

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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11 CONCERTO IN SERENDIPITY (Part.2)



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Zechs File.1
Part.01

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

The long-range high-speed hovercraft VOYAGE skimmed silently across the snow-blanketed expanse of the Isidis Plain.

For the moment, the fighting in this sector had lapsed into an uneasy lull.

My name is Kathy Po. I serve as a Warrant Officer with the Preventers, stationed at the Mars branch of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation.

Right now, I am reviewing through a virtual visor the newly corrected and supplemented Perfect Zechs File, a version refined with additional records from Long Meilan and my mother, Sally Po.

When I finish, this file is to be handed over to Heero Yuy, still trapped in amnesia, and to Relena Peacecraft, whose condition is nearly the same. By confronting the past laid bare here, both of them are expected to recover their memories, and with them their true selves.

What struck me most was how completely this version had transformed from the Zechs File I once saw at the Mars North Pole Base. Even the starting date was different. Where before it had carried on directly from the Treize File beginning in AC-188, this one reached back further, two whole years further, opening instead upon the events of AC-186...

AC-186 AUTUMN

“How many days has it been since then?”

He could no longer tell if it was day or night.

Even the notion that the season was autumn seemed doubtful.

His sense of time had been completely paralyzed.

L-2 Colony Cluster, V08744.

Inside this prisoner internment facility, a suffocating darkness reigned.

Lighting and air-purification were pared down to the bare minimum, and a heavy staleness of carbon dioxide clung to the air.

This prison appeared to be unofficial, an off-the-record compound, apparently shared with a penitentiary for common criminals. The treatment meted out to United Earth Sphere Alliance prisoners was appallingly brutal.

Within these walls, two young cadets of OZ were confined to separate cells: Zechs Merquise and Elev Onegell. Their fates had been bound together by cruel turns of destiny.

Elev's father, Brigadier General Daigo Onegell, was the man who had not only urged but commanded the conquest of the pacifist nation of

the Sanc Kingdom. To Zechs, that made Elev the son of the man who annihilated his homeland.

And yet these two, bitter enemies by bloodline, had trained side by side under Treize Khushrenada, survived together as cadets of the Specials, and faced death shoulder to shoulder on the battlefields of Mogadishu and the lunar front.

After the great Ocean of Storms War on the Moon, their next assignment was to deliver twenty-five Leo IV "Greif" units to the nearly completed mobile fortress Barge. But before the mission could be fulfilled, they were ambushed by Artemis Sedichi's anti-Alliance colonial forces.

Elev had laughed at the time, "Leave it to me."

And then, before the enemy soldiers who had boarded their transport, he exposed Zechs's secret as a member of the Peacecraft family.

"The Marticus Rex you all revere was his father, and the legendary Lightning Queen, Six Merquise, was his grandmother."

For the colony rebels, those two names were blazing beacons of glory. In the long war against the Alliance, they alone had brought victory to the insurgents.

"His true name is Milliardo Peacecraft, the rightful heir of the pacifist nation of the Sanc Kingdom."

At once, the soldiers' demeanor shifted. Zechs was taken not in chains but with the dignity accorded a commander, summoned directly before their leader, Artemis.

"Why would the son of Peacecraft be serving the Alliance?" was the first question she put to him.

"You truly believe I am Milliardo?" Zechs countered.

"There's always the chance you're lying, clinging to life with falsehoods."

At the time, Alliance prisoners were often executed on the spot. With no official state of war, there were no conventions of rights to shield captives. The Alliance did the same, and vengeance had long since hardened into the law of retaliation.

"I am prepared to die," Zechs replied.

Artemis heard this, nodded gravely, then turned to her adjutant.

"What do you think, Quinze?"

"We should seek counsel with him, I believe."

Quinze Carrant, a man who seemed to have embraced as his life's mission the role of perpetual "Number Two." Ever since serving at the side of the revolutionary Heero Yuy, he had been content to remain in the shadows, eschewing self-assertion, avoiding even the simple act of naming himself. It was only nine years later, during the uprising of White

Fang in AC-195, when he reunited with Zechs, that he finally introduced himself, prefacing his name with a deferential, "Forgive my late introduction." Perhaps even that was the mark of his chosen role.

Artemis faced the two prisoners again.

"If what you say is true, then your father and mine once fought side by side. They were comrades-in-arms."

Her father, Sergeant Sedichi, had been a veteran of the old Rebellion, a pilot of the pumpkin-shaped tanks and Apollon fighters under Marticus himself.

"That was more than thirty years ago," Zechs answered firmly.

"Allies of one generation may become enemies in the next. I ask only that you treat me as any other prisoner of war."

"Milliardo," Elev interjected, trying to stop him.

"Our parents may have been enemies, but we became comrades. You don't need to take such a rigid stand. After all, I—"

But Zechs cut him short.

"Forgive me. I am not Milliardo Peacecraft."

His clear eyes met Artemis's.

"I am Zechs Merquise, Officer Candidate of OZ Specials."

"Enough. Whether you're friend or foe, it makes little difference."

Artemis broke his gaze, her voice soft but edged with fatigue.

"Do you really think Treize Khushrenada would abandon charming, brilliant soldiers like you? No... he will send a team to retrieve you."

She exhaled a long sigh. The assault on Fortress Barge loomed before her, and the last thing she wanted was to bleed strength against Treize beforehand.

Quinze absorbed her worry and voiced the practical solution in his usual even tone.

"Then for now, we shall commit them to our holding facility. In the L-2 cluster, they will not be easily discovered."

He turned to the two captives with an almost apologetic air.

"You will find the accommodations inconvenient, but in time your fates will be decided."

And so, Zechs and Elev resigned themselves to captivity.

Days passed within the suffocating dark.

*

"Hmph... Milliardo Peacecraft, is it?"

Zechs muttered up at the ceiling, lying on the miserable excuse for a bed in his cell.

Since being locked away, he had developed two habits: bitter self-mockery and talking to himself.

Alone in the dark, with nothing but crushing solitude, there was nothing left to do but dredge up the past.

“If I grow strong enough, I won’t need to carry that name.”

Not a day went by that he didn’t recall the misfortune that had shadowed him ever since the fall of his kingdom at the age of six. To endure it all, to go on living, he had forced himself to view his own life as though it belonged to someone else, to keep a cold distance from his suffering.

He changed his name for the same reason, so that he could remain calm.

But when he allowed himself to think of “Milliardo” objectively, all he saw was an unbroken chain of calamity, so relentless it was almost laughable.

The fall of his nation.

The death of his parents.

The lost sister whose whereabouts remained unknown.

Flight and wandering. Hunger and thirst.

Revenge and despair. Regret and hesitation.

Rage and submission. Affirmation and denial.

When those memories swelled to the breaking point, they left behind nothing but a vast hollow in his chest. From that hollow, words spilled out unbidden, raw fragments of his true feelings.

To escape that trap, Zechs had taught himself to speak only what was not his truth.

“Now and always, I will be Zechs Merquise.”

Beyond the bars, the only sounds were the grating drip of water from the failing ventilation system and the ragged coughing and moans of inmates stricken with the so-called “Colony Flu,” a sickness sweeping the cluster.

Zechs rolled onto his side, facing the wall.

“That virus, there should have been a vaccine by now.”

That summer, the medical teams of the L-1 Colonies, with funding from the Romefeller Foundation, had reportedly distributed doses.

“So, it never reached the prisoners...”

A mortality rate of forty percent, and in conditions like these, the toll would be higher still.

“At this rate, I’ll be infected too. Well, maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.”

He closed his eyes with a kind of grim resolve.

Time passed, minutes, hours, he couldn’t tell. Perhaps he even slept.

When his eyes snapped open again, it was to the sound of footsteps echoing from the far end of the corridor. He sharpened his focus: several sets of boots, steadily approaching.

Among them was another sound, out of rhythm with the rest.

Clang... clonk. Clang... clonk.

The metallic knock suggested a cane, or an old prosthetic leg.

Zechs rose from the bed, fixing his eyes on the gloom ahead. In the dim light he saw guards flanking a man hunched over, leaning on a cane.

The man dragged behind him an abnormally thin left leg. In silhouette, his gait made him look almost like an old man.

They came directly to his cell and halted.

"You," the man said. His voice was hoarse, but commanding. "You're the one they call MilliarDO?"

The cane-bearer was not elderly after all. He wore a plain, unremarkable suit, yet Zechs judged him to be in his mid-thirties.

But the left half of his face was ravaged by burn scars so severe that his true age was impossible to read.

"I've never claimed that name," Zechs replied curtly.

"Of course not... A Peacecraft would never take up that title lightly."

The scarred man seemed satisfied by that. He wore black sunglasses, and beneath them, oddly, a black patch over his right eye.

"I am called Ein Yuy," he said.

"Ein?"

Zechs had heard the name before. He had even seen a photograph, one that had seared itself into memory. Yet this man looked like someone else entirely.

Unwilling to believe it, Zechs let the silence stand.

"Forgive the shock," Ein said at last. "I lost my right eye and left leg in an accident."

The left leg, Zechs now saw, was indeed prosthetic, an antiquated hunk of metal so crude that without the cane the man could hardly walk. No wonder he dragged his step.

"I dislike showing myself in this wretched state," Ein admitted. "But I had to see you with my own eyes."

Silence stretched between them. Zechs wished it would remain so. But under the weight of Ein's unspoken pressure, he found himself asking:

"Why remain as you are? Why not be restored?"

In this age of advanced regenerative medicine and tissue engineering, scars like his were rare. Artificial skin, synthetic joints, his disfigurement could easily have been erased.

"Because this is the proof of my resolve," Ein answered, his voice firm.

"If I shed this body, I would no longer be myself. Forgive me, but I must endure as I am."

Zechs narrowed his eyes. He finally asked the question gnawing at him from the start.

"Are you really Ein Yuy?"

*

Ein Yuy was supposed to have died on April 7, AC-175.

On that day, the leader Heero Yuy had been touring the colonies. His route brought him to Emerald City, in the L-1 Cluster, Colony C-01422, the very place where he had once made his political debut.

During the reception there, as Heero spoke before the assembly, a sniper hired by the Alliance Space Forces put a bullet between his brows. He collapsed on the spot, dead.

But the Alliance operatives did not leave it at that. They blew up the entire venue, erasing every trace of the legendary leader's remains.

Among those consumed by the blast was Ein Yuy.

"It's no wonder you doubt me," the scarred man said now. "Ein Yuy is recorded as dead. I no longer have a registry, nor even a citizen identification number."

"You're telling me you command the anti-Alliance forces, then, as Heero Yuy's nephew?" Zechs asked.

"That is not my intention," Ein replied evenly. "But if it makes things easier for you, you may think of me that way."

Zechs now understood, the "certain person" Artemis and the others had spoken of, this was him.

"I have nothing to prove my identity beyond these wounds," Ein admitted. "But then, neither can you prove you are Zechs Merquise."

Zechs had no answer. He too lacked any official record, no birth certificate, no citizen identification number.

"I believe there is no meaning in being alive," Ein said, his voice heavy with conviction. "But there is meaning in continuing to live."

The words pressed down on Zechs, resonating with thoughts he himself had carried.

Suddenly, a harsh light flared across his face.

A guard had switched on a hand-lamp, training its beam directly at him. Zechs flinched, raising a hand to shield his eyes.

"I see," Ein murmured. "The same eyes as Lady Katerina."

"..."

“Long ago, I accompanied my uncle to an audience with King Marticus and his queen. I remember them well. There is no mistake. You are not Zechs, you are Prince Milliardo.”

“That past is discarded,” Zechs said flatly.

“No. What you must do is not cast aside the past, but confront it.”

Ein smiled. The scars across his face creased into deep, twisted folds.

“Come. Let’s take a walk. It is my daily ritual.”

“Are you saying... I’m free?”

Ein nodded silently.

But Zechs shook his head. He could not accept it. Too many here had been left to suffer, their bodies wracked by the Colony Flu. His comrade Elev was among them. To be singled out, granted special treatment, felt like a betrayal.

As though he had read Zechs’s hesitation, Ein spoke again.

“Rest easy. The vaccine has just arrived at this facility. Your comrade will be released shortly, along with the rest.”

*

Hours later, Ein and Zechs were walking through the streets of V08744.

Outside, the air was bitterly cold, as though winter had descended. The colony’s weather-control system, it seemed, had been broken for years.

In such a place, Zechs’s OZ uniform stood out like a beacon. Reluctantly, he accepted a deep green greatcoat, borrowed from a small-statured anti-Alliance soldier, pulling up the collar to hide himself. On his tall frame, the coat’s hem dragged low, transforming it into something like a long officer’s trench.

They walked slowly, almost idly, with neither guards nor escorts, just the pace of two men out for a stroll. Though in truth, it was Ein’s crippled leg that set their rhythm. From a distance, they might have looked like a dutiful son guiding his disabled father.

If Zechs had wished to shove Ein aside and flee, he could have done so easily. But he did not. He had taken Ein’s words, “Walk with me, it is my daily ritual”, at face value, and honored them.

The city was saturated with despair. Ruins stretched in every direction. The faces of its people were hollowed and wan. Homeless children squatted among the rubble, staring up at the colony’s low artificial sky with vacant eyes and sighs too heavy for their age.

The meager produce at the street stalls, wilted vegetables, fruit stripped of color, spoke of soil and lives equally exhausted. The vitality of the entire colony had been bled away.

It was hard to believe that Ein took such a walk as “daily ritual.” More likely, he meant for Zechs to see all this with his own eyes, to breathe in the colony’s ruin.

They stopped at the remains of a fountain. A rusted bench sat nearby, and they rested there. A woman filled a bucket with the muddy water that had collected in the basin. Undrinkable. Hardly fit even for washing.

Zechs watched in silence until the words slipped from him, unguarded.

“I never imagined it could be this bad.”

“This colony has always been poor,” Ein said. “But some thirty years ago, a fortune suddenly fell into its lap. A vast inheritance was bestowed upon Maxwell Church up ahead. And the priest, Bill Maxwell, gave it all away.”

Following Ein’s gaze, Zechs spotted the church, a small spire wedged between half-collapsed buildings.

“Have you ever heard the name Shergold?” Ein asked.

“No,” Zechs said. “I haven’t.”

“Good. It makes little difference if you do.”

What Zechs could not know: Eric Shergold, upon marrying Sabrina Peacecraft, had donated his entire fortune to Maxwell Church. Nor did Zechs know that his supposed grandmother, Six Merquise, was not truly his blood.

“That fountain was built then. Once, they say, this was a beautiful city.”

“Why has it fallen to this?” Zechs asked.

“Prosperity invites both blessing and curse,” Ein replied. “When the wealth flowed in, laborers were brought from other colonies. People of every kind swarmed here in search of work. Eventually, the newcomers outnumbered the old residents. Jobs vanished, the gulf between rich and poor widened, and language and ideology fractured. The city devolved into lawlessness.”

Zechs studied the faces in the crowd. Indeed, they were of every race, every origin. Many bore no family names. The children squatting in the streets, some of them likely had no names at all.

“Crime spread. Riots broke out over trifles. Inevitably, the Alliance intervened, citing ‘security.’ They planted a garrison, sent in elite troops. Weapons development was carried out here as well. And of course, all the military funds were bled directly from the people. In a few short years, the coffers were empty. When the wealth was gone, the Alliance withdrew, leaving only a token force behind.”

The Alliance was rotten. They had crushed the Sanc Kingdom not only out of fear of pacifism, but because they coveted its thriving medical economy. As Ein spoke, Zechs thought grimly of that parallel.

"The people's rage boiled over," Ein continued. "Anti-Alliance hatred rooted itself deep. Resistance groups multiplied. They became fiercer than any in the colonies. When I was young, I often came here to calm them. While my uncle lived, that was enough. But now..."

He lowered his head, shaking it.

"Now the resistance squabbles only over who will lead. The people have abandoned them entirely."

Zechs understood at last. It was not only the Alliance that had destroyed this place. Power itself bred weakness, bred arrogance, trampled down the people, stripping away peace and hope alike.

"Well," Ein said at last, rising with effort, "we should be going."

"Back?" Zechs asked.

"No," Ein answered, dragging his leg as he set off again.

"There is something I want you to do."

"For me?"

"Yes. Something only you can do."

Zechs braced himself. Ein's tone carried a weight that made the words impossible to dismiss.

"Tell me, Milliarde... Do you not wish to know the true workings of the universe?"

"The workings of the universe?" Zechs repeated softly.

*

The place was a shuttered school, right beside the Alliance garrison. Whether it had once been a law school or a high school was impossible to tell now.

Desks and chairs had been the first to vanish. From textbooks to light fixtures, anything of value had long since been looted. Without Ein's explanation, Zechs would never have guessed that the ruin before him had once been a school.

So it was across the colony: every public facility stripped bare. Parents with even a sliver of means sent their children to the school inside the Alliance base. For the rest, for the orphans and the children of the poor, education no longer existed.

Ein led Zechs into what had once been a gymnasium. The cold there was biting, unnatural. A faint stench hung in the air.

The cavernous hall was piled high with plastic sacks of refuse, mountains of them nearly brushing the ceiling.

Zechs thought the heavy chill was meant to stave off rot.

"I purchased this place," Ein said quietly. "And gave it to the people."

Then Zechs realized, the bags did not hold garbage.

"This is a privately run morgue. In summer, the collectors come once a month. In winter, once every three. They take what remains."

His voice was pained.

"In a poor colony, even graves cannot be afforded. The refrigeration units here are the only modern fixtures I've spared no expense on. But with so many bodies, even that can't kill the smell."

Ein moved deeper into the hall.

"Help me," he said.

He stopped beside one corpse, lifting it by the ankles. Zechs understood, this was what Ein had brought him here to do. Silently, he bent and took the body by the shoulders. Together, they shifted it atop another pile. They repeated the grim work, again and again, until a patch of wooden floor came into view.

Painted across it, in broad strokes of yellow, were the words: DO NOT PLACE BODIES HERE!

Ein knelt at the final exclamation point, holding up a card key. He passed it over the painted dot.

A sharp beep.

At once, the nearest pile of corpses shifted aside with mechanical slowness, revealing a stairwell descending into darkness.

"They say the best place to hide a leaf is in the forest," Ein said. "For the dead, there is no better hiding place than here."

He descended. Zechs followed without hesitation. He, too, was supposed to be a dead man.

*

The basement opened into a vast computer control chamber. Under dim lighting, row upon row of hulking mainframes stood, silent titans of steel.

"The cold air serves two purposes," Ein said. "It preserves the bodies above, and it keeps these machines alive. The Alliance has no inkling. The electric bill, though, it cuts deep."

He stopped before an old terminal and powered it on.

"We have been repairing and analyzing this quantum computer for years. It once served aboard the cruiser Sherwood. Nearly forty years

have passed since its program was developed, yet no AI has ever surpassed it.”

“Artificial intelligence?” Zechs murmured.

“The creator was a man named Thomas Currant. A brilliant mind. He is long dead now.”

“ ... ”

“They say it was once called Sam, after the developer’s cat. For reasons no one quite understood, he traced the animal’s personality into the AI. Its ‘cat-persona,’ if you will.”

The name meant nothing to Zechs.

“Sadly, when the Sherwood was destroyed, Sam’s persona died with it. Only the core program survived: the ZERO System.”

According to Ein, the quantum computer could intercept every surveillance feed on Earth, the Moon, and the colonies, hack the Alliance’s databases, even eavesdrop on private satellite calls.

“You might say it can watch nearly the entire human race,” he said.

Beyond that, it could process this ocean of data, running calculations at speed enough to forecast the future itself, predictions not of whim, but of probability and precision.

“The ZERO System...”

Zechs felt an awe that bordered on dread. To use such a machine was to touch something perilously close to the realm of gods. So this was what Ein meant by knowing the workings of the universe.

But did mankind truly need such a thing?

“If it had been activated twelve years ago, Heero Yuy might have lived,” Ein said, grief raw in his voice. “History’s gears might never have slipped. This system can change the future. It can alter not just the fate of Earth, but of all space. Immanuel Kant’s Perpetual Peace, no longer an ideal, but reality.”

He stared at the monitor, where a cursor blinked patiently in the dark.

“If you believe that,” Zechs said, “then you should use it yourself.”

“The password is... special. It will only respond to the Peacecraft bloodline.”

“Then what you want me to do—”

“There are two things.”

Ein handed him a scrap of paper.

“First, stand before the terminal. Read these words aloud as you type them. The system will scan your voice and image. Only then will it recognize you.”

Zechs glanced down.

PEACECRAFT × 2 HEERO YUY

A strange incantation. Why such a phrase had been chosen, he could not fathom. Perhaps there was some hidden philosophy to it, some Zen-like riddle of “the self before one’s parents were born.” But he could not grasp it. Only that it felt strangely fated.

“And the second task?” he asked, cautious still.

“This is the most important.”

Ein removed his sunglasses, revealing a left eye wet with tears.

“You must deliver this system, to my son.”

“Your... son?”

“Yes. A man you know well. The commander of the OZ Specials. Treize Khushrenada is my child.”

Zechs could not answer. For a long moment, no words came at all.

*

In Greek myth, there is the tale of Pandora’s Box.

It was the Titan Prometheus who first gave humankind the gift of fire, the foundation of what we call civilization. Fire brought prosperity and progress to human society. Yet it is equally true that it made human conflict infinitely more terrible.

From fire came forged weapons, iron swords and axes. Fire itself became a weapon, culminating in the birth of the ultimate means of destruction: nuclear arms, with power enough to erase humanity entire.

For this theft of fire, Prometheus incurred the wrath of Zeus, king of Olympus. He was chained to the peaks of Caucasus, condemned to endure each day as a vulture tore out his organs, only for them to regenerate and be devoured again.

But Zeus’s fury did not end with him. It turned next upon mankind.

To Epimetheus, Prometheus’s brother, who had watched over humankind in his stead, Zeus sent a woman, Pandora, whose beauty was said to surpass all others. Epimetheus fell for her at once, and soon they were wed.

In their home rested a single box, entrusted to him by Prometheus. Within it lay all the world’s calamities. Prometheus had warned his brother never to open it.

But one day, Pandora’s curiosity overcame her. She lifted the lid in secret.

Out flew every misery imaginable, plague, crime, inequality, prejudice. The world was flooded with suffering.

Panicked, Pandora slammed the lid shut. Inside, only one thing remained.

The Greeks called it Elpis. Some say it was “hope.” Others interpret it as “forewarning.” The ancient word carries both meanings.

If it was hope, then humanity was left to live on in despair, clinging to that last glimmer, never free of the need to reopen the box. Yet the myth makes no mention of such a return.

If it was forewarning, then humankind, spared the sight of all the miseries yet to come, could continue without losing hope altogether. By that reading, Elpis must still lie sealed within.

There is yet another, darker interpretation, that the final thing in the box was not hope at all, but the power to foresee the future. And if mankind were to know its future, fraught with suffering and disaster, it could never accept it. The knowledge would drive it to seek its own destruction, until extinction was inevitable.

And here before us stands another Pandora’s Box: the ZERO System.

To open it, would that be to grant humanity the hope of evolving to its next stage? Or would it be to unleash a calamity, plunging all humankind into despair?

*

Ein’s left eye was bloodshot at the corner, as if on the verge of spilling tears. Perhaps it was nothing more than the cold that reddened it, but Zechs knew it was genuine emotion.

He could sense it, that unspoken loneliness.

Ein slipped his sunglasses back on and turned away, unwilling to let Zechs see him wipe his eyes.

Zechs felt no sentimentality at the sight.

Leaning against the computer’s table was Ein’s cane. Its handle was silver, shaped like a dog’s head. Zechs found himself staring at it. There was something familiar in its face, a memory shrouded in mist.

"Ah... it’s the eyes."

The gaze of a dog, fixed upward toward its master. True and unwavering. Yet he could not recall when he had seen it. For an instant, he thought he heard the sound of surf, distant and rolling.

He shook it off and looked back to the monitor’s waiting password prompt.

"Should I really activate this?"

Then, a sudden thought rose in him, and he asked, “Does Treize... does our instructor even know you’re alive?”

Ein shook his head, then answered with measured pauses.

"I have never met my son. And I never intend to."

There was no point in asking why. Zechs understood the reason too well. A man presumed dead, who chooses to remain so, he does it because everyone he touches is swallowed by misfortune. To love, and yet to embrace solitude: that was Ein's choice.

It was the same reason Zechs had never gone to see his own sister, Relena. To keep her from being dragged into the curse of his past.

"I believe all humans live in solitude," Zechs said. "That was what the battlefield taught me. But it is because of solitude that we can be strong. With that strength, we can protect the weak."

"I agree," Ein replied. "Your path and mine are very much alike. That is why I chose you."

The task he had laid upon Zechs was simple to name, impossible to weigh: to awaken the dormant ZERO System, and deliver it to his son, the commander of OZ Specials, Treize Khushrenada.

But Zechs could not bring himself to act. The system felt too dangerous.

After a long silence, he asked, as if to press the point.

"Can I refuse this request?"

"Not merely delivering ZERO to Treize? Or do you wish to refuse to awaken it at all?"

"No, I mean the realization of perpetual peace."

"You mean refuse Kant's Perpetual Peace itself?" Ein said, turning his head slightly. "How strange... for a Peacecraft to reject peace."

"This is Pandora's Box," Zechs said firmly. "Once it's opened, I fear humanity will walk only into despair."

Ein kept his back turned.

Zechs spoke on, his gaze fixed upon the mute monitor.

"The power to see the future does not lead directly to peace. Not even if it comes from a quantum computer that claims to unravel the workings of the universe."

"I see it differently."

Ein turned, speaking in a quiet, steady voice.

"Man is a traveler, forever searching for someone who can show him he is not alone. When he finds such a person, he changes. I know this from experience. I want you, too, to know what that feels like."

"I doubt I could ever change," Zechs said.

"That is up to you. But know this: even before this machine is awakened, you and I were brought together. That alone should tell you something."

Zechs glanced down at the scrap of paper in his hand. The password.

“There is such a thing as strange and inexplicable causality in this universe,” Ein said.

On the note were two names: Peacecraft and Heero Yuy.

So this was what Ein meant by “the workings of the universe”: causality.

“When this machine awakens, human connection will become clear. The web of future ties will be visible, predictable. Encounters like this one will multiply. It will not be a god’s dominion, not a tyranny. It will be a beacon, a signpost for lonely travelers. If what Pandora left behind truly was Hope, then should we not open it at once?”

But Zechs still refused.

He kept his eyes on the monitor and said:

“Mankind is not ready. Encounters, hope, even peace, these are not burdens to hand over to a machine.”

“Then you needn’t decide now,” Ein said, disappointment in his voice.

From behind Zechs, he shut off the computer and drew out a rectangular device from its core.

“This unit box is the trigger. Keep it with you.”

Zechs turned it over in his hands.

“A quantum computer... so small?”

It measured eighteen centimeters by eight, and no thicker than two.

“No. It is not the quantum computer itself,” Ein explained. “It is only the key. With this, any computer in the Sphere can awaken the ZERO System through the network, once the password is spoken and typed. It is the legacy of the Sherwood’s AI, Sam, self-evolved beyond its origins.”

“And if I were to connect it to a mobile suit’s onboard computer?”

Zechs asked, more out of curiosity than intent.

“Then you would have the strongest mobile suit in the Earth Sphere. But whether its processors could keep pace is another matter. If the machine cannot process quickly enough, the future it sees may already be the past.”

“So... a mobile suit built solely for ZERO would be required.”

He had neither the knowledge nor the skill to make such a thing. Still, Zechs hefted the unit box. For something said to carry the fate of humanity, it was surprisingly light.

“It truly is Pandora’s Box,” he murmured.

“One correction,” Ein said. “The notion that Pandora held a box is a Renaissance mistranslation. In the original, it was a jar. Or perhaps a chest. But once an error takes hold and spreads wide enough, it becomes truth itself.”

“ ... ”

“Words shift. Meanings change. Even hope can be read not as blessing but as curse, merely an illusion that spurs futile effort. Perhaps this is such an age...”

And so, in the end, Zechs did not awaken the ZERO System.

In German, the adjective for “lonely” is einsam.

Ein, together with the silent Al Sam, had sat for years in that freezing crypt beneath the morgue, facing one another across the void. His eyes red, swollen with tears.

Ein and Sam, by chance, when placed side by side, their names formed the word that expressed both their states of being.

Zechs stepped outside, struck by the weight of the thought.

Dead leaves drifted on the air. Autumn was gone. Winter had arrived.

He pulled the collar of his borrowed coat high and looked out over the ruined city. The unit box rested snug in his pocket.

He had no idea yet where he ought to go.

“What is essential is invisible to the eye, Zechs.”

Lucrezia Noin’s words rose suddenly in his mind. Half a year earlier, in the lounge of a spaceport colony, she had murmured them while gazing at the summer constellations.

The line came from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*.

At the time, Zechs had thought it described him perfectly: a solitary prince, marooned on his tiny star.

And it still did.

Why remember it now, of all times?

The causality of the universe.

If he could grasp that law, perhaps he would understand even this.

Ein rejoined him after locking down the facility, leaning heavily on the silver-headed cane. The dog’s head gleamed as he pulled his crippled leg forward.

“Forgive the wait.”

“It’s nothing,” Zechs answered.

For a moment, Ein seemed like the aviator of *The Little Prince*, the pilot stranded in the desert beside his broken plane. His awkward, solitary back became that silhouette in Zechs’s mind.

What would Lucrezia say, if she were here? She was like the rose the Prince had left behind on his small planet, fragile, irreplaceable.

“Hmph... I suppose that makes me the Little Prince, burdened with Pandora’s Box,” Zechs muttered with a faint, self-mocking smile.

It was a habit now, these stray soliloquies.

Ein turned at the sound, as if to speak.

“Pay it no mind. Just talking to myself,” Zechs said quickly.

Ein gave a small nod, then faced forward again. With his dragging step, he moved on.

Zechs followed.

And together, without a word more, they vanished into the crowd of the ruined city.

AC-186 WINTER

The completion ceremony for the space fortress Barge was held on October 26 of that year. At the very same time, Artemis launched her assault to seize it.

The operation ended in disaster.

OZ Specials mobile suit forces counterattacked, and the fortress itself fired its massive main cannon. Of the twenty-five Schwarz Greif (Leo IV units) that had been the rebels' pride, only two survived: Artemis's own machine and her adjutant's.

Zechs and Elev had been present on the bridge of a rebel transport, serving as "special observers." Both had grown doubtful of the United Earth Sphere Alliance.

They had seen the colonies' desperate poverty with their own eyes. It was impossible to ignore, their war was unjust.

Yet they remained captives. Each was forced to wear an astrosuit fitted with a suicide device. A single suspicious move, an attempt to escape or contact the outside, and a switch would be pressed. The resulting explosion inside the suit would kill them instantly.

Watching over them was their minder, Quinze Currant. He wanted them to see the full scope of the fortress assault, to impress upon them the rebels' might. His secret hope was that victory would win them over, and that the name Peacecraft could become a symbol for their cause.

And beyond that, he needed Milliardo. His brother had left behind the ZERO System, and only a Peacecraft could awaken it.

But now they had lost. The reverse of what Quinze had intended.

He ground his teeth in frustration.

Zechs, unmoved by his disappointment, said quietly.

"Nothing in war ever unfolds as one intends."

There was no mockery in his tone.

"Even the best commander could never hope to take a fortress with only twenty-five suits."

Quinze said nothing, his mood soured.

"Then you tell me, Zechs," Elev asked, almost testing him, "how would you bring Barge down if you were in command?"

"If it were me—" Zechs began, and spoke without hesitation.

“To begin with, war in space is itself folly. In a world without air, without gravity, human life has no place. There is no necessity to trade death in such a place.

“But if one must fight there, then the most effective means is long-range attack, missiles, shells, energy cannons. Space offers no obstacles. To topple a fortress like Barge, you would need energy weapons of comparable scale, and between two and five hundred mobile suits to provide support and disruption at minimum.”

“Absurd!” Quinze snapped, dismissing him at once.

“It’s easy to spin fantasies on paper. This assault was our only chance, our greatest opportunity to strike! To catch the Alliance in the midst of its celebration, such moments don’t come again. And we had just acquired the twenty-five Greif units to make it possible!”

“Even so,” Zechs countered, “there was a fatal lack of intelligence.” Artemis’s judgment had been careless.

Two mistakes stood out. She had not anticipated the Specials’ arrival under Treize. And she had not considered the possibility that the unfinished fortress cannon would already be operational.

“But the greatest failure,” Zechs concluded, “was that the high command pressed the assault despite their lack of preparation.”

The rebels’ chronic shortage of forces was undeniable. The Alliance’s overwhelming strength was beyond question. Zechs understood this.

“All the more reason twenty-five Greifs should never have been deemed enough. If you lack strength, then you must take more from the enemy. That is not mere theory.”

Quinze had no reply at once. Zechs pressed on.

“Of course, that is only if one views the matter from the plain perspective of ‘winning a war.’ Treize thinks along an entirely different vector.”

He thought of the Chimera Corps, piloted by former comrades. Of Noin, who must have been among them.

“If you had activated the ZERO System,” Quinze said darkly, “the lack of intelligence could have been erased. That much, at least, was within your grasp.”

The activation unit was already inserted into the console. Before the battle, Quinze had told him, “Be ready to awaken it at any time.” And he had added Ein’s words: Your will shall be respected. If the moment feels right, then use it.

But Zechs had not.

Quinze’s voice sharpened.

“Are you so certain you chose rightly? Do you even know how much the colony citizens will suffer with Barge complete? Our defeat, the

deaths of our comrades, these may be your burden to bear. What do you say to that?"

Zechs said nothing.

It was true: had things gone differently, Treize or Noin might have died in that battle. Perhaps he should have used ZERO to search for another path.

At last, he turned and met Quinze's glare.

"Very well."

His own eyes flashed with steel.

"I will bear all the blame. The debt will be repaid, when the day comes."

The words carried a confidence that defied explanation.

History would prove him true.

For in time, Zechs would take back the name Milliardo Peacecraft, and with the Gundam Epyon, the machine built for ZERO, he would lead White Fang's revolutionary army to bring down Fortress Barge itself.

*

Zechs and Elev had been assigned to service the two Schwarz Greif units that returned from battle.

In mobile suit maintenance, the two of them proved more skilled than any of the rebel technicians.

"It was quite a battle, wasn't it? Were you afraid out there?" Elev spoke to the jet-black machine as though soothing a living creature, running his hand across its armor.

He was a strange one. He claimed that when he touched a mobile suit, he could feel what it had endured.

The machine under his hands was Artemis's own.

"It must have been brutal. But you did well. You survived, and that's what matters."

Beside him, Zechs worked in silence, tools in hand.

"There, there, good girl... I'll make you good as new. No, better. When I'm done, you'll be in even finer shape than when you launched."

"You sound like a man talking to his dog," Zechs observed.

"My old man was a dog lover. Guess I picked it up from him."

"...I see."

Daigo Onegell, the general who had urged the invasion of the Sanc Kingdom, and overseen its destruction.

Elev caught the shadow in Zechs's expression and quickly veered away from the subject.

“And you? Don’t tell me you hate dogs?”

In Zechs’s mind’s eye, the silver dog’s head returned, the gleaming cane of Ein Yuy. Its unflinching gaze.

He said nothing.

“Hah. That’s right,” Elev muttered. “A man like you couldn’t love any animal. You hate others... and you hate yourself even more.”

“...”

Perhaps it was true. And if not, he certainly gave that impression. Even with Lucrezia, who had shown him such warmth, Zechs had met her kindness only with cold indifference.

Hours later, the work was finished.

A thin woman descended the stairway into the hangar.

“You’re already done? Impressive.”

Artemis.

In her hand was the switch that could trigger the explosive charges in their astrosuits.

“If I’d remembered I had this, I should have taken you along as pilots. You’d have been useful.”

“No thanks,” Elev shot back. “We’re not professional killers. We don’t have it in us to slaughter our own comrades.”

He leaned forward, defiant.

“Hell, why don’t you press it right now? You think you can bend people with a toy like that?”

His eyes flicked to Zechs, an unspoken plan. If they rushed her together, they might seize the device before she could act.

“Right, Zechs?”

“Forget it,” Zechs sighed.

Artemis chuckled softly.

“You’d best listen to him. Even the two of you wouldn’t stand a chance.”

She shifted her stance lightly. At once, it was obvious: no opening, no wasted motion.

“I’m better with my own body than I am with a mobile suit,” she said.

She wasn’t boasting. On the Moon, during the Ocean of Storms War, she had stormed the bridge of the battleship Sagittarius alone and subdued the Alliance crew in an instant.

“That isn’t my intent,” Zechs said, holding Elev back.

“But if you mean to use us as pilots, then choose our enemies wisely.”

Neither he nor Elev had any wish to face Treize’s Specials. The Alliance, however, that they would fight without hesitation.

Artemis smiled, alluring and unreadable.

“We can’t always have everything the way we want. But I’ll see what I can do. One day, you won’t need those suits at all.”

AC-187 SPRING

On the western edge of the Oceanus Tempest, the “Sea of Storms” on the lunar surface, stood Marius Hill. Once, it had been home to an Alliance-run resource mine and weapons plant.

But when those facilities were seized, General Million Riddelhart of the Alliance Space Forces ordered the lunar battleships Sagittarius and Centaurus to fire their main cannons. The site was obliterated, leaving nothing but ash and ruin.

It has remained a dead place ever since, with no sign of reconstruction.

At the beginning of this year, the Alliance officially designated the plant a total loss and abandoned it. But the rebels’ engineers had not given up.

Slipping past the eyes of surveillance satellites, they tunneled into the veins beneath the site and extracted great quantities of luna titanium, along with a rarer prize: unrefined GND ore.

That ore, they believed, was the remnant of a meteorite that had struck the lunar surface long ago, shot through with traces of unknown interstellar matter.

By synthesizing the GND ore with luna titanium in zero gravity, they achieved an alloy with a remarkable property: electrical neutrality. They named it Gundanium Alloy,

Genetic on Universal Neutrally Different Alloy, an “electrically neutral, hetero-structured, space-borne alloy.”

With this, the dream became possible: a mobile suit clad in Gundanium armor, armed and driven by its strength. A Gundam.

Zechs and Elev were transferred to Sinus Iridum in the northwest of the Mare Imbrium, the “Sea of Rains.”

Here, in a secret rebel facility, new mobile suits were under development. Zechs and Elev were to serve as test pilots, flying everything from modified Greif units to full prototypes.

It was Artemis’s idea, her sharpest use yet of the two captured aces.

The Sinus Iridum stretched wide and flat across the lunar plain, but the engineers had chosen the cliffs in the north to build their runways and test installations. On paper, this was reckless. The area lay directly under the path of Alliance surveillance satellites. Discovery should have been inevitable.

Yet the rebels shielded their work with a powerful ECM field and a camouflaged dome designed to blend into the lunar terrain. Unless one was looking directly at it, the facility would remain unseen.

Five scientists worked there: Jay Null, D.D., Sorcière, Henry Fia, and Wu Wanglong.

Their goal was nothing less than the completion of a Gundanium-alloy mobile suit. And for that, they demanded brutal trials of their pilots, simulations that blurred the line with actual combat.

Until now, those trials had claimed every test pilot: either killed outright, or left maimed for life. Progress had been agonizingly slow.

But with the arrival of Zechs and Elev, everything changed. Progress accelerated at once.

Their skill, honed as OZ Specials' finest, exposed the prototypes' flaws and drove the machines toward refinement.

The scientists marveled.

Elev in particular seemed touched by something divine. Once inside a cockpit, he could sense the machine as though it were a tailored suit, pinpointing imperfections with uncanny precision.

From the cockpit of the new prototype, Elev's voice erupted like a thunderclap.

"Professor Henry! There's a nasty vibration in the left arm actuator! And the energy gain won't ramp cleanly, first it sputters like a man coughing up blood, then it spikes! If that happens on launch, I'll trip over myself in front of the whole damn universe!!"

Henry only grinned as he answered over the comm.

"Understood, Test Subject One."

Neither Elev nor Zechs were ever addressed by name. To the engineers, they were nothing more than Test Pilot No. 1 and No. 2.

"I know you trust me most, but that unit's development is Sorcière's responsibility," Henry added, smirking.

The machine Elev was piloting would one day be christened Prometheus. It bristled with heavy armaments across its frame, and Sorcière was already planning to outfit it with a colossal, cross-shaped cannon as well. For now, its "face" was bare metal, its head camera nothing more than a Leo's stock lens.

By this time Sorcière had abandoned his penchant for cross-dressing. His only explanation was that he had "grown bored of it," and no one dared pry further.

He spoke now with his usual clipped disdain.

“You’re flying the work of Sorcière, genius scientist. This machine was never designed for the rabble. Don’t expect versatility. A few quirks should be nothing for your skills to compensate.”

“The hell’s the point of a test pilot then?!” Elev barked. “You can’t just throw garbage at me and say, ‘deal with it!’ I’ll burn through my lives faster than you can count!”

“All we require are the numbers,” Sorcière replied flatly. “And you’re mistaken about the premise. It isn’t man who pilots the machine, it is the machine that pilots man. That’s how I’ve designed it.”

It was mad science, pure and simple. Yet Gundanium alloy carried a kind of seductive power, a logic that made such lunacy seem plausible.

Neither Zechs nor Elev knew these prototypes were built from that alloy, and neither pressed for the truth. They simply obeyed, repeating test after brutal test with unflinching discipline.

This time, Zechs sat within Erkökönig, a quadrupedal design built for speed, engineered by D.D. In time, it would evolve into Mage.

Watching the telemetry, Wu Wanglong leaned toward D.D.

“Professor Diamond... Test Subject Two handles it with ease. Perhaps Erkökönig is already finished?”

“Not yet!” D.D. snapped, shaking his enormous, oddly coiffed head with violent vigor.

“Jay’s working on a transformable design! Still chasing his damned wyverns! If he insists, then so will I. I’ll make Erkökönig transform into the Demon King of the Underworld!”

His rivalry with Jay Null burned hotter than with any other.

And so the scientists spurred one another ever higher, each new design pushing beyond reason. Their competition, more than anything else, birthed mobile suits with absurdly advanced performance.

Now, with Zechs and Elev, their perfect, obedient test pilots, their ambitions were finally given wings.

At that time, Jay Null was attempting to crack the password lock on the ZERO System’s unit box.

If he could somehow reactivate it, he might reunite with the AI once known as Sam. If that program could be built into a prototype mobile suit, it would grant the same abilities once possessed by the Wyvern piloted by Six Merquise, Katarina Peacecraft, the Lightning Queen.

It was only after laying eyes on the unit box that Jay had conceived the idea of giving his latest design a full flight mode.

Zechs had briefly entrusted the unit to him. Jay had copied the internal data, then returned it at once. Now, he could attempt to break the code from his own terminal.

“I’ll bring it back... no matter what. For Heero. For Thomas. It’s the only atonement I can offer.”

Thomas Carrant, who had developed the program, and the leader Heero Yuy had both been Jay’s friends in their student days. Both had died with their ideals unfinished.

“And you too, Lightning Queen... I raise this toast to your eyes.”

Katarina Peacecraft, his unreachable Madonna. She, too, was gone from the world. For Jay, Sam itself had become a relic of youth. His attachment to ZERO was unlike that of any other scientist.

Yet even his brilliance could not break the password.

“I’m the one who built this lock in the first place!”

Seventeen years earlier, in AC-170, when the cruiser Sherwood was shot down, Jay could have restored both Sam and the ZERO System if he had moved at once.

But fate had intervened.

At that exact time, Quinze, chasing colonial independence, had unearthed the “Permanent Peace Program”, the P.P.P., and sought to unleash it into the Alliance.

Heero and his nephew Ein had discovered it and turned to Jay. They begged him to seal the program away.

To do so, Jay used ZERO itself, forging a self-evolving security matrix to cage the P.P.P. entirely. But in the process, he locked ZERO as well.

Even now, he could not fathom why he had made the system’s defenses so absolute.

At present, within the V08744 colony, he had succeeded in separating the P.P.P. from ZERO inside the quantum computer they had once shared. All that remained was to wake ZERO alone.

“Damn it all! In the end, I’ll have to beg that son of Marticus!”

The program was ironclad, coded so only the bloodline that had sworn itself to peace could unlock it.

And the security system, ceaselessly evolving, had long since surpassed the man who built it.

“Marticus, I despise you!” Jay roared. “You failed to protect anything, your beloved, your kingdom, even your so-called peace!”

His rage boiled over. He slammed his prosthetic left hand against the computer’s keyboard, metal ringing against plastic.

*

That day, Zechs Merquise piloted Erbkönig along the outer rim of Sinus Iridum.

From the northern horizon the Earth rose, blue and magnificent. Overhead, the sun burned nearly at zenith.

At Cape Heracleides, the inlet's edge, he came upon an Alliance detachment: a Chimera squad of twenty Leos, their commander flying the newest Type V Nemea.

The unit had pitched camp in the vast desert, four machines set to perimeter watch while the rest rested.

Erlkönig's stealth systems were flawless. Zechs crouched in a crater known as Bianchini, intercepting their chatter. From their comms, it seemed this exercise had brought them far afield into the Bay.

"Captain, we've detected a large-scale heat signature, one hundred and fifty clicks north."

Static crackled, but the report was clear.

"Could be a rebel forward base."

Zechs froze. They had found it.

The Nemea's captain used a secure line, his voice unreadable. But his XO answered:

"Not beyond our reach, but if it is a forward base, one squad won't be enough."

"Recommend we send scouts to confirm and then report to HQ."

If they moved, the base would be exposed.

Zechs decided at once. If he stayed hidden, the Alliance would learn everything. He hailed D.D., Erlkönig's handler.

"Enemy contact. Commencing attack."

"Wait, Test Subject 2! Erlkönig isn't fitted with missiles, the cannons are only for show!"

"I have white fangs!" Zechs barked back.

And Erlkönig burst from Bianchini.

The Chimera squad scattered in panic. They could not see their assailant. The Leo's optics left blind zones beneath their feet, and its torso-aiming lagged too far behind Erlkönig's low, blistering speed.

Within moments, ten machines were down, ripped open at their rear generators, torn apart by Erlkönig's gleaming fangs.

Zechs knew every weakness of the Leo.

The remaining ten opened fire with mid-range cannons. Beams cut across the sand, but Erlkönig threaded the flashes and lunged straight into their formation.

At close quarters, it was over. He sank his fangs into the auto-balancers beneath each unit's arms, one after another, crippling them.

In minutes, the Chimera squad was annihilated.

Bathed in sunlight, Erlkönig's four-legged silhouette stretched long across the desert, like a hound standing proud on the sand.

In the cockpit, Zechs steadied his breath. The battlefield had fallen silent.

And then, faintly, he heard it: the wash of waves.

“The Sinus Iridum has no surf...”

He scanned the endless desert.

A memory surged. Ein’s silver-headed staff, carved with a dog’s face. His words: You and I have met. There is such a strange, fated causality to the universe.

Why remember that now?

On his monitor, a figure shimmered against the desert. At first he thought it a mirage, the figure wore no suit, and a dog trotted at its side.

The sealed doors of memory opened.

He had seen this before.

Once, as a child, he had walked the coast of the Sanc Kingdom bay. It was early morning, the sand cold beneath his small feet. Beside him strode his father, hair and beard streaming in the sea wind, while the dog, Spade, bounded ahead.

He stumbled in the sand, chasing to keep up. Spade turned, barked sharply, “Hurry up!” it almost seemed to say, then licked his face with sudden affection, before gazing upward at his father with loyal eyes.

“Come then, Fourth,” his father said.

For a moment, the boy thought he meant him. He knew nothing yet of dynasties, of lineages.

“Not you, Milliardo. Spade,” his father laughed. “This is the fourth, since the first. The others... all dead.”

“So sad...”

“Everything that lives dies. No need for pity.”

“But still...”

“You and I, too, will perish. The question is: in the brief span we’re given, what will we do?”

“What should I do?” the boy asked.

His father gave no creed of peace, no royal burden.

“That, you decide for yourself.”

That very afternoon, in AC-182, the Sanc Kingdom fell. The Alliance stormed the capital in a single day. Milliardo Peacecraft was six years old.

Back in the cockpit, the monitor showed no mirage. A figure truly stood there, this time clad in an OZ-issue suit, without a dog. The footprints led back to the waiting Nemea, its hatch open.

Zechs zoomed in.

An OZ soldier, as expected. Who else would be given a Leo Type V?
White noise hissed in his helmet, like surf again. Between the static, a girl's voice broke through.

"The OZ line..." he realized. A short-range channel immune to jamming. He tuned it.

"Zechs... is it you?"

His lips curved in a faint smile. The voice, familiar, achingly so.

"How did you know?"

"I could never forget the way you fight."

Lucrezia Noin.

On the horizon, she came running, kicking up sand in slow arcs under lunar gravity, bounding toward him.

Zechs whispered, "Lucrezia... are you well?"

On his monitor, her face filled the screen, eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Yes, Zechs... it's been one hundred and eighty-two days."

Zechs File.1
Part.02

—Pandora's Box Remains Unopened—

From the moon, the Earth loomed vast, four times the size the lunar disc appears when gazed at from Earth. Its pale curve, a half-lit sphere suspended against the void, dominated the horizon. Toward that sublime target, Zechs and Lucrezia piloted their machines, the Erbkönig and the Nemea, descending across the bleak regolith en route to the mobile suit development base hidden in Sinus Iridum.

They were headed there to decide Lucrezia's fate.

Would she become a prisoner of the rebels?

Would she, like Zechs, be pressed into service as a test pilot?

There was no option of simply freeing her here and letting her return to the Alliance Space Forces' base.

"Lucrezia, you've been entrusted with a command unit already. That is no small thing," Zechs' voice broke the silence first.

Her reply drifted in from the cockpit speaker, her voice tinged with melancholy.

"It's just for show... I'm nothing more than a mannequin, dressed up in the newest prototype."

A beat.

"An empty woman with nothing inside."

"I... see," Zechs said, unable to find anything more.

Yes, he thought. It was true. Weapons required advertisement as much as they did function. OZ profited from development and sale; it was inevitable someone like her would be made the face of their campaigns. Her image, her smile, another kind of weapon.

Yet the face displayed upon his monitor was not triumphant, but etched with resignation. Not sorrow, exactly, but something deeper: the weary acceptance of a fate already sealed. The "mannequin" may have been the very outcome of her wish to turn her back on war. Zechs clung to that interpretation, if only to make sense of her despair.

Silence lengthened, broken only by the brilliance of Earth itself. Against the black void, the planet glowed with sublime radiance. Marble-white clouds swirled slowly across the ocean's surface in mesmerizing patterns of motion.

Her voice returned, hushed with awe.

"It's beautiful..." she murmured. "Part of me wonders if we could just keep going, straight back to Earth."

Zechs' reply was low, solemn.

"Earth is beautiful, but its beauty can only truly be grasped from space."

That, he believed, was why those who lived in space loved Earth more than the people who lived upon it.

Colony citizens despised the planet's inhabitants, especially the United Earth Sphere Alliance, for degrading that miraculous environment. In truth, anyone who waged war, whatever their allegiance, was the object of bottomless hatred.

With those thoughts in his heart, Zechs went on.

"War destroys everything, structures, nature, the human spirit. It should never happen. We'd be better off without weapons at all."

"But isn't there no real way to abolish war at its root?" she asked.

"There is one. Or so it's said."

He prefaced it that way before speaking of the "Pandora's Box," the ZERO System, entrusted to him. A device that gathered all information to predict the future; a device he would eventually have to hand over to Treize.

He blurred over the details involving Ein Yuy and the Peacecrafts but added that only he could unlock its password.

Lucrezia seemed genuinely surprised at the name.

"There are rebels like that? Why would you give such a system to Treize, your enemy instructor?"

The question was as piercing as it was inevitable.

"Because," Zechs answered at last, voice tight with conviction, "he alone might guide not just Alliance or rebels, but all humanity of the Earth Sphere toward peace."

"That's a fine intention," she said. "But if that's the case, shouldn't he free you now instead of forcing you to serve as a test pilot?"

"That's—"

The same as you, he was about to say, *the result of what I wished for myself,* when an urgent transmission from Jay Null cut in.

"The Alliance Space Forces have moved. They're about to carpet-bomb Sinus Iridum."

"They're acting faster than I expected," Zechs replied.

Only hours ago he had crippled a squadron of Leos.

"Probably just one of their lucky hunches hitting the mark again," Jay snorted.

He couldn't take that at face value. Surely there were competent people in the Alliance, someone might have pieced together the base's location from the smallest clue. A vague sense of dread gnawed at Zechs' chest.

Unfazed, Jay continued.

"We're abandoning this base and retreating to the L-1 colonies for now. There's another facility under Catalina on the Moon. We'll lay low there until things settle."

"Catalina? The crater? That's awfully close to Mare Tranquillitatis."

"Ever heard the saying 'the darkest place is under the lighthouse'?" Jay chuckled.

"But still..."

Zechs felt a tightening urgency at an unreadable future. He tried to think of a move he could make now but found none.

"Do we have no means of striking back? This is my responsibility."

"There's a mobile suit transport ship already on its way to you. Don't even think about trying an interception! Just bring back the new test unit and the new Leo, the Nemea!"

With that, Jay cut the transmission unilaterally.

Zechs spotted points of light approaching from the direction ahead.

That must be the transport ship Jay had mentioned.

Their window was closing fast.

"Lucrezia..." he called as he slotted the unit box into the lower console of his cockpit.

"There's something I need you to do."

"What could I possibly do now?" she answered wearily. "I can't imagine myself capable of anything."

"I'm going to unlock the password. I want you to take this activation unit back to Earth and give it to Instructor Treize."

Her refusal was instant, sharp as a blade.

"I refuse. Empty as I may be, I will not become Pandora herself."

Her voice trembled now with something beyond resignation, something fragile, pained. Perhaps she saw in Pandora not merely tragedy, but folly: a woman remembered only for the calamity she unleashed.

And then, in a whisper so faint it seemed meant for no one but herself, she bared the truth of her heart.

"I can't bear to part from you again, Zechs. Not now that we've finally found each other again..."

*

Warrant Officer Cordelia Fitzgerald had just graduated from the officer's academy when she was posted to the Alliance Space Forces base at Mare Tranquillitatis on the Moon. A red-haired girl of fresh youth, she possessed a luminous, refined beauty that drew the

affectionate nickname “maiden.” Around the base she was treated like a mascot, coddled for her charm.

But Cordelia resented both the sobriquet and the indulgent treatment.

“I am a lady,” she would say, asserting her dignity with a touch of pride.

And true to her word, she pressed her talents into service from the first days of her posting, taking initiative in every task, carrying out practical duties without hesitation.

Her performance was so consistently excellent that her standing within the base rose at an astonishing pace. Within less than a month, the dainty aura of a sheltered girl had vanished; in its place stood a sharp, competent officer.

To reinforce that image, she donned a pair of silver-rimmed glasses, an intentional performance of cold precision.

Her intellect went far beyond her academy record, graduating at the top of her class on an accelerated course was proof enough, yet still insufficient to capture her true brilliance. When Cordelia sat at the operator’s console, her reports were so meticulous and incisive, one might think she held the entire lunar theater in her grasp.

If a superior hesitated in judgment, she would guide them with subtle prompts; if they neared a wrong decision, she provided hints so deftly that the officer believed the correction was their own idea. Beyond her technical gifts, she buoyed morale across the base, becoming its unofficial mood-maker.

The recent bombing of the Sinus Iridum had been her proposal. It was no lucky guess but the product of calm, rational analysis. She had run hundreds of simulations on why a Leo squadron might be attacked by an unidentified mobile suit during lunar maneuvers. Every line of reasoning pointed to one conclusion: a rebel base in the vicinity.

Her genius was especially evident in how she deliberately leaked word of the planned carpet bombing to the rebels. If nothing stirred in the area, the raid would be called off. But as she predicted, traces of small craft fleeing the lunar surface were soon detected. Too few for a full base evacuation, but there could always be a larger transport with stealth capabilities.

The bombing went ahead, and in the northwestern Mare Imbrium the ruins of experimental facilities, almost certainly a development base, were uncovered. That the rebels’ Gundanium mobile suit program was delayed can be laid, in no small part, at the feet of a front-line operator named Cordelia.

Years later she would encounter Treize Khushrenada and join the OZ Specials. Upon their first meeting, Treize remarked, “Your name is far too elegant. It sounds as though it stepped out of a Montgomery novel.”

He was referring to Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, whose heroine, Anne Shirley, disliked her plain name and dreamed of being called "Lady Cordelia Fitzgerald."

Treize continued, "I understand better than anyone that you are a lady. But I think you'd be truest to yourself not as Cordelia, but as Une."

The name, echoing Anne yet uniquely hers, delighted her. She gladly set aside the ornate Cordelia for the simple Une. The woman would become "Colonel Lady Une," later to serve as Treize's brilliant aide, OZ's indispensable adjutant.

AC-187 APRIL 7

The L-1 Colony medical complex, known simply as the Medical Center, stood as the pinnacle of healthcare in the Earth Sphere. Here, the most advanced technology was concentrated. This was where the riddle of childbirth in space had been solved, and where the first vaccine against the dreaded "colony virus" had been created.

Odin Lowe and his son, Junior, were waiting their turn in a special isolation lounge. For several days the boy had been plagued by dizziness and a mild fever. At first Junior dismissed it, "It's nothing, I can deal with it," but Odin had been firm, "Kids don't get to choose." Neither of them had ever received the vaccine; there was always the chance this was the "colony flu."

Since escaping from the fortress Barge, father and son had drifted from colony to colony, living off the jobs Odin took. In half a year, even with a child in tow, the number of men he had killed could not be counted on one hand. Among his targets were government officials of the United Earth Sphere Alliance, former rebel soldiers, and mafia bosses who had gone to ground in the underworld. Odin's trade had no ideology, no banner, he would kill for anyone who paid, sparing only women and children.

He had tried to hide this bloody livelihood from his boy, but Junior had seen through it almost immediately.

"How did you know?" Odin once asked.

The boy, who had already witnessed more than his share of death, answered quietly.

"You cry out in your sleep."

"That's ridiculous."

"I was lying."

"Don't mock me. And stop calling me 'you.' I'm your father."

"I refuse. To call someone like you 'Dad,' that would be the greatest misfortune of all."

A freelance sniper traveling with a child was a near impossibility.

"Then at least *pretend*. I provide you food, clothes, a roof over your head, that's worth some concession, isn't it?"

"Then abandon me. I don't care."

Odin despaired at a son who never opened his heart.

"What will it take for you to accept my terms?"

"Teach me how to survive."

Junior's eyes were deadly serious.

"That's the condition for our contract."

Odin sighed and nodded.

"Fine. Contract accepted. I'll hammer every skill I have into you."

"But I'll never raise you to be a killer," he vowed silently.

It was also a promise, in his heart, to Aoi Clarke, now surely watching from heaven.

They waited in silence until Junior, uncharacteristically, spoke first.

"The smell of disinfectant makes me sick. Why did you really come here?"

"For your treatment, obviously."

"The real reason."

Odin gave a crooked smile.

"Sharp brat," he muttered, then spoke plainly. "Three reasons. First, I had a job, same as always. Second, I came to get rid of you."

"That's nothing new either."

Odin chuckled. "You could put it that way."

Before he could say more, a bright female voice cut in.

"Kept you waiting, didn't I?"

They turned to see a middle-aged woman in a white coat, about Odin's own age. The nameplate on her chest read Doctor Katherine Po.

"Katherine..." Odin said.

"It's been a while, Odin. Still living the dangerous life, I see," she replied.

"More or less."

"You're not Aoi, but maybe it's time you considered retiring."

Odin's voice grew heavy.

"Aoi's dead."

Katherine's composure cracked.

"What? I heard she remarried."

"Not remarried, married, for the first time. And she never left the work. Even that wedding was part of a mission."

“When?”

“Six months ago. Things went bad at Fortress Barge.”

“...”

“Her husband, Chief Engineer Seis Clarke, died that same day.”

Katherine’s eyes widened suddenly. She turned to the boy.

“Then this child... is Aoi’s?”

“Yes.”

“He has her eyes.”

Junior turned away, scowling, refusing her gaze.

“So, you’ve taken him in?” she asked.

“Only by circumstance,” Odin murmured, almost apologetic. Then, lower still, “Katherine... for old time’s sake, I need your help.”

She lowered her voice too.

“I only ever introduced the client. Aoi disbanded the team years ago. Don’t drag me into your mess.”

“It’s nothing major. Just keep the boy here for a while. This next job can’t be done with a kid around.”

“That much, maybe.”

Junior bristled.

“So, I don’t even get a choice?”

“This is part of the contract.”

At that, Junior fell silent.

“You’ll be admitted here as a colony flu patient,” Odin told him. “This isn’t coercion, it’s your assignment.”

“Understood.”

In this quarantine ward was Hundert Khushrenada. Not far away, in the mental health wing, Angelina endured a long convalescence for her broken mind. And Vingt Khushrenada, de facto leader of OZ, came often to visit his mother.

None of them knew it yet, but fate was guiding them toward an encounter with the boy who, in time, would take the name Heero Yuy.

Junior pressed one last time.

“You said three reasons. What’s the third?”

“Ah, yes. The third is... a grave visit.”

“A grave visit?”

Katherine’s eyes softened with remembrance.

“Of course. Today marks twelve years, since Heero Yuy was assassinated.”

*

Cordelia felt a mounting panic.

It had been decided to decommission the dilapidated colony G-03554 in the L-5 colony cluster. All residents had been evacuated and salvageable materials recovered. But an accident had occurred while they were towing it out to the graveyard orbit beyond Earth, the thrust units fitted to the colony had proved underpowered. After detaching from the Lagrange point, the colony had failed to escape; the combined pull of Earth and Moon had dragged it back into a precarious trajectory.

If nothing was done, it could fall to either the Moon or the Earth. The odds were even, fifty percent either way. A lunar impact would fling an immense cloud of orbital debris into the vicinity and wreak secondary havoc on the neighboring L-1 and L-2 colonies. If it fell to Earth, the scale of the catastrophe would be incalculable.

Cordelia had received that report from the observation team only yesterday.

“A sabotage by the colonists...?” she had first suspected, perhaps vengeance aimed at Earth on the anniversary of leader Heero Yuy’s death. In fact, it was different: a subcontractor hired by the Alliance had installed shoddy thrusters. The L-5 colonies had been plagued by mass-produced defects since their development; their usable lifespans were far shorter than ordinary colonies. Failures in lifelines had rendered living spaces uninhabitable; G-03554’s retirement had been decided for that reason.

Cordelia ran precise orbital calculations and worked out options for interception or re-vectoring. The most effective measure would be to annihilate G-03554 outright with the mobile fortress Barge’s own cannon. If Barge could be accelerated to high speed and lie in wait on the colony’s descent corridor, it could obliterate the structure with minimal resultant debris. There would be no need to divert lunar base forces.

She immediately proposed that plan to her superior. He refused on jurisdictional grounds.

“We exist to fight the rebels,” he said.

Cordelia removed her silver-rimmed glasses and, eyes glistening, appealed.

“I was told the Alliance’s purpose was to protect the safety of the Earth Sphere... is that not so?”

“The high command will not authorize use of Barge at this stage. If it becomes certain the colony will fall to Earth, they might act, but then it will be too late.”

Cordelia felt a surge of impatience.

“All right, I’ll at least put in the request to Barge. But the fortress’s commander, Captain Dotzent, is notoriously stubborn.”

Her superior’s tone made plain his suggestion: give up.

She put her glasses back on.

“If that’s how it must be, then so be it.”

The bloated United Earth Sphere Alliance was suffering institutional terminal symptoms. It could respond quickly to localized crises, but when faced with a far-reaching catastrophe its coordination collapsed. Sectarian guardrails within departments crippled action. Cordelia devised a desperate plan.

“If the Alliance won’t do what’s necessary, then the rebels must be given the opportunity.”

She would leak the colony drop data to the rebels. The question was, did they have the capability?

*

Katherine and Odin stood in quiet prayer before the preserved body of Heero Yuy, sealed in a chamber of special glass. Heero lay in the fifth basement of the L-1 Colony Medical Center. On the day Heero had been assassinated in Emerald City, C-0-1422, Ein and others had hauled the body from the subterranean meeting hall, Ein, who smelled the gunpowder before the bomb detonated, had tried to save at least the corpse. He had arrived moments too late and suffered grievous burns, losing his right eye and left leg.

They knew revival was impossible, but the L-1 medical staff, clinging to one small hope, had kept Heero’s body from decomposing. Of course the Alliance government had been kept in the dark; only a handful within the rebels knew.

“A glass coffin... Hmph. Like Snow White, isn’t it?” Odin said, and at that strange footstep behind him he opened his eyes to see Jay Null approach, his left arm and both legs replaced with prosthetics.

“Was it ironic to meet you here?” Jay asked.

“Hmm? About what?” Odin kept his voice even. Jay laughed as if he could read him.

“Don’t worry. I hold you no grudge... so, you’ll take our job, won’t you?”

"If Katherine hadn't intervened, I would have turned you down," Odin replied.

Jay bowed a mock salute. "Well, well. Much obliged, Kathy—"

"Please, Dr. Null," Katherine cut in. With a serious look she said, "I'm sorry the Spare research is taking so long."

"No need to rush. Your regenerative medicine results were top-class; you'll succeed soon," Jay said. Turning his back, he addressed Odin, "There's a shuttle waiting at Port 07 in an hour. Take it to the Catalina crater on the Moon. Target details will be given upon arrival."

"Wait. What mobile suit am I taking? A Leo, an Aries?" Odin asked.

"A white unit called the 'Proto Zero.' The shuttle carries the frame and weapons. Personally, I call it 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.'" Jay laughed as he walked off.

"I've been on the job a long time, but never been told to sniper from a mobile suit," Odin said.

"You can fly it?" Katherine asked.

"I can manage." Then Odin turned back to Katherine. "This Spare, that's the clone project, right?"

"Yes. It's funded handsomely by some foundation, but how many years it will take, who knows."

Odin glanced up at the figure preserved in glass.

"Are you trying to bring Heero Yuy back?"

"You can't resurrect the dead," Katherine told him.

"Then who?"

"The test subject number two, Zechs Merquis."

"Who's that?"

"Beats me," Katherine shrugged. "That's what was written on the DNA sample they handed us. Dr. Null says there's a device with a password that absolutely won't unlock. That person might hold the key."

"So, the plan is to make a clone."

"Something like that..."

*

Jay Null approached the bulk of a Sweeper Group vessel, one of the massive civilian ships tasked with orbital debris clearance, currently docked at the spaceport. In truth it was only a disguise, the ship was rigged as a mobile suit transport.

D.D. was there to meet him.

"The man who killed the legend, Sniper Lowe... You really trust him with this?"

“He’s the best sniper in the Earth Sphere,” Jay replied. “If we can image-trace his technique, Snow White will become the ultimate sniper mobile suit.”

“Maybe so. But why rely on the one who shot Heero Yuy?”

“Because only he can hone accuracy down to fractions of a decimal point. To perfect the Buster Rifle and the Messer Zwerg, we need that man’s skill.”

“Hmph. It says something when both the one who hires and the one who accepts are out of their minds.”

Together they boarded. The Sweepers’ vessel cast off, leaving L-1 Colony behind.

Inside, Jay noticed the usual cadre of technicians was missing a familiar face.

“Hm? Where’s Wanglong?”

“Bearing ten o’clock, heading toward L-5. Said an old friend called for him.”

“An old friend? Long Shirin?”

D.D. shook his head.

“No, the son. Name’s Long Liao Ya. And the bastard made off with my masterpiece, the Erlkönig, without permission.”

“There’s still the Zi-Long at L-5, isn’t there?”

“That prototype Tallgeese isn’t enough, apparently.”

“What sort of firefight are they planning to stir up?”

“They got word the abandoned colony at L-5 is on course to fall to the Moon. Wanglong and his people intend to adjust its trajectory.”

Even Professor Henry, usually mild, spoke with rare urgency.

“How can they alter a colony’s orbit with mobile suits?”

Jay didn’t bother asking. His thoughts leapt ahead.

“They mean to destroy it from the inside,” he concluded, and smiled darkly to himself.

*
*
*

Odin sat aboard the shuttle, flipping through the Proto Zero’s operation manual. One section in particular caught his attention: the ZERO System.

“Why is this page blank?” he muttered.

Neither the final schematics nor the circuit diagrams explained it. That entire section was black-boxed. From the density of the circuitry, it was clearly an advanced computer system, but its exact function was opaque.

“Guess I’ll just have to fly it myself,” he said, rising and making for the Proto Zero’s cockpit in the shuttle’s hangar bay.

*

By then, Long Liao Ya and Wanglong had already infiltrated Colony G-03554.

The derelict was built in three tiers, its ring lined with enormous mirrors and vast solar arrays. Phase one of their plan was to cripple the colony’s skeletal supports from within. The Erbkönig and Zi-Long proved their worth, tearing through girders with precision.

The Long clan of martial artists had trained here until the colony’s abandonment. Its thin air and unstable gravity had made it an ideal crucible. They had not sabotaged the thrusters, nor sought to interfere with decommissioning, but they could not ignore the danger their home sector’s negligence now posed to Earth and the colonies. Their pride as martial artists would not allow it.

The operation shifted to its second phase.

Wanglong entered the control center and began purging detachable structures one after another. Long Liao Ya, piloting the Zi-Long, launched outside to dismantle the heavy rotating axle. Inside the colony, the Erbkönig remained at work, this time piloted by Long Liao Ya’s twin daughters, Hu Die and Meilan, who continued tearing down supports.

But even as they worked, the colony drew ever closer to the Moon.

“It’s time. Get the girls out,” Wanglong said grimly. “The odds of lunar impact have risen above seventy-five percent. I’ve steered it toward the uninhabited south pole. A new crater will scar the surface, but casualties will be minimal.”

“What of the debris?” Long Liao Ya asked in a voice as cold as any warrior’s steel. “Which colony will it endanger, L-1 or L-2?”

“Simulations show nearly two hundred fragments falling toward L-1,” Wanglong admitted.

“Then nothing remains but to leave it to fate...”

“L-1’s Lagrange Point is rimmed with a wide buffer net in case of disaster. It won’t be a cataclysm. We’ll have to accept that much.”

Long Liao Ya nodded. He ordered his daughters to retreat. Together the group evacuated aboard their transport, mobile suits in tow.

When the Erbkönig, carrying Hu Die and Meilan, returned, the hangar already held the prototype Tallgeese Zi-Long, undergoing automated maintenance.

The twins stripped off their astro-suits and climbed to the cockpit deck. A plaintive sound greeted them, the mellow strains of a two-stringed erhu.

The melody evoked the slow grandeur of a river in flood. The player was their father, Long Liao Ya, martial warrior, but also a lover of classical music. His performance seemed to soothe the tempest within his own spirit.

Hu Die and Meilan adored him for this. They lingered in silence, letting the music wash over them.

The transport turned its bow from G-03554 and sped back toward the L-5 cluster.

*

On the Moon, the Alliance Space Forces base at Mare Tranquillitatis was in chaos, thrown into panic by the onrushing hulk of Colony G-03554.

General Clarence, the base's commanding officer, sent an emergency transmission to Fortress Barge.

"We need reinforcements immediately! Fire the Barge Cannon on Colony G-03554! According to our simulations, if the derelict impacts at the lunar south pole, it will fragment into over a thousand pieces of debris. Those fragments will blanket the skies above the Moon."

The general stressed that while the direct damage might be minimal, a sheet of debris orbiting the Moon would cripple communications, scramble defenses, and paralyze the base entirely. If the rebels launched a general assault at such a moment, the base would be defenseless.

Captain Dotzent, commander of Fortress Barge, a man notorious for his obstinacy, listened, then gave his assent.

"I'll consider this a favor owed, General Clarence."

"Of course. You have my gratitude."

Clarence exhaled in relief. But his relief would prove fatally premature.

At that moment, Fortress Barge was on the Moon's far side. Even at full burn, to strike the falling colony they would have to arc fire over the cratered horizon, a nearly impossible shot.

When Cordelia heard this from her superior, her blood ran cold.

"You expect to hit a target from that hardpoint?"

The destructive power was not in doubt. But if they missed, if the shot only glanced, the colony would not be destroyed outright. Its fall would simply splinter, altering trajectories and magnifying disaster. She cursed

the incompetence of the Alliance high command, and her own powerlessness to change it.

*

The Barge Cannon fired minutes later. Its blazing lance tore through the void and struck G-03554. But the shot only grazed the mirror-ring truss around the colony's circumference. The impact jarred the weakened structure, already gutted by internal sabotage, and ripped it apart. The colony broke into three titanic sections, each flung on its own path.

One, the midsection residential block, began drifting toward the L-1 cluster.

Another, the lower agricultural sector, fell toward the L-2 cluster, toward colonies without any protective debris nets. A collision there could kill tens of thousands.

The third, the upper industrial zone, was caught in Earth's pull and began plummeting homeward. A mass that size, at that acceleration, an impact could erase half a continent.

The painstaking efforts of Wanglong and Liao Ya had backfired disastrously.

*

"The Alliance has botched it..." Jay clicked his tongue.

Behind him, Sorcière approached with news.

"The test subjects are requesting permission to sortie with the prototypes, Prometheus, Scheherazade, and the conscripted Nemea."

"What?" Jay arched an eyebrow.

"They say they want to adjust the falling colony's orbit."

A wry smile touched his lips.

"Ha... we've gathered a collection of eccentrics, haven't we?"

"Shall I authorize it?"

"Let them do as they please..."

In Jay's mind rose the memory of Katrina Peacecraft, flying her Wyvern to save the Sanc Kingdom.

"Blood will tell, after all," he murmured.

*

In the belly hangar of the Sweepers' ship, three mobile suits stood poised for launch.

Nemea: piloted by Test Subject No. 2, Zechs Merquise

Prometheus: piloted by Test Subject No. 1, Eleve Onegell

Scheherazade: piloted by Test Subject No. 3, Lucrezia Noin

Each felt a fierce pride at facing down this unprecedented crisis.

Elev, inspecting the massive cruciform heavy cannon just completed, grinned.

"Don't let me down, new toy... The target's big, but if I miss, I'll never live it down."

Lucrezia, attuning herself to the subtle handling of Scheherazade, whispered as though to a partner.

"This machine's response... it suits me. Like a silk dress, delicate and precise. Let's do this together, Scheherazade."

And Zechs, seated in the familiar cockpit of a Leo-type, spoke to himself with quiet resolve.

"I know this is reckless. But someone must act. We cannot allow this beautiful cosmos to be defiled."

The three suits launched, arcing out into the void. Ahead of them loomed the sundered bulk of G-03554, splitting into three colossal fragments. Tracing their separate courses, the trio broke formation and streaked toward their respective targets.

*

Jay opened a channel to Odin, already in transit. To his surprise, the man had strapped himself into Proto Zero's cockpit.

"Sniper Lowe. Can the mission parameters be changed?"

"For a fee."

The mercenary's voice came back light, almost flippant. Jay scowled.

"Don't be coy. I haven't even told you the original target."

"Ah, that's true."

The man was playing dumb.

"So, what's the job now?"

"At first, I was going to have you fire on the lunar base. But the situation's changed..."

"Doesn't bother me. What's the target?"

"Debris. The derelict's splintered and is shedding parts everywhere. Every last fragment in that cloud is yours to shoot."

"Understood."

Odin accepted without hesitation. The debris count was staggering. Was he ignorant, or simply fearless?

"One thing, Dr. Null..."

"Don't call me that! I never instructed the likes of you!"

"Call it what you like. Question is, those Messer Zwerg attachments for the Buster Rifle. There are three, correct? Can I use them all? Ein, Zwei, Drei... Drei Zwerg, you could say."

"Field judgment is yours."

"That's how I like it."

A pause, then the sniper's voice, more serious:

"One more thing. The ZERO System, it looks tied into the firing sequence. What is it?"

Jay severed the link.

That the man had noticed the unfinished circuitry proved he was no ordinary mercenary. To say more would be dangerous.

If the ZERO System had been active already, this crisis might have been contained before it ever spiraled so far out of control.

—Pandora's Box Remains Unopened—

Elev's Prometheus barreled toward the abandoned colony's lower agricultural sector.

Shattered by the Barge's cannon strike, the debris now spun wildly toward the L-2 cluster.

The colony remnant, donut-shaped, a "Torus type", was not rolling like a wheel but tumbling like a coin flicked across a table, spinning on its axis in dizzying rotation. To approach at all, Elev had to match that spin precisely.

Accelerating in a widening spiral, Prometheus finally caught the rhythm and closed in on the colony's axial summit, the only place where the rotation slackened enough to allow a landing.

As long as he kept his eyes locked on the wall before him, he could manage. But the instant he glanced aside, Moon, Earth, and Sun flickered past in a mad kaleidoscope.

"If I can bleed off this spin, I can change the fall trajectory..."

But even as he said it to himself, Elev knew, it would not be that simple.

Through the dual cameras of Prometheus, the colony's interior came into focus.

"Tch... focus is mushy. Why in hell did they swap to a dual-eye?"

The head camera had been reworked from Leo stock into a two-eyed system, reshaping the face to resemble a human visage. It was a tweak pushed by Jay Null, who had argued that enhancing Proto Zero's sniping required new optical systems.

When Sorcière, the tech responsible, had done the modification, Elev had asked her directly:

"Prometheus isn't built for sniping. Why give it that ability?"

"Of course it's not," she had replied. "Its role is annihilation, wide-area destruction."

"Then why the change?"

"Because appearances matter. Intimidation matters."

No further justification. And yet the other engineers, swept up in her reasoning, had followed suit.

From then on, early Gundanium mobile suits all seemed to carry dual eyes, as though it were a new standard.

Inside the colony was pitch black. With power long severed, the vast interior lay in darkness. Once, giant reflectors had funneled sunlight through the broad skylights, but with those mirrors torn away, there was no hope of illumination.

Elev fired a flare. A green burst spread from the axis. By its light he saw the central rotation was off-kilter, pseudo-gravity uneven, centrifugal force unstable.

"No way we can infiltrate," he muttered.

The so-called agricultural block was stripped bare. No soil, no fertilizer remained, only inert rubble, concrete, and metal shards flung outward by centrifugal force. Bundles of wiring and severed pipes twisted among them in a deadly vortex. It was like peering into a blender on full spin.

Elev stripped Prometheus of its spare ammunition and stacked it against a section of the outer wall. Detonated at the right moment, the blast could slow the spin and even kick the colony back out toward the graveyard orbit. Calculations suggested it might even be blown clear of the Earth Sphere.

The challenge lay in timing: where, and at what instant, to fire the cruciform heavy cannon. Fire too close, and he'd be caught in the blast. Pull back too far, and hitting the ammunition against a wall spinning at such speed would be nearly impossible.

He settled on a plan: fire a homing missile first to catch the colony's leading edge, shave its spin, then wheel clear and loose a second missile into the ammo cache.

"Prometheus can pull this off," he said. "But what of Lucrezia, and Zechs...?"

*

Lucrezia's Scheherazade closed on the colony's midsection, the residential block now drifting toward L-1. Smaller and lighter than the others, it rotated swiftly but steadily, clocklike.

Before its bulk, Lucrezia drew the twin shotels mounted on her mobile suit's back. Half-moon blades, heated red-hot, they became heat shotels, weapons of terrifying cutting power.

She adored the machine's responsiveness.

It was thanks to the newly engineered Zero Frame structure, a revolutionary design that allowed the inner frame to drive motion independently.

Older mobile suits had relied on armor load-bearing to transmit power, introducing lag between pilot input and machine response. With Gundanium, however, frames could remain both strong and light, shifting all articulation to the skeleton itself. The result was a body of perfect precision and speed.

"The first time I've felt as though I've been given a heart," she whispered.

Born on Mars, she had fled with her mother to Earth. Since then, nothing had filled the emptiness inside. After her mother's death she had searched for purpose, even enlisting in the OZ Specials, but found no affirmation there.

But here...

"With this machine, I move by my will alone."

The fetters around her spirit fell away.

She despised war, that was why she had been hesitant, even passive, as an OZ pilot. But now it was different. Here was a chance to wield a mobile suit not for killing, but to save lives. That thought filled her with resolve. She saw herself in Scheherazade, unfinished, imperfect, but striving.

"A machine as incomplete as I am... just right."

The suit's body armor was still unfinished, its skeletal frame exposed in places. Protective cloth designed for radiation shielding had been wrapped like bandages across its body, anchoring the shoulder armor, and draped into a cloak. It looked at once like an Egyptian mummy and a warrior-woman of the desert, cloaked and armed with scimitars.

She chose a plan not to deflect the colony but to break it apart.



The netting around L-1 could never withstand the impact of an entire block, but it could catch hundreds of smaller fragments. Coated with adhesive polymer, the mesh would trap debris rather than let it scatter.

So she would dismantle the colony piece by piece.

Her heat shotels carved through panels, peeling back plating. She crossed the blades and shattered key joints one after another.

It was tedious, labor-intensive, time-consuming work, but it was a highly reliable method.

*

Zechs guided Nemea toward the upper industrial block of the falling colony, the segment already on course for Earth.

Unlike the other sections, this one was a sealed design: thick-walled, windowless, massive. Its sheer size and weight made it the most dangerous of all. Zechs noted with bitter irony that most of its facilities had belonged to HSTE Co., Hercules Space Technical Electronics Company.

Hercules: the Anglicized name of Heracles. And in myth, Heracles' first labor had been the slaying of the Nemean lion.

A smile touched his lips, half amused, half fatalistic.

"So, am I the Heracles clad in a lion's hide... or is it Hercules who will strike me down, to mount me in the heavens as Leo?"

Approach was simple enough. The block spun only slowly, counter-clockwise, its acceleration still gradual. Yet therein lay the danger, on entering the atmosphere, its momentum would not burn away but drive it intact into the northern hemisphere.

Elev had chosen to slow his target. Zechs chose the opposite.

Acceleration. If he could hurl this mass faster, sharpen its entry angle, the dense atmosphere would swat it aside, bouncing it into the void. But he had no thrusters at hand, no way to ignite such force. He would need to improvise.

And he would need to trigger it remotely after escaping. No such device existed in his kit.

"There's no choice but to go inside."

He brought Nemea down through an airlock, forcing the mechanism by hand. Residual atmosphere rushed out, followed by chunks of machinery half a meter across. Reflex took over, Nemea twisted aside, avoiding them.

Zechs cursed himself.

“A mistake... debris at thirty thousand kilometers an hour is what I need to stop, not dodge. Nemea’s armor could have borne it.”

He sealed the lock and pressed deeper. The interior was drowned in shadow. Here, he had to find a surrogate for thrusters.

His sensors swept the complex, chemical traces highlighting a cluster of peroxide storage tanks. The Leo-type visor’s built-in analyzers confirmed it: H₂O₂, stenciled large, with the HSTE company crest beneath.

“As expected. Perfect propellant.”

Hydrogen peroxide, used for cleaning electronic components, any electronics factory would have it. And in vacuum, distillation was easy. Concentrated, it was the oxidizer of an old age: rocket fuel.

Zechs set Nemea to work sealing off the sector, venting the last scraps of atmosphere until the chamber was a vacuum tomb. The distilled peroxide completed, he rigged pipework into the airlock. Once the valves were open, he would leave behind a timed detonation. Ignited, it would blast the block forward like a makeshift rocket.

“Up to this point, flawless...”

But a chill passed over him.

“No. Too flawless. Nothing is ever so simple.”

Then, the console chimed. A transmission. OZ military line.

“Lucrezia... answer me. It’s you piloting that machine, isn’t it?”

Zechs froze, breath caught.

That voice. Treize Khushrenada.

*

Two hours earlier.

At the Alliance Space Forces’ Mare Tranquillitatis base, Warrant Officer Cordelia Fitzgerald received notice of a second firing sequence from Fortress Barge.

“A second shot?”

She was not surprised. The first miss would have wounded Captain Dotzent’s pride; now, with the fortress circling back into line, he would seize the chance to redeem himself.

“The Barge cannon cannot fire in volleys. Three trajectories, three targets, and only one shot.”

Cordelia fed data into the computers. The simulations told her what she already suspected. There would be a moment, brief but real, when the cannon’s sightline aligned both the midsection residential block drifting toward L-1 and the industrial block plummeting toward Earth.

"That's the shot he'll take."

The weapon's power could pierce one and strike the other. Accuracy barely fifty percent, but Dotzent would gamble. He would ignore the agricultural block aimed at L-2.

He was a man who thought nothing of collateral.

Cordelia clenched her fists. She knew, unconfirmed, but certain, that rebel soldiers had boarded the derelict, trying to shift its fall. Her own leaks of information had sent them there.

"This is my fault..."

And inside the industrial block, she knew, was the Leo Type V variant Nemea, the same machine stolen at Sinus Iridum.

She longed to call out, to warn the pilot, but had no channel.

One hundred fifty minutes to impact.

She reported Nemea's presence to her superior.

"It was captured. Rebels are inside."

"Or prisoners," he countered. "Perhaps defectors. Either way, humans remain aboard."

"Then we must send rescue—"

"Unacceptable. A rescue would compromise the firing schedule. If we miss, the entire Earth Sphere may pay the price. Some sacrifices must be made. Understand that, Warrant Officer Fitzgerald."

Cordelia closed her eyes behind silver frames, forcing calm. The guilt threatened to crush her. She had leaked data before, but always one-way. Now, she needed a miracle.

And then, it came.

"This is OZ Specials. Responding to a request from General Chilias."

Cordelia's breath caught. She snatched the line.

"This is the Lunar Base!"

On her monitor, a young officer's face appeared, handsome, composed. Treize Khushrenada.

"Operator, we field twenty mobile suits. Tell us where we are needed."

Cordelia's voice trembled with urgency.

"There's an unconfirmed report... inside the industrial section, the Leo Type V Nemea has entered."

The OZ Specials, above all units, had the privilege of autonomous action.

"Lucrezia's unit... understood. We will attempt its recovery."

Cordelia bowed her head, relief flooding her.

"Godspeed, Your Excellency. May fortune guard you."

*

Thirty minutes until the Barge Cannon fired.

Elev's Prometheus loosed the first shot from its massive cruciform heavy cannon.

The recoil drove against the colony's spin, slowing its terrible rotation. "Good. Now for the second."

He swung the giant cross around, presenting the long barrel, and lined it up with the section of outer wall where he had gathered the explosives. A heavy homing missile was locked into the chamber.

"No... I'm still too close."

At this range Prometheus itself would be caught in the blast. The dual-eye optics gave him sharper depth perception than ever before; distance was no longer guesswork. He pulled back, maintaining careful spacing, all the while adjusting the targeting data fed into the sub-monitors as they recalculated the trajectory toward the graveyard orbit.

"This is it."

He squeezed the trigger.

The missile corkscrewed through the void, chasing its target.

"Hit... please."

Elev watched it like a man praying. The strike was clean, the missile slammed into the cache. Chain detonations erupted in brilliant blossoms of fire. The agricultural block shuddered, its descent turning away from the L-2 cluster, veering outward, thrust toward the graveyard orbit beyond the Earth Sphere.

Elev allowed himself a rare moment of pride, giving voice to a report no one had asked for:

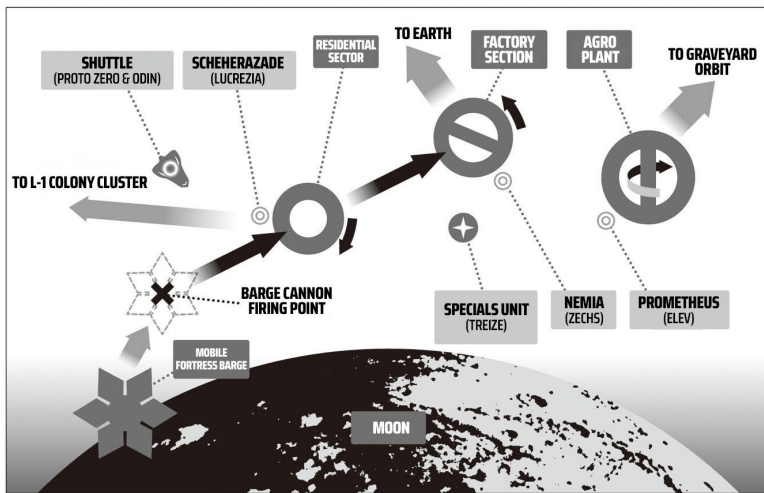
"This is Prometheus. Mission complete. The agricultural block has cleared the L-2 vector and is en route to the graveyard orbit."

*

Lucrezia's Scheherazade was making progress of its own.

Piece by piece, the abandoned residential section had been reduced to fragments, more than two hundred, and spread with deliberate spacing. The L-1 cluster's safety net could absorb that much.

From a distance, the block still looked whole, inertia keeping its fragments in a common clockwise spin. But within the mass, Lucrezia moved, weaving through tumbling debris, using the suit's momentum to ride the orbit and open gaps while she continued her methodical cuts.



Every large piece she cleaved with the heated shotels increased the colony's chances of being safely contained.

After splitting several more sections, Scheherazade came face-to-face with a looming, fifty-meter black cube.

"That one's still out of range," she muttered, focusing instead on the large tank drifting up behind her.

She crossed her burning blades, slicing the tank cleanly in two, and spun on instinct, cutting the cube in a single horizontal stroke.

The result was immediate and violent.

"Damn!"

Whether it had been a power core or a compression unit, she could not tell. The cube exploded, and its shockwave hurled fragments into the surrounding debris field. Pieces slammed against each other like billiard balls, ricocheting in chaotic chains. The entire swarm shifted, careening on new vectors, and closing in on her.

Scheherazade was all exposed frame, no armor. Any hit could be fatal.

Lucrezia fought with desperate speed, slashing down one onrushing mass after another, her shotels blazing arcs through the dark. For minutes that felt eternal she held them off, every nerve stretched, every motion on the knife-edge of survival.

But no human endurance was infinite.

A massive section, an entire suspension bridge, fifty meters of girders, came whipping in at speed. She turned too late.

The Zero Frame held; the structure shattered around it. But the cockpit shook with crushing violence. Lucrezia's helmet could not absorb the force. Her head snapped forward, back, side to side, until blackness claimed her.

Scheherazade, uncontrolled, was hurled like a toy into the wall of a drifting office tower. The impact rang out, a metallic scream in the void. And inside, Lucrezia's consciousness slipped away.

*

"Listen to me, Lucrezia. Within moments that industrial section will be destroyed, wiped out along with the residential block, by the Barge's main cannon. You must escape at once. There's no time."

Zechs could not answer Treize's call.

He thought, briefly, of routing the signal through to Scheherazade, letting Lucrezia respond in his stead. But inside the fractured colony the debris storm made communications impossible.

He had to choose.

He could save himself easily. But Lucrezia, trapped in the residential block, the very first target of the Barge, could not be saved. The cannon's destructive force would vaporize colony and mobile suit alike in a single incandescent breath.

Zechs opened another channel, this one to Jay Null aboard the Sweepers' disguised transport.

"Doctor... if I open Pandora's Box here, will it give us a way through?"

"So, you would awaken the ZERO System at last..." Jay's reply brimmed with excitement.

"I want to save Lucrezia, Test Subject No. 3."

"I see..." Jay hesitated, then spoke more carefully. "Yes, it would find a solution. But the data won't be sent to your machine. The system first feeds victory conditions into Proto Zero's cockpit, then filters the processed "future" directly into the pilot's brain."

"Can the pilot of Proto Zero be trusted?"

"That I cannot say. In fact, there is no guarantee the ZERO System will choose an outcome that benefits us. If peace for the Earth Sphere demands it, it may well abandon us all."

Doubt seeped into Zechs. Too many variables. Too many unknowns.

Jay pressed on, heedless of Zechs's hesitation.

"Once, the prime directive of AI Sam was to protect Heero and Catrina. But they are gone. With that purpose erased, who can say what conditions the System will set now? ...And yet, " Jay's smile flashed wolfishly across the monitor. "Your Peacecraft blood may alter the very causality of the cosmos."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Do you love her, Zechs? Do you love Lucrezia Noin? If so... perhaps that love itself could trigger a miracle."

"..."

Zechs felt himself driven deeper into the forest of doubt. He had never thought of her that way. Not as an object of love. And yet...

Then Treize's voice came again, cutting through his paralysis.

"Pilot of Nemea, I know now you are not Lucrezia. That makes you a rebel soldier. Your self-sacrifice in this crisis is worthy of the highest praise. Which is why all the more, you must survive."

"...Instructor Treize." Zechs finally replied.

"We have only done as you taught us."

"Zechs... it's you?"

"For the soldiers yet to come. For the generations of humanity yet unborn."

It was Elev's resolve as well, and Lucrezia's. The colony's correction was not just for today, it was for the future of the Earth Sphere.

Zechs affixed the ZERO System's activation unit to his console.

"Instructor Treize, you must withdraw immediately. Once accelerated, this section will be flung clear of Earth's atmosphere."

"Understood. And Lucrezia, she is with you?"

"Yes."

He cut the line there.

He could not say he loved her. But he knew, beyond doubt, that losing her here would mark him with regret for the rest of his life. To entrust their fate to the causality of the cosmos, that was the only path left.

Zechs keyed in the password.

"PEACECRAFT×2 HEERO YUY"

Pandora's Box opened.

At the same time, he left a message on the OZ line.

"Instructor Treize, please recover this machine. Accept Pandora's Box. Once linked to the proper computer, it will grant you access to future-prediction data."

He said nothing of Ein Yuy, or of the deeper keys. Such things were irrelevant to Treize.

Zechs placed the activation unit on his seat and ejected, leaving Nemea behind as he propelled himself into the void in his astro-suit. Elev's Prometheus should be nearby, Jay had told him.

*

In Proto Zero's cockpit, the spherical ZERO System flared to life.

Odin Lowe's eyes widened. Only minutes earlier Jay Null had contacted him: If the ZERO System activates, obey its instructions.

"So now it shows its true colors..."

High-pitched electronic tones surged through the cockpit. The ZERO System gave no words, no text, only torrents of images, visions thrust straight into his mind.

Countless flickers of the Moon, of space, of battles long past and yet to come. In those images, if he focused, he could even see his own history: Aoi, Seis, his son. The system had absorbed his identity, his skills, in mere seconds.

"What the hell is this?"

Odin was swept by the visions, but he did not break. A man who had lived his whole life buffeted by history could weather the System's storm.

"Sorry, machine. I still go by my own judgment. I'm the man who killed a legend, after all."

One image crystallized sharper than all the rest: the muzzle of the Barge's main cannon, charging for its next shot.

"You want me to snipe that? With the Drei Zwergs?"

The system's tones rose in pitch. Beside him, the launch lever blinked furiously, its pulses quickening. It was the trigger for transformation into flight mode. The machine was urging him. Hurry.

"All right, all right! I hear you!"

He slammed the lever forward.

Seconds later, Proto Zero exploded out of the shuttle bay in blazing flight form. The exhaust scorched the shuttle behind, tearing it apart in a violent blast.

"Reckless... not my style. I prefer a cleaner job."

The ZERO System gave no answer.

"I know the target. I know the method. What matters now is the clock."

The fortress would reach firing position soon. He had three hundred seconds.

At the System's command, Odin poured on speed.

Proto Zero streaked toward destiny.

*

Cordelia, stationed at the lunar base, saw the flash on her monitor: a civilian shuttle arriving from the L-1 cluster had exploded mid-flight.

“...That blast?”

It couldn't have been debris from the falling colony, the distance was far too great. And the Alliance's detection net showed nothing else.

“A stealth-type mobile suit launch...?”

Her instincts whispered it. Rumors had already circulated that the rebels were developing such technologies. But what could they hope to achieve, so late in the crisis?

Then a shout from the operations deck behind her:

“Message from Fortress Barge! Cannon energy charge complete! Launch sequence initiated! Countdown, two hundred ninety-nine! Predicted accuracy against target colony block now at seventy-five percent!”

Cordelia's heart sank. The real danger was not the residential block, but the industrial section plummeting toward Earth. And somewhere within it, Nemea, with the Specials' units nearby.

“...Please... please, let them be safe...”

She slipped off her silver-rimmed glasses and stared out, as if her thoughts could reach into the void.

*

Proto Zero, in bird form, fired its retro-thrusters, bleeding speed as the massive fortress Barge swam into view below.

Odin disengaged the transformation, returning to mobile suit mode. He raised the Buster Rifle slowly. Three Messer Zwerger pods gleamed at its muzzle.

“Drei Zwerger, target lock.”

Through the scope he fixed on the Barge's main cannon aperture.

Then the ZERO System intruded. Its command was not to level the fortress, but to focus all fire on one tiny point, the cannon's central core, no more than a few meters wide.

“What? You don't want the fortress destroyed... just that?”

He grinned despite himself.

“Well, only I could hit something like that.”



Even with his deceleration, Proto Zero's relative velocity to the Barge was over five hundred kilometers an hour. Impossible for anyone else, but not for him.

"Then I'll do it."

He was calm, savoring the tension. The dual eyes burned bright, the ZERO System's tones rising in pitch, marking the firing instant.

Five seconds separated his shot from the Barge's own discharge. If he failed, both Proto Zero and the colony block, and Lucrezia's Scheherazade, pilot unconscious, would be erased in a single beam.

The electronic keening peaked.

"Fire."

He whispered it, pulling the trigger.

The Messer Zwergs opened, flaring into brilliance. Three converging beams fused into a single lance, thin as a thread of light, and vanished into the cannon's throat.

Impact.

Not explosion, but dissolution. The core melted. The stored energy dispersed harmlessly. A split-second later the Barge's firing cycle triggered, but only silence followed, the beam lost, the aimpoint missed.

The fortress drifted on in its orbit, impotent.

Odin smiled. "Now that's a job well done."

He rapped twice on the glowing sphere of the ZERO System, his own rhythm for "Thank you."

Proto Zero folded back into bird form, engines roaring as it sped toward the shattered residential block. The System had given its next directive: recover the mobile suit Scheherazade.

Once secured, he was to unfurl the Drei Zwerg at maximum angle and vaporize the debris field, two hundred drifting pieces, each a deadly hazard.

"What about the other colony remnants?" he asked.

The System's reply came as an image, a calm reassurance: No problem.

Odin chuckled darkly. "So, Dr. Null used me as his guinea pig... I'll be sure to charge double."

*

Minutes later, the residential block was gone.

Tens of minutes more, and the industrial block, rocked by a mysterious explosion inside, sped into Earth's atmosphere, deflected from orbit.

The agricultural sector had long since been flung clear to the graveyard orbit.

Cordelia could not comprehend it. Barge had not fired; she had seen the energy meter drop. Yet the residential block had vanished, the industrial had altered course. The disaster had been averted, but not by anything she could explain.

Captain Dotzent suppressed the truth, declaring the malfunction classified. With a routine core replacement and cursory inspection, the matter was closed.

At both the lunar base and Fortress Barge, the story was rewritten: They had saved the Earth Sphere. Clarence was promoted one rank, Dotzent likewise, both decorated with the Cygnus Medal.

The true story never reached the ranks of the Alliance Space Forces.

Cordelia only heard a sliver of it when a transmission arrived, from a Sweeper ship, one of the "space janitors."

The monitor filled with the wizened faces of five old men.

"The industrial section that fell toward Earth, we retrieved it. Think of it as volunteer work. No fee charged to the Alliance."

"Acknowledged. But there was a mobile suit aboard. That machine is Alliance property. Return it immediately."

The men exchanged shrugs.

"If there was, we never saw it. By the time we arrived, nothing remained. Maybe the OZ Specials got to it first."

*

In the hangar bay of the OZ Specials' transport, the recovered Leo Type V Nemea stood silent.

Treize Khushrenada walked up to the open cockpit hatch. He peered inside, then shook his head softly.

"As I thought. No one aboard."

On the pilot's seat lay the activation unit of the ZERO System.

"So this is Pandora's Box."

He lifted it in his hand, voice almost a murmur.

"Zechs... was it truly wise to entrust this to me? I have no need for a power that promises the future. What matters more is that you, and the others, return to us. That alone would better secure OZ's tomorrow..."

Inwardly, he could only lament.

*

The Prometheus returned to the Sweepers' ship. Zechs clung to its side plating, riding it home.

Removing his helmet in the hangar, he immediately saw Lucrezia's face, darkened with sadness.

She spoke quietly.

"In the end... I became Pandora, didn't I?"

"Don't trouble yourself. Everything worked out. That's what matters."

A voice crackled from within Prometheus.

"We're like the Wizard of OZ, aren't we?"

Elev emerged from the cockpit, peeling off his astro-suit with a wry grin.

"The Tin Man who thought himself hollow found a heart. The cowardly Lion learned courage. And the Scarecrow without wisdom gained the foresight of an AI."

The others glanced at one another.

"Was I really the coward?" Lucrezia murmured.

"When your own words come back from someone else's lips," Zechs said, "they pierce deeper than you'd think."

She managed a faint smile.

Zechs silently thanked Elev for breaking the tension, then asked:

"Then what about you, Elev? In this little play, what role are you?"

"Me? I'm the mutt running around the heroes' ankles. Useless mascot. Too handsome for the part, but still."

Zechs chuckled; Lucrezia too smiled.

In truth, Elev had been the only one to complete his task cleanly, with success beyond dispute. He ought to have been the one receiving full accolades. Yet here he was, playing the fool, easing the burden on his comrades.

Lucrezia understood. She bowed her head slightly.

"Thank you, Officer Elev."

He scratched at his hair, embarrassed. "Nah, I didn't do anything."

Then, glancing about, he asked, "But where's the Scarecrow?"

For the Proto Zero's cockpit had been empty when it returned. Odin Lowe, like Zechs, had jettisoned into the void in his astro-suit.

Some men simply could not abide belonging to a group. Zechs knew it well enough, he thought of himself, and felt the kinship.

AC-187 APRIL 18

At the L-1 Colony cluster's Medical Center, Junior drifted through dull, monotonous days.

Odin had not returned.

Already the boy had memorized the facility's corridors, its blind spots, its camera placements. Escape routes. It had been one of the "assignments" his father left him before departure, not a forced duty, he'd said, but training for survival.

"A way to pass the time," Odin had put it.

It had been more than that, of course. It was preparation for life.

But even that exercise was done. All that remained to occupy him was pacing the hospital's halls, searching for the smallest change in routine.

That was when a boy with a bouquet of flowers stepped across his path.

"You're Mrs. Aoi's..."

At the sound of his mother's name, Junior stiffened.

"You don't have your Leo toy today," the boy said with a gentle smile.

Vingt Khushrenada.

"You must have me mistaken for someone else," Junior muttered, curt, and tried to brush past.

"My condolences for your parents," Vingt said softly. "But it's a blessing you lived."

His smile never wavered.

"I'd like to see you join OZ. Become one of our agents."

Junior quickened his pace, bolting down the hall.

Only his voice lingered, thrown back over his shoulder, "I refuse."

*

Odin Lowe was taking his next contract at the L-2 cluster's spaceport. The meeting place was a private booth tucked into a nearly empty lounge. Ever since the inter-colony travel ban had gone into effect, traffic through the port had dwindled to almost nothing. These days it was used mostly by Alliance officials or laborers bound for the expansion projects on the lunar bases.

The client identified himself as being from the Alliance Intelligence Bureau.

"Mm. Maybe," Odin thought skeptically, but he listened anyway.

The target: Vingt Khushrenada, de facto head of the Romefeller Foundation and the OZ Specials.

It was not the first time he'd been approached with such an assignment. The job had been floating for months, but he had always refused. There were plenty of reasons why.

That Vingt had enemies inside the Alliance was beyond doubt.

"I told you before," Odin cut him off flatly. "I'm not taking it."

“My rule stands. I don’t kill women. I don’t kill children.”

“He is no innocent child,” the agent pressed. “Vingt Khushrenada wields the power of a tyrant.”

“Maybe so...” Odin’s eyes narrowed. “But you, you’re not Intelligence. You smell like the Barton Foundation.”

For an instant the man’s face tightened.

“I can smell it,” Odin said.

The “agent” said nothing.

“Tell your boss Dekim Barton this: if he wants me to take a job, he shows up in person. That’s what you call manners.”

He had, in the past, accepted contracts from Dekim and Quinze, rescue work at Artemis, sabotage during the Barge offensive. But lately, every job ended with someone trying to put a bullet in his back.

Some of it was clean-up, to erase a witness. But word of Heero Yuy’s assassination had leaked inside the rebel network. Now they hunted him for revenge.

It didn’t matter. Their “operatives” were amateurs; he read their moves before they made them. Evasion was easy. Still, they kept coming, like gnats. Odin had finally told them: Try me again, and I’ll set my sights on Dekim himself.

Maybe the threat had landed too well. Dekim had grown cautious, kept his distance.

This “agent” left without another word.

“Good riddance,” Odin muttered, and boarded a regular shuttle bound for the L-1 cluster via the lunar spaceport of Copernicus. Most of the passengers were supposed to be medical staff.

But when he entered the cabin, there was only one man seated among the empty rows.

Dekim Barton.

Even Odin could not mask his surprise.

“Well. Speak of the devil. Looks like you came yourself after all.”

Dekim’s voice was heavy.

“You called it ‘manners.’ I could hardly refuse.”

“Even so, if I take your job, I want my life guaranteed.”

“Not only your life. Your son’s as well.”

Odin’s eyes hardened.

“Son? Don’t joke. He’s no blood of mine.”

“Don’t underestimate our intelligence network. We’ve already completed the DNA testing.”

Odin froze.

“You used Katherine?”

Leaving Junior at the Medical Center had been a mistake.

Dekim confirmed it with a smirk.

“That facility is funded by the Barton Foundation.”

Odin cursed himself for his carelessness.

Dekim leaned in, pressing his advantage.

“So. Will you accept? Even a half-trained operative can kill a child.

Don’t make me give that order.”

Odin’s jaw tightened. Finally, he spat the words.

“Fine. Just this once, I’ll break my code.”

“Good. Then confirm it. The target is not me, but Vingt Khushrenada, Romefeller’s scion, commander of the OZ Specials.”

The way Dekim said it, his voice coiled with obsession.

Odin exhaled in disgust.

“Understood.”

AC-187 APRIL 20

At the L-1 Colony cluster’s Medical Center, Hundert Khushrenada hovered at the edge of death.

A new strain of colony virus had triggered cerebral hemorrhage, plunging him into unconsciousness.

On duty that night was Dr. Katherine Po. She cut him open without hesitation and managed to keep him alive. She assigned her daughter, Sally, as surgical assistant, while anesthesiology and medical systems were handled by Ilia.

Sally Po and Ilia Winner, both still medical students, were in training at the facility.

“Better to gain experience while you’re young,” Katherine said with a weary smile.

The three of them waited in exhaustion, pulling an all-nighter by Hundert’s bedside until, the next afternoon, he finally stirred.

“Will I last until my sons arrive?”

“Perhaps a month,” Katherine told him. “I’ll see they’re contacted in time.”

“I see.”

Hundert closed his eyes with resignation. Treize and Vingt were far too busy; surely neither would spare time for a dying old man. That was how he thought.

“Looks like I won’t make it.”

“Don’t give up,” Ilia said gently.

“There is one way,” Sally added, perhaps only trying to lift the mood with small talk.

“My mother’s been researching how to create clones from DNA samples. We’ve been helping. If we could prepare a healthy ‘spare’ body, then trace-image your consciousness and download it—”

“Enough, Sally.” Katherine stopped her. “It’s still only experimental.”

Hundert’s eyes clouded again. He whispered, almost to himself.

“That wouldn’t be me. Just a stranger.”

Silence pressed down on the room.

At last Katherine motioned her students out.

“We’ll let you rest now.”

But before she reached the door, Hundert’s voice rasped behind her.

“How much would it cost?”

She froze.

“Not for me. For Vingt, my only son. He was born weak, like me. He’ll need a spare.”

Without turning, Katherine replied, quiet and flat.

“DNA sampling is free. Strictly research. Nothing more.”

*

Back in her lab, Katherine opened her terminal. A message from Jay Null was waiting.

“Destroy Subject No. 2’s sample. We no longer require his spare.”

She followed the order. From the freezer rack she pulled the vial marked Subject 2, then dropped it into the incineration box.

On an empty vial she wrote a new name: Vingt Khushrenada.

“I forgot to mention, consent is required,” she muttered to herself.

The rack was crowded with samples. Among them were her own, and one labeled Odin Lowe, Jr.

“Mother, don’t you need mine?” Sally asked, arms crossed.

“One handful of trouble is enough,” Katherine teased. “I don’t need a second.”

Sally smirked back. “Then when I’m grown and want a daughter, I’ll use your sample. That way she’ll be perfect and never give me trouble.”

“Perhaps... but don’t be too hard on her,” Katherine replied softly.

MC 0022 NEXT WINTER

I tore off the virtual visor, still trembling, and turned to Father Maxwell.

“Father, it seems I’m my grandmother’s clone.”

He looked at me, calm as ever.

"That's news to me."

His face said plainly: *And so what if you are?*

He had told me once before.

"You are Kathy Po. Nothing else matters. You don't need to fit yourself into any other mold."

Clone, spare, copy, it made no difference. He truly believed that.

I steadied my voice, reporting what else I had learned.

"In the earlier Zechs Files, there was nothing about the ZERO System's activation. Nothing about the falling colony incident."

Father's mouth curved into a sly grin.

"Because Sally and Meilan were restored, the record changed. That's how history works, what survives is the truth."

Afterword

I was once told, in no uncertain terms, by Takao Koyama, the man who taught me the foundations of anime screenwriting, "In an anime script, you must never use the word 'expressionless.'"

Why? Because "no expression" is vague, imprecise, and utterly useless to the director or the storyboard artist. It doesn't conjure a concrete image. It relies too much on them to invent something specific. Unless you're dealing with an inanimate object, a robot, say, it won't fly. A human face is never truly blank. Somewhere in there is joy, anger, sorrow, or pleasure. If the character's emotions are subdued, then describe it as a quiet expression or a masklike face drained of vitality. And if it's a Golgo 13 type of character, then call it a cold, merciless expression. That was his teaching.

And yet... I could never quite get used to that rule, the linguistic sensibility. Before I aimed at anime, I had trained in stage drama, often sitting in rehearsals beside the director. There, I heard the word "expressionless" tossed around all the time. In theater, it was shorthand when an actor's performance lacked emotional presence. A director would say, "You're supposed to be smiling, but you aren't. Your face is blank." Then would follow a lecture, "You can't just smile with your mouth. The eyes, the brows, even the ears, nose, the whole body must participate. To truly smile, you must inhabit the role and let the thought and the body bring the expression forth." Listening to all this, I came to think, "So when people are at rest, when they aren't actively engaged, they really do lapse into being 'expressionless.'"

In prose fiction, of course, there's no problem at all with writing, "Heero Yuy was an expressionless boy." Readers understand instantly. The word, once fixed in place, carries with it shades of quietness, lifelessness, coldness, all at once. At long last I find myself slipping free of the prohibition drilled into me during my anime years. And besides, when it comes to Frozen Teardrop, aren't there far weightier issues than nitpicking over "expressionless"? If the subject is a mobile suit, a machine, an inanimate construct, then surely there's nothing wrong with writing: "In the hangar, the Wing Gundam Zero waited for Heero, its face as expressionless as ever." What a relief!

Consider another case. People do sometimes carry a neutral, "non-expressive" face. Look at the modern commuter in an elevator. What trace of joy, anger, grief, or delight could there possibly be? They are reduced to cargo in a metal box, silently watching the floor indicator

numbers rise and fall. There is no awe, no wonder, no doubt, no fury, no hesitation, no expectation, nothing. Especially among Japanese people, whose culture doesn't place much emphasis on showing emotional fluctuations to others. In anime scripts, a scene like this doesn't require description of facial expressions. "Passengers in an elevator" is enough. Writing "expressionless passengers" only bloats the page count without adding clarity. And animation, with its restricted number of drawings, has no use for such waste. Unless there's a very specific stylistic point, an elevator scene is meaningless, just have the doors open with a chime and let the characters walk out. A scriptwriter should spend that creative energy on richer developments, not squander it on filler.

And yet, some critics might say, "This is exactly why Gundam Wing failed to win over the robot-obsessed boys."

They were pointing to one thing: the omission of the launch sequence.

In robot anime of the time, the stock "BANK" cut of a launch was obligatory. Especially for Gundam. Think of Amuro's lines to the operator (Sayla or Fraw) of "I'm going!" before the RX-78-2 catapults out from White Base's launch deck, those were the moments that thrilled us. But Gundam Wing didn't include them. It robbed boys of the supreme, heart-pounding ritual. That was, in the eyes of many, a fatal flaw.

Even if Heero's nature made such launches a given, his departures without hesitation or doubt, his coldly "expressionless" face, even if the design and mechanical animation were flawless, the absence of that set-piece ritual was unforgivable in a Gundam show. On this point, I cannot disagree.

Go back further, Gerry Anderson's Thunderbirds. Its puppets were utterly expressionless, and yet the launch of the super machines was everything. So too the "Wandaba" launch sequences of Ultraman, or the transformation scenes in tokusatsu shows, where the props and gadgets, not the characters' faces, were the stars. Those moments gave children their "role-play items."

But director Masashi Ikeda, at that time, loathed the clichés. He fought against the conventional and the formulaic, against every sponsor demand for the safe and familiar. He chased avant-garde, provocative forms of expression. In that stance, he mirrored Yoshiyuki Tomino's original rebellion against "robot pro-wrestling," fighting through endless clashes with toy sponsors like Clover to forge the first Mobile Suit Gundam. And as Ikeda saw it, as long as that principle held, whether Heero fell, self-destructed, boarded an enemy suit or abandoned his own, Wing was the very essence of Gundam. I admired him for that and followed without doubt.

And then, came the shock. In the final stretch of the show, after Ikeda had left, character designer Shukō Murase storyboarded the second opening. At its start: the ZERO System activating, Heero launching in the Wing Zero. Just a few seconds before the title card, and I nearly fainted when I saw it. Such power in the drawings! Not cliché, not formula, another dimension entirely. A launch sequence filled with suffocating tension, and Heero's face, no longer "expressionless," but a look that radiated the explosive force within his silence. Murase shattered conventions, standing toe-to-toe with Ikeda and transcending every expectation.

A pity that this opening only aired twice, episode 48 and the finale. Any normal studio would never replace an opening just for the last two episodes. But producer Hideyuki Tomioka at Sunrise had the audacity to do it, and that's what made him extraordinary. I too repented, belatedly, and added a Wing Zero launch to the script of episode 48. In *Endless Waltz*, I wrote the scene of Wing Zero and Heero rendezvousing in space, the ZERO System activating, the descent toward Earth. At that time, Katoki's angelic white Wing Zero did not yet exist in my imagination, so the famous "spreading wings" sequence was still beyond me.

Katoki insisted: with characters as flamboyant as Wing's, the mecha must be equally elegant and outrageous. His genius was clear. The angel-winged Zero scattering feathers, rendered with dazzling grace by director Yasunao Aoki, left me stunned once again at the power of true brilliance.

And yet, when it came time to script Heero's face in the cockpit, could I get away with writing "expressionless"? Absolutely not. By then, I knew, it was unacceptable. Even now, that linguistic taboo still shackles me. Hence my many delays. Forgive me!

This year, 2015, marks twenty years since *Gundam Wing* first aired. The behind-the-scenes stories of the voice actors are fading into oblivion. And yet, in 2011, during the *Frozen Teardrop* campaign, we recorded an original voice drama. I wrote the launch scene for Heero and the Snow White. The title was, I believe, "Launch! Snow White & Warlock." With Hikaru Midorikawa's flawless interpretation, the script was a torrent of launch-sequence jargon. Listening on headphones, his cool, intelligent, and yes, seductively sweet voice whispered in my ear. Not "expressionless" at all.

The truth is, it was the higher-ups who ordered me, because of page count, to pad things out with this long-winded essay, but what I really thought was that it would've been better to include, as we did at the end of volume two, a bonus appendix of the voice drama recording script. I

even went so far as to propose it. The higher-ups even said, "Sure, why not." But then, disaster. The file had vanished from my computer, completely erased.

What?! How?! Panic, flailing, slapstick chaos.

No backup at Kadokawa? The editor from back then, on her second maternity leave?! Desperate, I turned to Takahashi at Sunrise. "Do you still have the 2011 data?" But the office PCs had been updated, the old files purged.

Calm down, calm down! No use. Dohyaa!

The only option left would be to listen to the drama and transcribe it word for word. But no. Absolutely not. To reconstruct something already written? Impossible. I'd rather die. So instead, I've been forced into padding out these pages with this rambling essay.

And so here we are, with volume 11 of Frozen Teardrop.

I must apologize, it is not yet finished. I never imagined it would stretch this far. But the Gundam Ace serialization will be concluding soon. So I will cut back on alcohol and tobacco, drive myself to the final spurt, tie up the story's loose ends, and race toward an ending no one expects. Until then, I ask for your patience.

That such a shallow, frivolous person as myself has been allowed a long serial at all is thanks only to the steadfast support of you, the readers. I am deeply, deeply grateful. Truly, thank you.

I also thank Hajime Katoki, Sakura Asagi, MORUGA, Tetsuko Takahashi and Koji Nakajima of Sunrise, and all the staff at Gundam Ace who have supported me.

And above all, I salute every staff member and cast member who gave us the shining program that was Gundam Wing, twenty years ago. You are magnificent people, and I will respect you always.

And of course, I have not forgotten the fans who have stood with us since the beginning.

Well then, until the next rambling essay, in volume 12 (perhaps out by year's end)...

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.11 Concerto in Serendipity (Part.02)

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