, terse voice spoke through Duo’s earpiece.

“Mission... complete.”

Realization dawned immediately.

“So it was you after all,” Duo murmured warmly. “Thanks for saving my partner, buddy.”

As Duo and Quaterine descended slowly, a massive aircraft emerged overhead from the northeast. More static-filled comms buzzed into Duo’s ear.

“Looks like you’re still alive, you reckless brat,” Father’s familiar voice said drily.

“Like I’d die that easy, you stupid old fart,” Duo shot back instinctively.

But then, a voice he hadn’t expected joined the conversation, gently chiding him.

“Still as foul-mouthed as ever, huh? I knew leaving you with Father was a mistake.”

“Sister?” Duo gasped, genuinely stunned. “What the hell are you doing with that cranky old man?!”

“I was abducted,” Hilde’s voice replied sarcastically, a faint smile audible beneath her complaint. “And before you even think it, it wasn’t romantic, trust me.”

Duo and Quaterine were soon retrieved safely aboard the Preventer aircraft, which quickly regrouped with the waiting submarine Voyage.



“Well, looks like our mission’s finally complete,” Father Maxwell sighed, relief evident in his voice as he leaned back comfortably on the bridge of the Voyage.

It was true that we had at last obtained the crucial memories of Sally Po and Long Meilan. With these two pieces, it was finally possible to reconstruct a complete, flawless Zechs File, and, by extension, fully restore the lost memories of Heero and Relena.

Moreover, we’d just received Doktor T’s report confirming that the battleship Grand Chariot had successfully located and salvaged the Snow White, previously sunk in the southern waters of Isidis Bay. Though Professor W remained unconscious, his condition had stabilized and his life was no longer in danger.

Currently, the Grand Chariot was continuing toward the Isidis Plains, where it would retrieve three additional suits: the Queen of Hearts, the Prometheus, and the Scheherazade.

But, could we truly consider this the end of our mission?

At that very moment, Lanagreene Republic’s formidable mobile fortress Babel stood largely untouched, looming ominously on the battlefield.

No, this conflict had only just begun.

Afterword

The first drink at VOYAGE is always a Laphroaig highball. This place's Laphroaig isn't your standard fare, it's not the blend tailored for Japanese tastes. Imported via the West, it steers clear of the usual Asian imports circulating throughout Japan. It's so good I toss it back in one go and order the same for my second round. This time, the aroma is smoother, revealing an entirely new dimension of delight. When I try asking Captain and proprietor Mr. Sakai, "What's your secret?" he never lets on, merely smiling warmly and replying, "If my customers never tire of drinking it, that's satisfaction enough for me."

But I digress, what really needs addressing here is Kathy Po's ruby earrings.

When was that detail established? In fact, it goes all the way back to Sakura Asagi's illustration on page 45 of *Frozen Teardrop*, Volume One. Believe it or not, that was only the second installment after the series began running in *Monthly Gundam Ace*. Some of you may already be thinking, "Let me check that," and flipping through your copies. And the moment you look you may well fume, "It's black and white, how am I supposed to tell whether the earrings are red or black?!" You'd be absolutely right. That said, in Asagi's color depiction of Kathy, she unmistakably has red earrings. If you doubt it, you can confirm by watching the picture drama "The Next Battle (Epyon Ares)," included as a video extra on the TV series Blu-ray BOX 2. Wait. A sudden doubt nags at me, so I go back through past illustrations of Kathy, and, oh dear, every last one of them is in black and white. Whoops. Which means, um, well, y'know, this, that, the uh, this "red earrings" bit was a design note known only to those who saw the picture drama, or to the handful of people (myself included) who have seen Sakura Asagi's original color art in person. Which makes it sound like I dreamed it up after the fact and slapped it on, a tacked-on vibe that's off the charts. Sorry about that.

Even so, I can't help feeling the bliss reserved for the chosen few who get to see these magnificent illustrations, one could even say they've crossed into the realm of fine art, in their finished, full-color form.

Every single one of Sakura Asagi's illustrations is vividly, beautifully rendered in color. It's a crying shame that, owing to page-layout constraints, we so rarely get to print them in color for our readers.

Once, I cornered the editors and said, "Since Asagi is taking the trouble to paint in color, shouldn't we make these pages color every time? At least the cover, if nothing else!" The only reply I got was a murky, "Well,

that's a bit... mumble-mumble." It may have been a mistake to slip in, mid-complaint, "Rather than making T's interview color, why not..." I have a terrible habit of not knowing my place and tossing out that one extra line, and it always feels like I end up tightening the noose around my own neck.

When I asked the editor, "Does Asagi know next time's pages will be monochrome?" the answer was, "Of course. But Asagi says, 'Please let me do it in color.'"

I'm no expert on illustration work, but I do understand that coloring is tremendously labor-intensive. Back when I asked her to provide the inserts for the novel edition of *Endless Waltz*, they were in black and white, yet they were more than beautiful enough, and her delicate renderings of the characters were spot-on.

So why is Asagi, a wildly in-demand artist with an impossibly busy schedule, pouring in the extra effort and making *Frozen Teardrop* fully, gloriously color, without a shred of compromise, when her fee surely hasn't changed (probably!)? Is it out of consideration for the larger trim size of a monthly magazine? Because she feels it's necessary to convey even deeper character work? I still haven't asked her why.

This is something Mr. Sakai told me: there's a certain top-tier sushi master who scores his squid sashimi and dusts those cuts with the smallest pinch of salt. By doing that, the squid's native sweetness and savor condense, rise, and blossom, apparently it becomes astonishingly delicious. But the customers never see that handwork; the dish is eaten with almost no one aware of the craft. The guest's response boils down to a single word: "Delicious." And, says the chef, that's more than enough. That's satisfaction. Me, I'd be tempted to blurt, "This salt is rock salt from Such-and-such!" or "These minerals come from the waters of So-and-so Bay, which pair perfectly," and so on. Perhaps this is what truly elevated, craft-devoted professionalism looks like.

Yumi Touma, who played Sally Po and her daughter Kathy, is precisely that kind of professional actor. We reunited on the CD drama *Preventer 5*, a bonus in the *Endless Waltz* Blu-ray BOX, and again on the picture drama mentioned above. Her grasp of character, her idiosyncratic timing, the tempo of her lines, she showcased the same flawless "artisan's technique" as ever. Come to think of it, this goes all the way back to the days of *Dragon Ball Z* and *Magical★Tarurūto-kun*. Touma is a master who carries out the roles she's given with pinpoint precision and seemingly effortless ease. Even when she returns to a part like Sally after a long gap, she reproduces it exactly as it was. That unassuming naturalness is easy to take for granted, but I'm certain she quietly

prepares dozens of approaches so she can adapt on the spot. It makes me sit up straighter and think I need to get my own act together. After the CD drama recording, Touma said with a smile, "Sumizawa, I really gave it my all." I hurried to apologize, "Oh wow, my apologies!" This time in particular, Touma had long passages, narration, technical jargon, and a barrage of loanwords; I placed a heavier burden on her than on the other actors. She's not someone who would ever say such a thing lightly. Including the previous picture drama, I've done nothing but lean on her, truly, I'm sorry. I'll try to balance the line distribution better next time. And if Sally were here, I'm sure she'd say, "It's your job to make sure it doesn't end up that way."

In any case, Frozen Teardrop has finally reached Volume Ten. I owe it all to our readers. Thank you. Vingt on the cover looks gallant and cute in equal measure. The black wings are ominous and impossibly cool.

The moment I saw it, I thought, "I want everyone to see every illustration in full color! Let's put out a Sakura Asagi art book." When I said as much to the editor, the answer was, "Let's wait until the serialization is complete." So that's it, turns out I'm the one at fault for everything. Hahaha.

Well then, please keep me company for my next bout of rambling in Volume Eleven.

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.10 Concerto in Serendipity (Part.01)

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