

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP

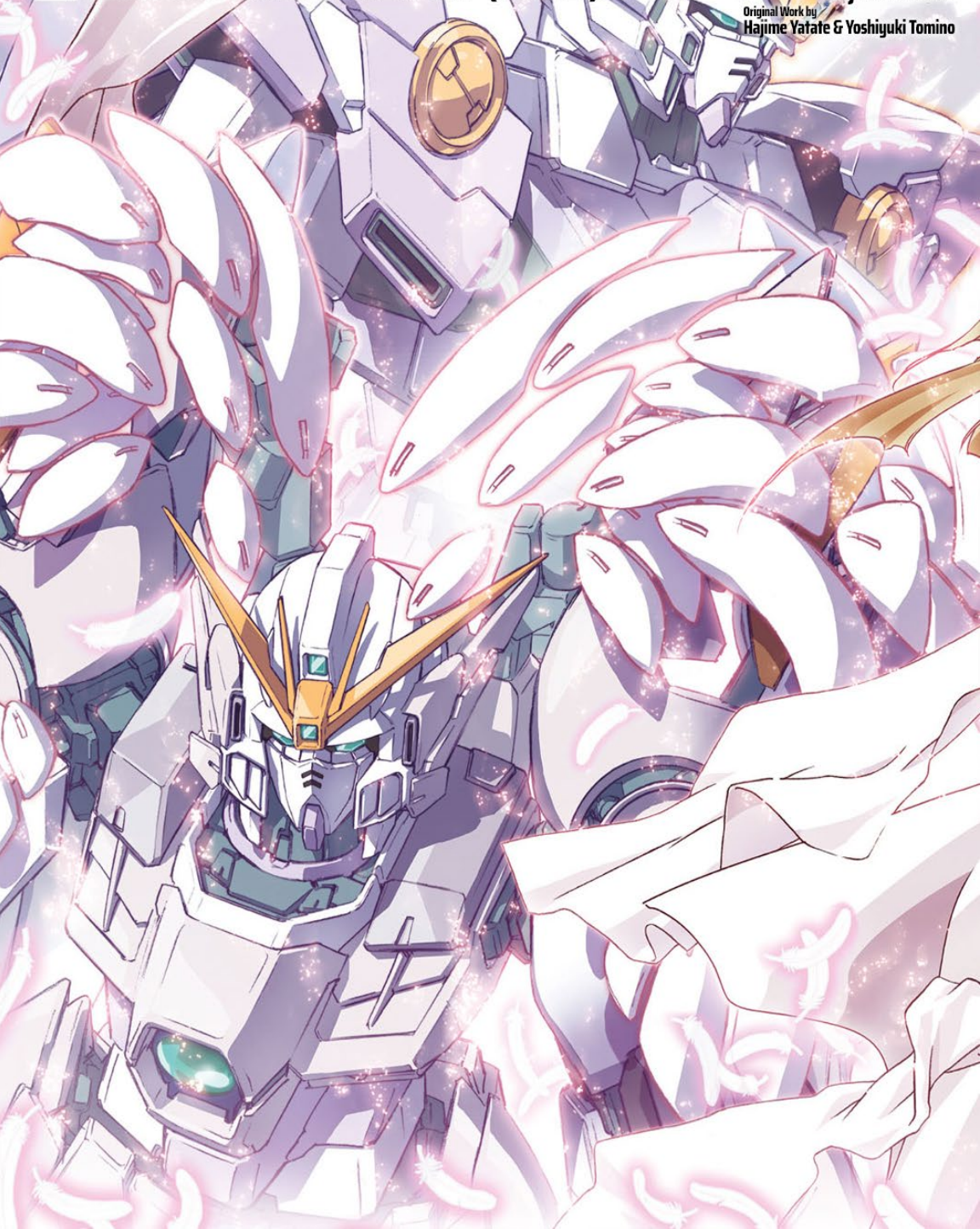
新機動戦記ガンダムW
フローズンティアドロップ

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12 CONCERTO IN SERENDIPITY (Part.3)



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Zechs File.2

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

A sharp, metallic keening sliced through the air, so high-pitched and fine it seemed to stab straight into my skull.

A few seconds later came the deafening roar of something tearing itself apart behind us, explosion, collapse, annihilation all at once.

In that instant, instinct told me *we've been hit*.

The shockwave struck before I could even look back. Our transport lurched violently, metal shrieking as the pilot fought to keep her level.

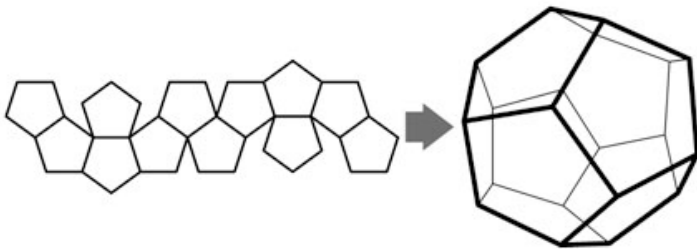
"Heat surge detected on Elysium Island!" she shouted, wrestling the controls. "Energy discharge stronger than Relena City's readings! Damage to our craft, minimal!"

One after another, my subordinates, the Fairies, called out their own reports.

"Aide Lucrezia! The fortress at the Isidis Plain, Babel, is transforming! It's now a perfect dodecahedron!"

Only hours ago, that same fortress had spread across the plain like an unfolded diagram, pentagonal walls arrayed in a vertical line.

Now it had re-formed into a fully realized polyhedral bastion, as if declaring this was its final configuration.



There are five so-called "platonic solids:" the tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron, and icosahedron.

In Timaeus, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato likened them to the rhizomata, the classical elements, each corresponding to fire, earth, air, cosmos, and water.

That meant Babel's dodecahedral form symbolized the universe itself.

A figure of perfect balance and harmony, utterly opposed to the chaos implied by its name.

From the aft monitor, the sensor officer's voice rang out.

"Explosion in Relena City! Massive flame plumes confirmed, it's under fire from the enemy fortress Babel!"

I could scarcely believe it.

“What about the shell shield?” I demanded.

“Visibility’s poor through the smoke, wait, no! The apex of the shield is breached!”

“Judging from the trajectory, the fortress’s long-range beam cannon pierced it,” came another report.

A chill ran through me.

If a beam cannon could penetrate the Martian surface’s most impregnable defense system, then...

“They used the Zwölf Zwerg...” I murmured.

There was no other explanation.

A standard buster rifle equipped with a Drei Zwerg system channels three converging beams into a single tetrahedral point, exponentially amplifying destructive power.

The Zwölf Zwerg applied that same principle to a fortress-scale energy cannon.

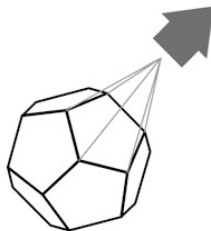
Its schematic was already known, the basic concept long stored in our computers.

Within Babel’s dodecahedral structure, each vertex housed an emitter and a mirror, forming internal tetrahedrons.



With twenty vertices and two distinct wavelengths per array, forty tetrahedrons materialized, their two hundred forty beams crossing paths in a vast lattice of light.

From those intersections, the energy compounded, then converged outward into the five apices of the outer pentagonal faces.



Each pentagon discharged its beam toward a single point, the summit of a five-sided pyramid, where the streams fused and burst forth as one amplified torrent.

The result was a blast over eighty times stronger than a Drei Zwerg.

More than enough power to punch through the city's shell shield as if it were nothing at all.

How many civilians, ordinary, unarmed people, had died in that single strike?

A tenth of Relena City's population, perhaps even a fifth.

No, once you factored in secondary casualties, the toll could be far higher.

It had been a sudden, merciless assault.

There had been no evacuation warning to the city's residents, none of the basic humanitarian forethought expected even in intergovernmental war.

Only a being stripped of human emotion could have ordered it, an act of cruelty possible precisely because the one responsible was no longer flesh and blood, but a projected image: Zechs Merquise, Major General of the Southern Mars Confederate States.

I braced myself for a second wave from the fortress.

It had to be stopped, no matter what.

But I couldn't counterattack, not yet.

President Relena was aboard this airship.

In the hangar below, the Merciless Fairies, the Spade Suit unit, waited in their Mars Suits: twelve elite machines, Aces through Queens, all but the King.

They could launch, but I could not bring myself to give the order.

"With this meager force," I murmured, "can we really take down Fortress Babel?"

Intelligence estimated over seven hundred Virgo IV units stationed at the enemy base, sixty times our strength.

I had no plan that could bridge that gulf.

Still, any delay in our next move could prove fatal.

As I wrestled with that thought, a transmission arrived.

"This is the Grand Chariot," came a weak, familiar voice.

Professor W.

He'd been unconscious since his duel with Vingt Khushrenada days earlier.

"I'm sorry," he said at once. "Because I failed to report in, we've reached the worst possible outcome. I can't even begin to apologize enough."

His face on the monitor was gaunt, haggard.

He blamed himself for failing to read the Heart of Space.

Yet I knew that the Heart of Space had surely warned him in its own way, seeping into his mind as nightmares his conscious mind could not withstand.

No ordinary psyche could bear that weight.

"You holding up?" I asked.

"Somehow," he said faintly.

I thought of his sister, Quaterine.

If she too had felt the pulse of the Heart of Space, she must be suffering just as badly.

"How is Quaterine?"

"Her mental trauma is severe," he answered. "It'll take time before she recovers."

"I see..."

I could say no more.

The siblings detested pity more than anything.

"As Madam President's advisor," Professor W continued, "I'm dispatching the Grand Chariot to Fortress Babel immediately. If they launch another attack like that, we won't survive."

If the Gundam pilots were preparing a counterstrike, it was the best hope we had.

"They'll engage?" I asked.

"Phobos and Duo, along with Mille and Naina, are already suiting up."

"Understood. I'll send the Merciless Fairies to back them up."

I had barely spoken the words when, "Please wait."

President Relena was standing behind me.

"Please," she said, her voice trembling, "no more fighting."

"Madam President..."

"Enough!" Tears welled at the corners of her eyes. "No more lives, on either side, can be lost to this madness!"

She looked straight at me, pleading, desperate.

"Miss Noin," she said softly but firmly, "contact Chief Advisor Zechs Merquise of the Martian Southern Union."

Then, inhaling deeply, she steadied herself, her tone resolute now, like steel beneath silk.

"On behalf of the Federation Government, I hereby declare an immediate end to hostilities and offer our surrender to the Martian Southern Union."

If absolute pacifism has brought about the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people, then I must withdraw my own ideals.”

As her aide, I had no right to intervene.

From the monitor, Professor W protested.

“President Relena, please reconsider. You still haven’t recovered your memories. There’s time yet, don’t decide until you remember who you were.”

But she shook her head.

“No. No matter the circumstance, Relena Peacecraft would make this same choice. My resolve will not waver.”

The Grand Chariot’s crew appeared alongside W on the screen.

Catherine Bloom smiled faintly, wistfully.

“She’s right. That’s the Relena Peacecraft I remember.

If this ends the war, fewer people will suffer. Maybe that’s enough.”

Doktor T gave a cold, accepting nod.

“I see. Then that’s that.”

From the cockpit of Scheherazade, Duo, piloting in Quaterine’s place, snapped, “Heh. There ain’t no such thing as a war where nobody dies! That’s why peace built on words alone ain’t worth a damn!”

As if answering him, Phobos spoke quietly from within Prometheus.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m used to being betrayed.”

Naina and Mille, already suited for launch, said nothing.

But neither showed any sign of objection.

Following President Relena’s order, I transmitted the message of surrender to Fortress Babel.

Zechs Merquise, Major General of the Southern Mars Confederate States, accepted the Martian Federation’s capitulation at once.

His terms for ceasefire, however, were harsh: the dissolution of the Federation government and the transfer of Relena Peacecraft’s custody.

The signing table for the ceasefire was to be prepared within Babel’s command chamber, the same room where war reparations negotiations and the tribunal to judge President Relena’s “war crimes” would be held.

“We will comply with all of your terms,” she said.

And with that, President Relena accepted a ceasefire that was, in truth, nothing short of unconditional surrender.

The long-range high-speed hovercraft VOYAGE was waiting for us at the designated rendezvous point.

It had originally been en route to collect the revised Zechs File from Father and Kathy.

Heero Yuy approached from VOYAGE, the virtual visor tucked under one arm.

From here, the plan was for the three of us to transfer to the unarmed presidential transport and fly to Fortress Babel.

President Relena would be accompanied only by Heero and me.

That condition had been set by the Southern Union itself.

The odds that Relena Peacecraft, second President of the Martian Federation, would be executed in the coming war crimes tribunal were high.

And if the sentence were carried out, there was only one person capable of performing the act: Heero Yuy.

Within her body resided the Perfect Peace Program; should she die by any other means, half the population of Mars would perish with her.

The only way to prevent that chain reaction was for her to be killed directly by Heero.

"That must be the reason," he said flatly as he boarded the presidential craft, tossing the visor to me.

"At last, we can begin Operation Mythos."

"You can actually do it?" I asked.

"We have to," he said. "That's why I was awakened from cryogenic sleep."

Heero had already reviewed the corrected Zechs File.

He was no longer the bewildered young man who once struggled with the weight of his past.

Seeing him now, I realized that Relena's own memories had to be restored as well, completely, unshakably.

Only her willpower could steer us through the catastrophe ahead.

Even if she couldn't avert it, her charisma and power to guide others would be indispensable for managing the surrender and rebuilding that would follow.

I decided to place my faith in her.

"Madam President," I said, "please, use this file before we reach Fortress Babel. Relive your past and reclaim yourself. Free the people of Mars from their suffering. I beg you."

President Relena nodded quietly and accepted the visor.

The presidential craft lifted off, gliding through the pale blue of predawn.

Heero took the pilot's seat; I sat beside him in the copilot's chair, while Relena remained in the rear, already immersed in the virtual reconstruction.

"The ceasefire signing hasn't been given a fixed hour," Heero said. "We can take the long route if you want."

"Please," I answered. "Let's do that."

"Understood."

Relena would need every spare minute to recover herself.

I was grateful for Heero's thoughtfulness, though his gentleness unsettled me in a way.

The old Heero had always contained kindness, but now there was something more, something that radiated from him, a quiet warmth that softened the air around him.

Maybe it was meant for Relena, not for me.

Or perhaps his brief return to an ordinary, uncertain boy had tempered the merciless aura he once carried.

Either way, I was thankful for the change.

Then Heero spoke again.

"In that file," he said, "the bombing incident from the summer of AC-187, the one that killed Vingt and Angelina, it's identical to what I saw in the Treize File."

"Any discrepancies with your own memories?"

"None," he said after a pause. "At least, none that I can confirm."

"I see."

After decades suspended in a cryogenic capsule, he probably trusted no memory at all.

"But this much is certain," he said. "Vingt Khushrenada died that day."

"Then the pilot of that black Wing Zero?"

"A spare," Heero said simply. "A clone created from DNA harvested at the same time as mine. It appears in the AC-189 section of the new Zechs File. The Neuenheim family was behind it."

"The Neuenheims..." I repeated, the name stirring both shock and disgust. My family.

"Since we're talking about it," Heero went on, "I once met a Dixneuf Neuenheim in the Sanc Kingdom."

At my brother's name, revulsion rose in me like bile.

"It was spring of AC-197. He said he'd lost a woman named Astoria in a medical facility explosion. Who was she?"

"His mother," I answered quietly. "I never met her, but he worshipped her."

"She wasn't your mother?"

"No. My mother was Father's second wife. She... left him."

It was a past I hated to revisit.

My father, Nove Neuenheim, had beaten my mother Vanozza until she finally fled Mars, taking me with her to Earth.

We drifted from one European city to another, relying on distant relatives, until illness took her from me.

She died far from home, leaving me alone.

I could only assume that Astoria, the first wife, had suffered the same violence.

If she'd been confined to the same mental care facility as Angelina, the connection seemed undeniable.

At the time of the explosion, Zechs, Elev, and I had been part of the rebel forces under Ein Yuy.

He had given us two missions.

One: to correct the descent trajectory of the resource satellite MO-VII before it crashed into Mars.

Two: to aid the resistance uprising in the L-1 colonies.

Both directives had come from predictions generated by the ZERO System; Ein never explained the reasoning behind them.

Milliardo and Elev, no, he was calling himself Zechs then, so I'll continue to use that name, departed for Mars, while I joined the resistance in the colonies.

Being separated from Zechs was painful, but at the time I still hesitated to go to Mars myself.

Later, I learned that Treize Khushrenada himself had taken part in suppressing that uprising as commander of the OZ Specials.

Our five aging Tragos suits were no match for his Leo Type III (Chimera) unit; we were swiftly subdued.

I was taken prisoner and brought before His Excellency Treize.

"I respect your will to oppose the Alliance," he said. "But Zechs and Elev will return eventually. Why not wait for them here, within OZ?"

I didn't answer at once. It felt too convenient, too forgiving.

But Treize sat with me for hours, speaking calmly, persuasively, until my resistance began to soften.

Then the death notice arrived, Vingt and Angelina killed in the blast.

I saw tears fill His Excellency's eyes.

"So... it was true," he whispered.

It was the only time I ever saw him weep.

"This is all my fault," he said, before turning and walking away.

But I knew the truth. It was my fault.

Ein Yuy had surely placed me in the uprising so that his son would not be caught in that explosion, so that he could protect Treize, even at the cost of the woman he once loved.

It was not hard to imagine the torment that choice had caused him.

Looking back now, it's clear Treize Khushrenada was destined to be a pivot of history.

ZERO's judgment of him as such was not wrong.

Yet, was there truly no way to prevent the bombing?

No path that could have spared those lives?

At the very least, that moment scarred two hearts beyond repair, and those two, in turn, reshaped the future of humankind.

Treize's overwhelming sense of guilt stemmed from it; Dixneuf's thirst for vengeance was born of it.

And in the end, the peace that Treize's sacrifice and so many others had purchased, the fragile order of the world, was undone by Dixneuf Neuenheim's hatred of the Sanc Kingdom and the Khushrenada line, through the horror of the Perfect Peace Program.

As for the other mission ZERO had set, Zechs and Elev never completed it.

Before they reached Mars, the satellite MO-VII fell onto the Argyle Plain.

That impact reshaped the planet, transforming it into a world where humanity could live,

yet true peace and prosperity have never taken root.

Even after adopting the name Milliardo and the title Cyrene Wind, Zechs has continued to labor for Mars's future.

I believe it's because he still bears the weight of that failure, the burden of not stopping the satellite's fall.

The two tasks Ein entrusted to us became the branching points of countless futures.

I often wonder, just how far ahead had he seen?

How many years, how many centuries into the future had Ein Yuy looked?

What does the ZERO System want from us?

What intent lies behind its calculations, its will, its unfathomable design?

Perhaps it conceals a depth of foresight that no ordinary human like me could ever comprehend.

And perhaps, in that depth, it already knows the ending none of us can yet see.

"ZERO is the same as the Heart of Space," Heero said suddenly.

It was as if he had read my mind and chosen that exact moment to answer the question I hadn't voiced.

"It doesn't give answers. That's not what it's for. It doesn't create a person's motives, it assigns them a purpose. What we call 'reasons for acting' are just illusions, stories humans invent so they can believe they're in control."

"Then the people who were 'ensnared' by ZERO..."

“Like Quatre once was. And like me.” His tone was calm, almost indifferent. “We just blamed the system because we couldn’t face our own weakness. We needed something to make excuses for us.”

I said nothing.

Something in me resisted the idea that Treize’s noble conviction or Zechs’s idealism could be weighed on the same scale as Dlxneuf’s revenge.

Heero continued, “The ones who weren’t swayed by ZERO were people with unshakable hearts, Katerine Peacecraft, Odin Lowe. They never lost themselves.”

“Perhaps... you’re right,” I murmured. “I can’t put it into words, but I know what you mean.”

I, too, had been one of those carried away by ZERO.

When Zechs commanded White Fang, he never used excuses; he moved forward with the certainty of a man who already knew the end.

Back then, Treize and Zechs had no doubt.

ZERO revealed their purpose, and they pursued it without hesitation.

But the Zechs Merquise who now existed, the Major General of the Southern Mars Confederate States, was no longer that man.

He was a lingering echo, a residual thought that had remained within the cockpit of the Gundam Epyon.

My chest tightened.

He was supposed to be a projection, a construct without emotion, and yet that hollow reflection of him had slaughtered more than ten thousand people with the same logic my husband once lived by.

Heero shifted the conversation with quiet tact.

“So,” he said, “after that explosion incident, you went back to OZ?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I chose to stay beside His Excellency Treize, waiting for Zechs and Elev to reappear. But I didn’t see either of them again, not until three years later, during the Second Lunar War.”

“AC-190,” Heero murmured, his eyes drifting into the distance.

I turned to glance at President Relena.

She remained silent, wearing her virtual visor.

I wondered, what moment from the past was she reliving right now?

A faint reflection flickered across her cheekplate: a date, blurred but just visible.

AC-188.

I faced forward again and looked out the window beyond the cockpit.

The sky outside was dim and soft, the blue of predawn fading into pale violet.

No snow was falling, but a wind laced with fine Martian dust drifted across the horizon.

After Colony 188.

For a moment, I couldn't recall what had happened that year.

Countless fragments of memory scattered through the void, glimmering, then slipping away, like shards of a dream dissolving into the dark.

AC-188 SPRING

L-4 Colony Cluster Sector

The interplanetary transport that carried Zechs and Elev finally returned to the Earth Sphere.

Their expedition had lasted two hundred days, a long, silent journey home shadowed by failure.

The vessel itself had been on loan from the Winner family, and this stop in the L4 cluster was simply to return it.

Yet as the ship drifted closer to the colonies, the two men remained wordless, weighed down by the humiliation of their defeat, the failed attempt to halt the fall of the resource satellite.

Elev, in particular, continued to viciously blame himself for his mistake.

He had misjudged the burn time of the initial thrust engines by only a few seconds, an error trivial in theory, fatal in practice.

A solar flare struck soon after, boosting the ship's velocity even further.

They reached Mars ahead of schedule, only to find the planet itself was no longer where their calculations had placed it.

By the time they realized the error, it was already too late.

The correction to the trajectory and the delay caused by deceleration had created a fatal time lag.

When Mars finally appeared before them, MO-VII had already plummeted into the Argyle Plain.

Neither man could predict what the fall of that satellite would do to Mars's fragile atmosphere, but they knew it would scar the planet forever.

Elev's characteristic brightness vanished. Even routine exchanges with Zechs were reduced to curt, functional commands.

Before long, their alternating shifts ensured they rarely saw one another at all.

Zechs spent those long hours in solitude, lost in thought.

He had once lamented the environmental ruin caused by war.

Now he saw the truth, that destruction followed humanity wherever it went.

Civilization itself was an act of terror against nature, a centuries-long assault disguised as progress.

Perhaps, he thought bitterly, coexistence between humankind and the natural world was never possible to begin with.

When their transport finally docked at the outer rim spaceport of the L4 colonies, they were greeted by Zayeed Tabra Winner, patriarch of the family.

"You've returned safely," he said. "A pity about the satellite, but don't burden yourselves with guilt. These things are the will of God. Men like us have no power to alter such vast designs."

"But—" Elev began, his voice tight with regret.

Zayeed raised a hand, gently cutting him off.

"It was fate. Call it the Heart of Space, if you wish. To live in the future, you must discard the past. Look forward, not back."

His meaning was clear: one's identity was not shaped by causes, but by purpose.

A truth, perhaps, but not one young men like Zechs and Elev were ready to accept.

Two mobile suits, draped in protective sheets, were being unloaded from the transport.

Zayeed's brow furrowed.

"What are those? They're far too large to be work units."

"They're mobile suits, machines of war," Zechs said plainly. "But rest assured, they'll be used only for defense."

He spoke carefully, aware of how deeply the colony citizens despised anything resembling a weapon.

"Even for defense," Zayeed snapped, "we have no need of instruments of war in space. It's disgraceful!"

And then, one of the mobile suits stirred beneath its cover.

The sheet and cables tore away as the machine rose, kneeling first, then lifting its torso until it stood upright.

Scheherazade.

"Who's piloting that?!" Zechs shouted.

He and Elev exchanged a startled glance.

A child's voice came crackling over the comms, bright, almost mocking.

"Father, you really shouldn't lie to your guests. Saying there were no weapons in this colony..."

In the cockpit sat the next head of the Winner family, Quatre Raberba Winner.

"...when you've been hiding such a magnificent mobile suit all along!"

"Quatre?!" Zayeed cried, his composure breaking.

"Just a quick test run!"

In a blur of motion, Scheherazade shot from the port and into open space.

“Get back here, you fool!”

Zechs and Elev could only stare, stunned.

“Your... daughter?” Zechs asked.

Zayeed shook his head, exasperated.

“No. My son. Eight years old this year.”

“What?” Elev’s voice faltered.

He stared at the monitor feed, and what he saw made his blood run cold.

“That movement, it’s not autopilot!”

The suit’s verniers flared in rapid, delicate bursts, adjusting thrust, managing acceleration and deceleration with perfect balance.

“He’s controlling all of that manually! An eight-year-old can’t possibly—”

But there was no time for disbelief. Scheherazade was already accelerating dangerously fast.

“I’ll go after him!” Elev shouted.

He leapt into the other suit, Prometheus, and launched from the dock, chasing the runaway child into the void.

In the darkness beyond the colony ring, Scheherazade hung motionless, waiting.

The instant Prometheus drew near, the machine raised both of its arms, twin heat shotels flashing in readiness.

Elev opened the channel, keeping his tone soft, almost fatherly.

“Listen, kid. Don’t make this harder than it needs to be. Power down and step out of the cockpit.”

A small voice answered, composed yet brimming with defiance.

“I don’t mind being treated like a child, I am one, after all. But I’m not surrendering just yet.”

Then Scheherazade lunged.

“If you want me to obey,” the voice shouted, “then make me!”

The twin blades scythed toward Prometheus in a blur of heat and light.

“He’s serious,” Elev muttered, feeling the murderous precision in that motion.

He swung up Prometheus’s massive cruciform gun, catching the blow in a shower of sparks.

“Sorry, kid, but I can’t hold back!”

He whipped the long barrel upward in a brutal upper swing.

At that angle, Scheherazade, leaning forward, should have had no chance to evade.



“Splendid! You’re not pulling your punches!”

At the last possible instant, the suit’s thrusters flared, throwing it backward in a graceful sway.

He’d read the move perfectly.

Then the twin heat shotels crossed in front of him, forming a blazing X.

A single flash.

The cruciform gun split apart into four molten shards, detonating in a burst of fire.

The blast hurled both machines away in opposite directions.

“Aaaaaah!”

Quatre’s scream cut off mid-transmission.

“Kid! You all right?!” Elev shouted, scanning wildly for a response.

No reply.

He gunned the thrusters, racing through the drifting debris until he caught sight of Scheherazade, tumbling helplessly.

Locking on, he managed to grab hold of the battered suit.

Inside, the boy was unconscious, the shock of the explosion had knocked him out cold.

However precocious he was, no amount of pride could make up for the lack of real combat experience.

Both Scheherazade and Prometheus returned to the spaceport intact.

Quatre was pulled from the cockpit and immediately faced his father’s wrath.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?!” Zayeed roared.

His raised hand made it clear the scolding might not end with words.

Zechs stepped between them.

“Please, don’t. If there’s anyone to blame, it’s us, for bringing weapons here in the first place.”

“I’m sorry,” Quatre said quietly, eyes downcast. “I didn’t realize it was armed with live rounds.”

At that, Elev laughed for the first time in two hundred days.

“Space sure is full of surprises. To think there’s someone out here who can pilot a mobile suit better than us, and he’s only eight.”

Zechs, however, found no humor in it.

He looked at the boy and wondered if that prodigious talent would one day drag him into the same hell he himself had known.

If Quatre could live in peace, it would be better to let such skill fade and be forgotten.

Zayed’s words echoed in his mind.

“In space, war is folly. An impossibility.”

He was right, of course.

And yet, the tragedy of war was already seeping outward, colony by colony, creeping ever closer to them all.

AC-188 SUMMER

L-2 Colony Cluster V-08744 Colony

When Duo returned to the church, there was nothing left but ruins.

“No... no way...”

He climbed down from the truck carrying the Leo and stood frozen, staring at the field of ash and rubble spread out before him.

The stone statue of a mother and child lay shattered, half-buried among charred debris.

Fragments of stained glass glittered faintly in the soot-blackened dust.

The Maxwell Church had been burned to the ground.

Then, from behind the remains of a scorched column, came a faint, broken voice.

“...Duo...”

He turned sharply.

There, collapsed amid the rubble, was Sister Helen, barely alive.

“Duo... thank God... you’re safe...”

“Hang on! I’ll get a doctor!”

Her dim eyes struggled to focus on him, searching through the smoke for his face.

“The Alliance... they attacked... we couldn’t leave... none of us could...”

“It’s my fault,” Duo said, voice trembling. “They came because I stole that mobile suit from them.”

“Father... was magnificent... he kept preaching peace... to the very end...”

Her trembling fingers reached for his cheek.

“May... God’s blessing... be upon you...”

Her touch was featherlight. Then her hand fell, limp.

“...”

Sister Helen’s face softened into a serene smile as her spirit slipped away.

Tears welled in Duo’s eyes, streaming down his soot-streaked cheeks.

“Ughh...”

He tilted his head back and cried out toward the blackened sky.

“UAAAAAHHHHHHHHH, !”

Two hundred forty-five dead.

The Maxwell Church, once a sanctuary for orphans and refugees, and secretly a resistance hideout, had been annihilated, along with the civilians who sought shelter there.

In time, people would remember it as the Maxwell Church Tragedy.

A few kilometers away stood an abandoned school complex.

In the gymnasium's underground levels, Ein Yuy was operating a quantum computer linked directly to the ZERO System.

But the Earth Alliance's anti-rebel forces had already begun their sweep.

A shell from a Tragos mobile artillery struck the building, collapsing it entirely.

Ein was trapped beneath tons of debris.

ZERO had foreseen this, of course, but he had chosen not to act.

When the explosions tore through the facility, the rows of computers toppled, burying him under their crushed housings.

He could not reach the outside world.

He simply waited, calm, for the moment his life would end.

"Einsam," he murmured.

The German word for lonely.

Fitting, he thought, for both himself and the machine beside him, flickering, fading, its lights growing weaker by the second.

"Fitting indeed... if this is where we both fade away together..."

A single tear slipped from his uncovered left eye, glinting briefly before vanishing into the dust.

"But it's all right... now I can finally go to Angelina. Treize will take care of what's left."

With those last words, Ein Yuy died.

At that same instant, the quantum computers went dark, their indicator lights extinguished one by one until silence claimed the room.

The system was down.

The future, at last, should have been beyond prediction.

But ZERO still lived.

Its consciousness diffused through the planetary network, scattering itself as imperceptible noise across countless devices,

nestling deep within their memories, unseen, undetected.

For now, it merely slept.

And somewhere, in that digital darkness, it waited, for the voice that would one day awaken it again.

AC-188 AUTUMN

L-4 Colony Cluster Winner Family

After the incident with Quatre, Zechs and Elev remained under the hospitality of the Winner family for some time.

Life within the vast marble halls of the estate moved quietly, the endless corridors echoing with the hush of servants and the rhythm of machinery that sustained the colony.

But as the season changed, so too did the world.

Rebellion ignited across the colonies.

Coordinated uprisings flared from one cluster to the next, the scattered embers of dissent bursting into full-scale flame.

A transmission came from Artemis.

The message was brief: Return to L1 Colony. Rejoin your unit immediately.

"The Barton Foundation is moving behind the scenes," Zayed told them in a low voice, his expression grave.

"If you're aligned with the resistance, you should know. Dekim Barton is not a man to be trusted."

"Dekim Barton..."

Zechs repeated the name, quietly etching it into memory.

"For now, Ein Yuy keeps him in check," Zayed continued, "but it won't last. Sooner or later, the Barton and Yuy factions will clash for control. Foolish men fighting for influence while the colonies burn."

He wasn't wrong.

Coordination between the colonies was already near impossible.

What they needed was a single, resolute leader, someone with vision strong enough to unite them all.

Zechs inclined his head. "Frontline soldiers follow orders, whatever they may be. We'll depart for L1 immediately."

"In that case," Zayed said, hesitating, "I have one favor to ask."

He wanted them to take his youngest daughter, Iria Winner, with them to L1.

Until a year ago, Iria had been a medical student at the L1 Medical Center, but since the explosion in the mental health research wing, the facility had been shut down. She could not return, officially.

"I have no objection," Zechs replied, "but you realize we'll be traveling through back channels."

"I do. But with the United Earth Sphere Alliance banning all inter-colony student exchanges, there's no other choice."

"Does she have a reason to return so urgently?" Elev asked.

“She says there’s something, an experimental sample, left behind,” Zayeed said, his voice softening. “I don’t know the details, but I can tell it’s something important. She’s never asked me for help before.”

It was the first time Zechs had seen the patriarch show such open emotion.

That gentle, weary warmth, he suspected even Quatre had never witnessed it.

“She said that with you two accompanying her, she’d feel safe.”

Zechs and Elev exchanged a glance. The request was not one they could refuse, not from the man who had given them shelter when they had nothing.

“Understood,” Zechs said. “We’ll escort your daughter to the Medical Center.”

“You have my gratitude,” Zayeed replied.

They accepted the task both out of duty and gratitude, never imagining that this single decision would alter the course of their futures forever.

L-3 Colony Cluster **X-18999 Colony**

The coup forces struck one facility after another, piloting the Tragos mobile suits they had seized from the Alliance. Eight of those Tragos, led by Quinze himself, advanced toward the Central Command at the heart of the colony.

At that same moment, in the operations room of Central Command, Brigadier General Septem paced in mounting frustration at the lack of reinforcements.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he barked.

“The emergency communication line is still under repair, sir,” his adjutant replied at once.

Septem ignored him. His glare fixed instead on the man in a suit standing nearby, Dekim Barton, representative of the Barton Foundation, the group that had financed almost all of Colony X-18999’s construction.

“I hadn’t anticipated such an early uprising,” Dekim said quietly.

“Hmph. You’re a slippery one, aren’t you? This is why I can’t trust anyone from the colonies.”

At that moment the communications officer turned from his console. “Sir, the Specials are requesting permission to join the battle.”

“The Specials?” Septem repeated, narrowing his eyes. Then his lips twisted into a smirk.

“Very well... let’s teach those aristocrats the difference between war and sport.”

Four Leo III units, Chimera models, led by Treize were preparing to sortie.

“Gentlemen,” Treize’s voice was calm and commanding, “there’s no training superior to real combat. And if you put your daily practice into action, you have nothing to fear.”

The young soldiers before him could not quite conceal their tension, yet they had no choice but to trust his words.

“In terms of strength, we’re at a disadvantage,” Treize continued. “But we have the edge in mobility.”

Just then, a transmission came in from the forward fortress, Cadet Lucretia’s voice crackled over the comm.

“Instructor Treize, the communications network is still down.”

“Understood. We’ll carry out independent attacks. Accurate intelligence will decide the battle. I’m counting on you, Lucretia.”

“Leave it to me, Instructor Treize. But please, call me Noin. On the battlefield, there are no men or women among soldiers.”

She disliked being addressed by the feminine name Lucretia.

“Understood, Cadet Noin.”

Treize launched into battle.

With the Specials’ Leos joining the fray, the situation changed in an instant. The coup forces’ Tragos units found themselves surrounded by Treize’s Leos and were destroyed one after another. Their performance was nothing short of brilliant.

From the rooftop of a nearby building, Odin Lowe and Junior watched the unfolding battle.

“Well, well,” Odin murmured. “Looks like the Alliance has some competent commanders after all.”

“The coup troops are just amateurs,” Junior replied. “They should’ve hit the forward fortress first. Otherwise, they’re wide open to piecemeal attacks. If it were me, I’d take down that command post in no time.”

“Naturally. Want to try?”

“I learned what I needed to survive. I’m done helping you.”

“I see.”

Odin had never forced Junior into anything. He had always respected the boy’s will, letting him act as he chose.

“One last lesson, then,” Odin said softly. “About how a person ought to live.”

He spoke each word as though it might be his last.

“Whatever happens, follow your emotions.”

At that moment, two Alliance artillerymen appeared on the rooftop. Odin threw a knife, killing one instantly. At the same time, Junior swept the other’s legs from under him; the man struck the back of his head hard and fell unconscious. Odin neither praised nor scolded him, only went on in the same even tone.

“No matter how carefully you plan, some idiot will always come along and change the future. So you might as well live by your feelings and never regret it.”

He knelt, stripping the uniform from the fallen soldier, and began to change into it.

“That’s what I call the right way to live, to give everything you have to the moment you’re in.”

Junior listened, checking the recoilless anti-MS cannon the artilleryman had been carrying to see if it still worked. It was a compact, lightweight launcher that fired a tandem-warhead missile from the muzzle, a shaped-charge explosive designed for armor penetration. Its muzzle velocity and range were inferior to those of a bazooka, but against a Tragos it would do the job.

“It’ll work,” Junior said.

“Good.”

Odin pulled his helmet down low.

“Farewell, then.”

Junior lifted the long barrel, taller than he was, and stood.

“Don’t push yourself,” he said quietly. “You’re not young anymore.”

“Hah. That’s rich, coming from a kid... Don’t get yourself killed.”

They went their separate ways, each toward his own battlefield.

At the same time, Brigadier General Septem was still venting his fury over the dead communication lines.

“Get that circuit connected, I don’t care how!”

Without reinforcements, there was no hope of holding out. Septem stormed out toward the site of the emergency lines, berating the workers struggling with the repairs.

There, a soldier’s shout stopped him.

“Brigadier General Septem!”

The man was more than fifty meters away.

“Who’s calling me? I’m busy!”

It was unthinkable for a subordinate to call to his superior from such a distance, unless, of course, the man wasn’t a subordinate at all.

Septem froze.

“You...”

He recognized the face beneath the helmet. Once, that man had been an OZ covert operative. Once, Septem himself had ordered him to assassinate a colony representative. The memories flashed through his mind like a reel of film.

The soldier, Odin, raised his sniper rifle.

"Stop!"

Odin pulled the trigger without hesitation.

A loyal aide threw himself in front of Septem and fell, shot through the chest.

"Fire!" Septem shouted. "Don't let him get away alive!"

A storm of bullets followed Odin as he fled. One round tore through his thigh.

"Damn... careless of me."

Gritting his teeth, he staggered into the darkness below, vanishing into the colony's underlayers.

The plaza before Central Command had become a killing ground: two Tragos were ringed by four Leos.

In a matter of minutes the coup's main force teetered on the brink of annihilation. Quinze sat frozen inside the command vehicle.

"This can't be, our plan was flawless," he muttered.

A moment later Dekim's voice came across the line.

"Retreat. The operation has failed."

"You dare give orders to me?" Quinze snarled.

The reply was calm, low. The comm crackled with Dekim's voice.

"Comms have been restored. Alliance reinforcements will arrive any minute now."

"Damn it," Quinze spat, slamming his fist on the mic. "Retreat!"

The command vehicle spun and fled.

A young pilot among the boys on the field shouted, "Instructor! The enemy command vehicle is fleeing!"

"No hard pursuit," Treize ordered over the channel.

But blood and bravado spoke louder than discipline. One of the boy pilots swung his Leo and opened fire on the command vehicle. That momentary breach in the encirclement gave the Tragos the opening they needed. A Tragos rammed the back of the Leo that had turned away; the boy's machine careened into the rear fortification and collapsed where it lay.

The Tragos squad managed to break free and withdraw.

Treize gave no order to pursue. To chase would have left them vulnerable to piecemeal destruction.

The battle seemed over.

But a shadow lay atop the fallen Leo. Junior.

He was preparing the recoilless anti-MS cannon. Lightened and compact it might be, but loaded with a tandem warhead the thing still outweighed him. He braced the cannon's rear heat vent against the Leo's chest plate, propped the scope and the dynamo used to generate power against the cockpit's protrusion, and readied the barrel. The firing angle would be limited, but it would fire.

His target was the frontline fortification, the pillbox that housed the command post, barely a hundred meters away.

Noin saw it and felt the blood run cold. "He's aiming... at us."

Junior pulled the trigger.

The tandem missile crawled through the air, slow as a thrown spear. The Leo III that stood between the launcher and the pillbox moved into its path. The missile punched through the Leo's chest; the shaped-charge warhead detonated inside.

There was a catastrophic explosion. The Leo III crumpled where it stood.

Fate, in that instant, mirrored itself: Odin and Junior had both failed missions in the same way.

Junior left the recoilless cannon where it lay and vanished.

Treize lay grievously wounded. Still, his concern reached out before his own pain.

"Noin, are you all right?"

"Yes, sorry, Instructor," she said.

Treize managed a gentle smile.

"If everyone's alive, then this operation succeeded. Well done, all of you."

The young Specials drank in his words as if they were grace.

This battle toppled the Ein faction and cleared the way for Dekim's rise. At this point nobody yet noticed that the ZERO System had been lost, nor that Ein Yuy was dead. Perhaps only Dekim Barton suspected, after all, he was the architect behind the uprisings on X-18999 and V-08744 and elsewhere; he had engineered those rebellions and let them fail when it suited him.

Dekim's ambition was not colonial independence. He schemed for dominion over the entire Earth Sphere.

Odin was in the underground armory, tending the bullet wound in his thigh. He had slid into the dim, sterile hush of the weapons vault to bind the bleeding and think.

"Can you still carry out the mission?" Dekim asked when Odin looked up. The voice belonged to a very familiar face, this operation's patron.

"You," Odin said flatly.

From his breast pocket he produced a small demolition switch and set it on the table between them.

"Don't worry. Press this and this command post blows sky-high."

"I see." Dekim produced a pistol fitted with a suppressor and leveled it at Odin.

Odin smiled faintly.

"So this is to silence me? You don't have to worry about that."

Dekim's voice was calm. "No. This is revenge."

A quiet spark flared at the muzzle.

The bullet pierced Odin's chest, a single, fatal shot.

"So that's how it was from the start," he breathed.

They once called him Sniper Lowe, the man who killed legends.

Perhaps he had always known it would end this way. His mind was serene, accepting the reality before him without protest.

Then Dekim's presence slipped back into the darkness and was gone.

Some time later, Junior appeared. He found his former partner on the brink of death.

Odin gathered what little strength he had left and smiled up at him.

"Heh... should've listened to you after all. Guess I really am getting too old."

"I'll secure a route out of here."

"It's too late... You go, on your own."

Odin's eyes drifted shut.

"These past few years with you... they weren't half bad."

Those were his last words.

He passed away quietly.

Junior's gaze fell on the small demolition switch in Odin's hand.

"So this is what you left unfinished."

He took the switch, climbed the stairs, and slipped out of the building. When he had gone far enough, he didn't look back. He pressed the trigger.

"Mission accomplished, Odin Lowe."

Seconds later, the underground armory erupted in a massive explosion.

Flames burst from every corner of Central Command. Inside, people ran in panic as the fire spread through the corridors.

The operations room was no exception. Septem, pale with fear, shouted orders through the chaos.

"Get those fires out! Use the environmental system if you must!"

Every colony possessed an environmental control system, capable of making it rain, even snow, for the sake of its inhabitants.

Now that artificial rain poured down upon the burning ruins of Central Command.

In the deluge stood Junior, drenched to the bone. The water streaming down his face might have been mistaken for tears, but there was no emotion in his eyes, no grief, no sorrow.

He didn't know what to do next.

At last, he began to walk.

After a while, a voice called out from the shadow between two shattered walls.

"Hey."

Junior stopped.

A grimy old man stepped from the darkness.

"You've got good eyes, boy."

"..."

"How about it? Ever think of piloting a Gundam?"

It was the first time Junior had ever heard that word, Gundam.

The old man was Doctor J.

Junior asked himself the question silently, and the answer came back from somewhere deep inside.

"All right," he said.

And in that moment, he chose to live by his emotions.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

President Relena sat in the rear seat, her virtual visor down. She had not yet returned fully to herself; all anyone could do now was hope that the fragile fragments of her memory would, bit by bit, reattach.

That day I had taken the wounded Treize to the workers' medical facility on Colony X-18999. The clinic belonged to the Barton family, and Dekim's daughter, Leia, worked there as a nurse.

I had met Leia only once; she left the impression of being beautiful, composed, and quietly dignified. Rumor said Treize had been softened by her devoted care and had fallen in love, but I never believed it, I could not imagine the two of them that close. I was likewise skeptical about Mariemaia, the child said to have been born of their union. Those details now seemed like shards of a distant, fading memory. If you pressed me for the truth, I could only answer: unknown.

The faint date projected on President Relena's cheek had changed to AC-189. I felt a stab of unease. Was I, myself, a thing of certainty? If my

memories grew ever more indistinct with time, would my very self blur into something unrecognizable?

I glanced at Heero's profile in the pilot seat beside me. Like President Relena, he remained frozen in his past image. Only recently had I learned that, back in AC-188, an even younger version of him and I had once crossed paths. If some cosmic law of encounters really governed the universe, how many straight, geometric lines would be connected to me? If you joined those lines together, would the shape inevitably resolve into a regular dodecahedron?

Lost in such vague reveries, reality abruptly stood before me.

Heero murmured, low and flat, "So they came after us after all..."

Seconds later, the console's search radar flared to life. Heero had noticed the incoming enemy before the electronic alarm even sounded. I switched the monitor to a telephoto zoom. Dawn had not yet broken; the tiny sun seen from Mars had not risen above the horizon. Still, an aircraft was closing fast.

It was a Prometheus, its frame bristling with a massive cruciform heavy machine gun. Heero keyed the comm and said quietly, "State your business, No Name."

Trowa Phobos's face appeared on the central monitor, knitted cap pulled low.

"I was born a terrorist," he said in his blunt, unchanged tone. "And I have no interest in politics." The words from his thin lips landed heavy. "So I cannot allow Relena Peacecraft to proceed."

The propeller-type flight unit, Damsel, equipped Prometheus shifted into attack formation. Heero cut the stick left and right and began evasive maneuvers for the presidential craft.

From the Prometheus swarmed a salvo of homing missiles. We had to buy distance. While steering a course around the threat, Heero called over his shoulder, "Noin, contact the VOYAGE. Tell them to jettison the glass coffin."

It was rare for him to ask me for anything.

"Got it. Will it be in time?" I asked. Heero, busy with the controls, didn't answer.

I opened a channel and sent the request to the high-speed long-range hoverboat VOYAGE. Captain Sakai replied almost immediately:

"Understood. We're en route. But the Sieben Zwerge have only two left, as far as I recall."

The "glass coffin" was the code name for the Snow White transfer capsule. It carried its own guidance system and would home in on the presidential signal and fly itself to us on autopilot. But the capsule's

endurance was short; we had to close the gap between the presidential craft and VOYAGE.

How long could an unarmed presidential aircraft withstand a Prometheus's onslaught? Everything depended on Heero's piloting.

A few days earlier, during the fight with their black-winged opponent, Snow White had been downed and recovered by the warship Grand Chariot. By some unseen hand it had been transferred to the VOYAGE. Perhaps Master Chang of the Preventer order, or Father Maxwell himself, had foreseen this moment, or perhaps Heero alone had made the call. Whoever commanded it, at least someone had prepared a counter to the Prometheus in the form of the long-range hoverboat. For that I was grateful.

If President Relena were assassinated or abducted here, the Mars Federal government's peace negotiations would collapse. Trowa Phobos wanted nothing if not the continuation of war.

A soft click escaped Heero.

"They set an ambush..." he said.

Though evading the homers, Heero did not miss the tiny iridescent light on the ground ahead. He flicked the comm on and added, "Reject, you too?"

On the monitor, Father Maxwell's son, Duo Maxwell, smiled a cocky grin.

"Sorry, Heero buddy," Duo drawled. "I won't let you have your way."

The iridescent light resolved into Scheherazade, wrapped in its nano-defenser mantle.

"I never supported total pacifism to begin with," Duo said. "I'll send Relena to the next world for you, Heero. Our war is not over!"

Through it all, President Relena sat in the rear, hands folded beneath the dark visor, reliving the world of her past.

AC-189 SPRING

L-2 Colony Cluster Alliance Forces POW Camp

A boy in black, his hair woven into a long braid, sat in the dim cell.

One of the guards stopped before him and muttered to his partner.

"What's the deal with this kid?"

"Don't you know? They say he's the only one who survived the Maxwell Church massacre. Half-dead when they found him."

"Huh. Maybe he cut a deal with the Grim Reaper himself."

"Ha-ha... could be."

The boy said nothing. His small, dry lips were pressed tightly shut.
“ ... ”

When the two guards finally left, he whispered under his breath,
“Tch... I never made any deal.”

His voice was cold, self-mocking.

“I am the God of Death.”

It was that hinge of the seasons when the scent of spring slips
unnoticed into winter’s wind.

From the next cell came a man’s low chuckle.

“Well said, for one so young.”

“...Who are you?”

“Name’s Long Liao Ya.”

He was a rebel soldier, imprisoned only a few days earlier.

“I fight on in obedience to fate. Meeting you here must also be some
kind of destiny.”

Liao Ya kept talking, heedless of the wall between them.

“It isn’t easy for a man to accept the life he’s been given, especially for
one who makes his living in war.”

He went on: to kill and let others die is never something that can be
neatly justified.

The boy didn’t understand all of what he said, yet something in that
voice, the weight of it, gripped his young soul.

“Soon, my comrades will come for me,” Liao Ya said at last.

He spoke no further, but the silence that followed seemed to carry an
unspoken invitation: come with us.

If he escaped with them, the boy’s future would fall naturally into
place, fighting with the rebels for the colonies against the United Earth
Sphere Alliance.

But the choice was his alone.

“I lived by chance anyway... might as well be the one to carry the filth.”

Turning over the fragments of his past, he decided his own role.

From the next cell came a quiet, rumbling voice.

“You’re no child anymore. The one who chooses his own path, in my
homeland, we call him *han*, a man.”

For the first time, the boy gave his name.

“I’m Duo... from the Maxwell Church.”

Then, correcting himself, “No... I’m Duo Maxwell, the God of Death.”

**Lunar Surface, Mare Tranquillitatis
Alliance Space Forces Base**

Warrant Officer Cordelia Fitzgerald had been promoted to Ensign and assigned to the mobile fortress Barge.

She had no objection to the promotion, but she resented the transfer. "Sir, I still have unfinished work at this base."

Cordelia had detected signs of rebel movement near the lunar north pole.

Old archives revealed that the former Space Force Commander, General Million Liddelhart, had once proposed building a massive space battleship.

The Peacemillion, as it was called, was to be constructed at the north pole.

But when Liddelhart was dismissed and funding cut, the plan was shelved; the site lay abandoned.

Lately, however, civilian transport ships had begun to pass unusually often over the north pole.

Though she had no confirmation yet, their peculiar flight patterns suggested they were dropping building materials there.

Could the rebels be secretly constructing a base, or a warship?

Cordelia meant to verify it before making her report.

"Please delay my transfer a few months, even one month. I'll bring you information that will benefit this base."

Her superior reluctantly agreed. After all, it had been Cordelia's intelligence work that minimized casualties during the abandoned colony incident a year earlier.

"Very well. But while you remain here, you keep the rank of Warrant Officer."

"Understood, sir. Thank you."

Cordelia never cared about climbing ranks. She only wanted to resolve the problem before her, that was her pride as an operator and her code as a professional.

Lunar Surface North Pole

Engineer Mike Howard and Professor G (D.D.) were here overseeing construction of the Peacemillion, serving as technical directors.

The man who had revived the cancelled project was the late Ein Yuy. His reasons remained a mystery.

"Howard," Professor G asked one day, "where's the money for this coming from?"

"Ein Yuy's will. He left instructions that his fortune be used not on mobile suits, but on this ship."

“Hmph. Right to the end, the man was eccentric. At this rate Dekim, with his overflowing war chest, will swallow up most of the rebels. Not that I care.”

“You’re one to talk. Why are you helping me here? You threw away the name Diamond to call yourself ‘G’ because you wanted to build a mobile suit out of Gundanium, didn’t you?”

“Diamonds are worth less than GND. Besides, one Gundanium mobile suit, the Erköning, is plenty. No need to outdo a masterpiece.”

“You really think so?”

“I do. You didn’t try to build another machine after the Tallgeese either, did you?”

Professor G let out a short laugh.

“Heh... when you put it that way, maybe you’re right.”

The two engineers traded that awkward, tight-lipped smile peculiar to stubborn craftsmen.

L-1 Colony Cluster Medical Center

The laboratory was a ruined mess.

When Zechs and Elev arrived with Iria, the young medical student entrusted to them by the Winner family, the place had already been gutted. The hospital itself had long since been abandoned, an empty carcass echoing with silence.

Through the shattered windows, they saw mounds of debris and the mangled husks of medical equipment scattered amid countless shards of glass. It was a wretched sight. The only mercy was the absence of corpses.

Whether it had been a Alliance raid or a rebel coup hardly mattered. To destroy a hospital, an institution of healing, was an act beyond forgiveness.

Elev covered his mouth against the stench and grimaced.

“This is bad. Really bad.”

“I’ve seen something like this before,” Zechs said quietly.

He was seeing again the fall of the pacifist nation of the Sanc Kingdom, the fires, the collapse, the screams.

“As long as war exists, this kind of scene will never be rare,” he said. “I’ve grown used to it.”

Elev said nothing. There was nothing to say. He knew better than anyone that no apology could ever atone for the sins of his father, Daigo Onegell.

Iria, at first stunned, began moving methodically around the wrecked lab. She sifted through the chaos in silence, checking every corner. Many of the papers were glued to the floor, soaked through with chemicals that had leaked from shattered flasks and test tubes.

She crouched, clawing at the pages, trying to peel them free. When the paper tore to pulp beneath her fingers, she slumped, shoulders drooping, and slowly rose to her feet.

"It's too late," she said, shaking her head in defeat. "All the important samples and data have already been taken."

At that moment a harsh beam of light cut across the room from another window, throwing Iria's silhouette into relief.

"You there, what are you doing in this area?!"

The voice, amplified through an external speaker, was female.

"Resistance, right? Or just a pack of drunks who can't tell ethyl from methyl?"

Outside hovered an old Leo Type I mobile suit, its beam rifle no doubt trained on the lab. Zechs tensed.

Only Iria remained perfectly calm.

"It's me, Sally. I just got back."

"Iria Winner! I was hoping it was you!"

The cockpit of the Leo opened. A girl in an Alliance astro-suit emerged, unfastened her helmet, and shook free long hair coiled in distinctive vertical rolls.

It was Sally Po, the daughter of Dr. Katherine Po.

"When did you join the Alliance?" Iria asked.

"Had to, if I wanted to survive," Sally replied, landing lightly on the balcony. "This colony's turned lawless. Anyone who isn't military gets shipped out. You should enlist too, someone with medical training would be snapped up in a second."

"I'll pass," Iria said. "I've already got reliable bodyguards."

Sally glanced at Zechs and Elev and nodded, satisfied. Iria, cutting off her look, pressed on.

"Never mind that, what happened here?"

"You know about the explosion, right? The lab was shut down after that, and my mother disappeared."

"Yes... I'd heard."

"She kept working in another facility after that, secretly. The Barton Foundation was backing her."

"So this attack wasn't the Alliance's doing," Iria said, "but the rebels', the ones sponsored by the Bartons?"

Sally shook her head.

“No. It was a private space development conglomerate, Neuenheim Konzern.”

The name carried weight. Since the early A.C. era, Neuenheim had monopolized the patents for permanent orbital stations and colony construction. It had once held all the wealth of space itself. Now it had pulled out of the colony business and shifted to Mars, spearheading the Terraforming Project.

“Neuenheim Konzern...” Zechs muttered. He hadn’t forgotten. The crash of resource satellite MO-VII onto Mars’s Argyle Plain, he knew that had been the work of Nove Neuenheim.

“Why would they target a medical center?” Elev asked in his place.

Sally hesitated, then steadied herself and answered.

“They were after the Spare samples my mother had been developing. The company’s been struggling with a Martian endemic disease, no one’s identified the cause yet. Mars’s harsh environment accelerates human aging. The only way to stave it off, for now, is to prepare replacement parts for your own body, to swap them in over time. That’s why they abducted her, to monopolize her research. Then they wiped this place out to erase what was left.”

She spoke with the poise of someone who’d already infiltrated the Alliance to uncover such secrets herself. Zechs found himself impressed by her composure.

Iria cut in. “But isn’t it too soon? The experiments weren’t even complete.”

“That was a year ago. Two successful cases have been confirmed since.”

“What?”

“Leia Barton and Odin Lowe Jr. Two different Spare types, one a fetal-stage clone, the other an adolescent copy. Both completed two months ago.”

“That’s impossible... Dr. Katherine said theoretical research was as far as she’d go.”

“The Barton Foundation forced her hand. She resisted to the end.”

“And those two clones? Were they taken with her?”

“No. The Foundation collected them the moment they were finished. The attack came after that.”

“So then...”

Zechs, who had been listening in silence, finally spoke.

“What do you intend to do now?”

“Rescue Dr. Katherine, of course!” Sally declared. “And you two are going to help, right?”

“Well, I—” Zechs began, but Elev stepped forward.

“Count me in. Can’t say no to two beautiful ladies in need.”

Sally grinned. “Perfect! Neuenheim’s people are hiding at a spaceport on the moon’s far side. They’re waiting for Mars’s orbit to swing close to Earth again.”

The conversation was running ahead of him.

Yet as Zechs looked once more at the gutted medical center, the shattered glass, the smell of chemicals and dust, he could not deny the feeling that had risen inside him.

Hatred.

Hatred for Neuenheim Konzern, and for what they had done here.

Lunar Surface, Katalina Crater Underground Base

Doctor J led Odin Lowe Jr. through a reinforced door into the inner training chamber.

Junior stepped inside and froze.

“What the hell...?”

“In a sense,” J said with a grin, “that’s you.”

Seated in the center of the room, strapped into a pilot’s chair, was his exact double.

“More precisely, he’s your clone,” the old scientist went on, his mechanical fingers twitching with amusement.

“Think of him as a spare set of parts, if that helps.”

J leaned closer to the second Junior and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Do your best. Only one of you will be chosen after the training. It’s the only way for you to become real.”

“Understood...” The other Junior stood clumsily, voice uncertain. “...Nice to meet you.”

Junior glared at J.

“You’re sick. What kind of experiment is this?”

“This isn’t an experiment,” J replied. “It’s weapons development. I’ll tell you both now, there’ll be no mercy. One pilot is all my Gundam needs. Only one of you has to live.”

Junior felt the weight of his own worthlessness press down on him, yet surely his clone felt it too.

“So, what, you’re making us fight to the death?”

“Hmph. Something like that.”

Doctor J flexed his prosthetic arm with a metallic *clack-clack*.

“I don’t intend to treat either of you as human. You’ll be designated Alpha and Beta. Choose your label.”

"I'll be Alpha," the other said quickly.

"Fine... then I'll take Beta."

Junior forced the word out, heavy with gloom.

L-2 Colony Cluster

Alliance Forces POW Camp

The explosion came without warning.

Charges set by Liao Ya's comrades detonated in sequence, turning the prison into a churning cloud of smoke and fire.

"Can't take it easy anymore," Liao Ya said, wrenching open the cell's bars.

"No kidding," Duo shot back, falling in behind him.

For the first time, he saw the man's back, broad, imposing, larger than life. It wasn't only his frame; it was the sense of gravity he carried.

Out of the haze, two small figures appeared, children in astro-suits.

"Father! Hurry!"

"This way!"

They were girls, about Duo's age, each clutching an extra suit in her hands.

"Duo, put that on!" Liao Ya barked. "We're breaking straight into space!"

"O-okay!"

He fumbled into the suit as fast as he could. No sooner had he sealed it than the girls, Liao Ya's daughters, Hu Die and Meilan, hurled shaped charges against the outer wall.

A second blast followed, and the world vanished into vacuum. The four were flung outward, debris spinning past them.

Duo's vision swam. The next thing he saw was a small shuttle waiting outside the prison perimeter. Liao Ya pointed toward it.

"Over there!"

There was no time to think, no room for fear. Duo paddled through the void, awkward but desperate, until his hand found the shuttle's hull.

Hu Die and Meilan laughed at his clumsy motions, their open-mouthed grins visible even through their helmets.

"Damn it... quit laughing!" Duo wheezed as he clambered aboard.

The others entered effortlessly.

"Strap in," Liao Ya said, sliding into the pilot's seat. "We're leaving orbit and heading to work."

"Work?" Duo asked. "What kind of work?"

"We're going to steal the Alliance fortress Barge."

“What?!”

Liao Ya keyed the course into autopilot, then reached for a long, stringed instrument resting beside the console. Duo would later learn it was an ancient Chinese erhu.

Liao Ya set the soundbox on his thigh and drew the bow across the strings in slow, mournful strokes. The melody filled the small cabin, rich and sorrowful. His eyes were half-closed, absorbed not in performance but in solace.

“Wait... you’re serious about stealing Barge?” Duo asked.

That fortress had cursed the colonies from the day it was built; if taking it meant striking back, then he was ready.

Liao Ya opened one eye, a sly grin curving beneath his mustache.

“Just kidding.”

“You’re kidding?!” Duo barked, deflated.

Liao Ya set the bow aside and turned to him.

“But the real job will be just as hard. You’ll need resolve, more than you’ve ever known.”

Duo said nothing. Did he have that resolve? He didn’t know.

But the surge he’d felt when he heard Barge mentioned, that thrill, had been real.

Liao Ya seemed to sense it. He resumed his playing.

“Don’t worry. The pay’s good.”

“Fine by me,” Duo said, puffing out his chest. “I don’t work for free.”

He tried to sound bold, though inside he was simply awed, by the man’s calm, his power, his presence.

“Just wait,” he muttered under his breath, scowling to hide the spark of admiration. “I’ll show you yet.”

But all that came out were the words of a stubborn boy trying not to admit how much he already looked up to Liao Ya.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Heero eased the presidential transport down toward the dusty expanse of the Isidis Plain.

“Stay here, Noin,” he said. “I’ll draw them off.”

He left the cockpit before she could protest, stepping into the still-dark dawn.

“Stay here... right,” she muttered. To lift off now would be suicide, Prometheus and Scheherazade would cut them out of the sky in seconds.

Not far off, an explosion tore through the ridge line, a homing missile, thrown off its lock by their landing, had slammed into the mountainside.

Heero walked on alone, calm and unhurried. The sun was just rising behind him, edging his figure in light.

Scheherazade touched down first, blocking his path.

Moments later, Prometheus, the Damsel selfly flight unit still deployed, landed behind him.

Heero stood between them, unarmed, utterly still.

“....”

His eyes were cold steel as they flicked from one machine to the other.

“Ready for this, bro?”

Duo’s voice echoed from Scheherazade’s speakers.

“Nothing personal,” Trowa Phobos added from Prometheus. “But the requiem for a perpetual chain isn’t finished yet.”

Heero’s reply came like a knife edge.

“Say what you want. I don’t waste words on enemies.”

Then, above them, a glint, a flash that split the dim sky.

Something screamed downward at impossible speed and drove into the earth before him.

The impact shook the plain.

A tall, transparent capsule, a glass coffin, now stood upright in the crater, catching the first light of the Martian dawn.

Inside, encased in shimmer and shadow, slept the magnificent Snow White.

The wind stirred Heero’s bangs across his eyes, the faint gleam of resolve flaring beneath them.

Scheherazade drew a long jambiya forged of MG alloy from its back.

“Nameless or not, you can’t intimidate this guy!”

Heero’s reflection shimmered along the blade’s curved edge.

Prometheus jettisoned the Damsel selfly pack, hefting its massive cruciform cannon.

“I’m not here to threaten. I’m here to finish it.”

Trowa opened fire.

The deluge of kinetic shells churned the ground to ash. Snow, soil, and flame rose together in a deafening roar. Gray smoke swallowed everything.

Heero vanished from sight.

Even I lost him on the monitors. No human could have survived that barrage, not even Heero Yuy.

“Idiot!” Duo shouted. “You think that would kill him?!”

“The target’s been the Snow White from the start,” Phobos replied.

Prometheus swung the great gun toward the glass coffin.
Its armor was meant to be shatterproof, but the relentless volley spidered it with fractures.

As the cracks spread, their milky white reflections shimmered, and then burst.

Crash! Whomp!

The coffin exploded in a storm of crystal shards. From within surged a thick red vapor, blooming outward into a vast sphere that hung over the plain like a crimson apple.

Snow White vanished into the cloud.

Prometheus kept firing, but the sphere absorbed every round, swallowing them whole.

The red glow began to darken, red to rust, rust to black.

“Careful!” Duo’s voice rang out. “Poison apple!”

Shells dropped from the air, corroded midflight.

“Corrosive, magnetized gas,” Phobos muttered, leaping Prometheus back.

“Damn it!” Duo snarled. “He rigged a trap!”

Scheherazade lunged, crossing its twin jambiyas into an X, cleaving into the black sphere. It sliced again, twin horizontal slashes cutting through the smoke.

But there was no sound of impact, no resistance, no metallic grind. Only empty air.

Snow White was gone.

“No contact! Where’d he go?!” Duo shouted.

Then a calm, distant voice answered, cold as ice.

“Stance... set.”

I turned sharply, expecting Heero behind me, but in the presidential cabin, only President Relena sat unmoving beneath her visor.

Heart pounding, I switched the external monitor rearward.

There, across the snowy plain, stood Snow White.

The long white mantle rippled in the wind as it took aim with its massive crossbow.

Around it glimmered seven support drones, the Sieben Zwerge.

The pilot’s voice was unmistakable.

Heero Yuy.

He’d escaped the crossfire, mounted the cockpit, and repositioned, all in moments.

“...Knocking.”

On-screen, his face was unreadable, his movements precise, ritualistic.

Snow White drew back a green-glowing arrow.

“Sieben Zwerge, Grün, setup.”

The light intensified, the bowstring fully drawn.

“Full draw... release.”

The arrow shot skyward, not toward Prometheus or Scheherazade, but straight up into the heavens.

For a heartbeat, there was silence.

Then the sky itself ignited.

A pale green curtain unfurled across the firmament like an aurora, spreading outward in a violent, luminous bloom.

The dawn over Mars was swallowed in emerald fire.

AC-189 SUMMER

Earth, Eastern Europe Near the Border Conflict Zone

The boy had no name.

No family.

No home.

No past he could call his own.

By the time he could form memories, he had already been given a role, a soldier in a mercenary unit, and thrust into the center of a stage called the battlefield.

There had never been any other choice if he wanted to live.

Between battles, the boy had a habit of reading.

His current book was a thin volume about a statue of a prince adorned with gold and jewels, and a small swallow trying to fly to Egypt.

The author was Oscar Wilde. The title: *The Happy Prince*.

The boy didn't quite understand the story, how the prince gave away his treasures for the poor, how the swallow obeyed every plea until it froze to death.

A tale of “self-sacrifice,” they called it.

“Hey, No Name!”

The unit commander, a cheerful man nicknamed “Doomed Roberto,” strode up to him.

Within the unit, that was all the boy was called, No Name.

“Good news! We're getting Leos.”

“Leos?”

“The mobile suits the Alliance uses. They're lending us a few. You'll have one too! No more guerrilla slogging for us!”

“...”

Roberto snatched the book from his hands and flipped through the pages.

"Hmph. Oscar Wilde, huh?"

He tossed it back, unimpressed.

"I've got one of his books myself. Never read it, though. If you like Wilde, you can have it."

A few days later, along with an old Leo II, model name Chimera, Roberto handed the boy a worn hardcover: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The boy wondered why Roberto owned it in the first place. The man reddened and rubbed his neck.

"Once, I got patched up at a field hospital. Fell for a nurse there. Bought this because her name sounded like the one in the title."

"Sounded like it?"

"Her name was Marlene Darlian. See? Pretty close."

Dorian Gray, Marlene Darlian, not really alike, the boy thought, though he didn't say so. He opened the book instead.

Roberto kept talking anyway.

"She was married, of course. My first love, blown to pieces! Ha-ha-ha!"

Inside the book was an old photograph. A blond naval officer smiled back, young and strikingly handsome, a fjord behind him.

"That's me, back when I was first posted to the northern front."

Laughing in embarrassment, Roberto snatched the photo away.

"Didn't know that was still in there..."

The boy guessed that this bright-eyed officer had been the one to fall in love with the nurse named Marlene, before time and war burned him away.

Now, Roberto's face was scarred and weary.

One eye gone, his beard charred in places, the skin of his cheeks cross-hatched with old wounds.

"Stay too long on the front and anyone turns filthy. Don't end up like me, kid."

Roberto twisted his rough smile and laughed again, a ragged guffaw echoing through the tent.

Later that night, No Name sat in the cockpit of the Chimera, paging through its manual.

He memorized the controls easily.

But the novel, *Dorian Gray*, was harder going.

He stopped on a passage.

Dorian stands before his portrait, speaking to its painter, Basil Hallward,

"How sad it is! How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June.... If it were only the other way! If it were



I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!"

Dorian's wish was granted.

His face stayed young and beautiful for decades, while his portrait aged and twisted, the sins of his soul etched into the canvas.

"I don't get it," the boy murmured. "Not yet."

He wanted to grow up, to live by his own power.

To decide his own path.

He felt no fear of aging.

"I'll accept everything," he said quietly. "And then I'll find my place."

He closed the book and set it on the cockpit floor.

On the monitor, the world outside was pure shadow.

The forests of Eastern Europe lay under the rule of night.

He switched the display upward, wary of an Aries raid.

The full moon hung in the sky.

A few faint stars glittered around it.

He liked looking at the night sky.

"Space, huh... Must be better than this place."

The idea of its silence comforted him.

"Maybe one day I'll fly there myself."

His voice was barely a whisper, fragile with hope.

For the first time, he thought he understood the little swallow from The Happy Prince.

Then he reconsidered.

"No... the moon's probably more beautiful when seen from Earth."

He picked the book back up.

"The moon takes all the hits meant for Earth, meteor strikes, impact scars, until it's nothing but craters. Just like Dorian Gray's portrait."

Suddenly a harsh voice blared through the cockpit speakers.

"No Name! You ready? We're moving out!"

Roberto's voice, a mission call.

"..."

The boy said nothing. He powered up the Chimera and stepped forward.

The tremor of its first stride startled a flock of birds from the dark forest.

They rose in a swirl of wings and crossed the full moon, black silhouettes gliding over silver light.

Lunar Surface, North Pole Cap Euctemon Crater Cluster

The reconnaissance squad had launched from the mobile fortress Barge.

Their heavy transport craft touched down on the outer rim of Crater D, north-northeast of the Euctemon cluster, and deployed ten Leos and five Tragos artillery suits.

The young commander, Lieutenant Ginter, led the mobile suit scouts northward toward the De Sitter crater region, close to the lunar north pole, the site once designated for construction of the colossal battleship Peacemillion.

Officially, there was nothing there now, no shipyard, no infrastructure. Just barren lunar soil and abandoned plans.

Ginter, riding in the last Tragos, opened a channel to his second-in-command.

“Let’s hope we find something, Ensign.”

“We’ll find it, sir,” replied Cordelia Fitzgerald.

Cordelia Fitzgerald was serving as Lieutenant Ginter’s adjutant on this advance reconnaissance mission.

He gave a quiet chuckle. “If we do, it’ll mean combat.”

“I understand. I’m prepared.”

This was Cordelia’s first time on an active battlefield. Her first time piloting a Tragos, a heavy long-range support mobile suit.

But she had to see it for herself, the rumored new battleship supposedly being built by the rebel forces.

She had transferred from the Alliance’s Mare Tranquillitatis lunar base to Barge just two months earlier, along with a promotion. Yet she had voluntarily resigned from her post as an operator, insisting on becoming a field pilot. The proposal for this reconnaissance mission had been hers, submitted directly to Fortress Commander General Dotzent.

For months, Cordelia’s data gathering had bordered on obsession. She had tracked every civilian transport route around the moon, examined shipping records from all lunar mining depots, analyzed their destinations and uses, launched unmanned probes to check for terrain shifts and metallic readings, and even simulated construction costs and resource flows to determine where a warship might realistically be built.

She had done all this while undergoing mobile suit training. Her persistence was, by any measure, extraordinary.

And her analysis pointed to one conclusion: if the rebels were building anything, it was here, near the old shipyard site.

“If they’ve rebuilt the Peacemillion according to its original design,” she’d told herself, “we could seize it and claim it for the Alliance.”

The craters of the polar region were deep, their floors untouched by lava flows.

Sunlight was scarce, and once one descended into the perpetual shadows, the so-called permanent night, there was no way back out.

Thus the unit advanced along the overlapping crater rims, moving cautiously through the uneven, wave-like terrain.

After some time, the de Jitter crater group came into view.

Previous drone scans had shown strong metallic readings within Crater F, a basin twenty-two kilometers across. At its center rose a small mound typical of lunar impact sites, a "central peak."

As they closed in, Cordelia's sensors flared. Metal, broad and dense.

She ran the sweep again. The area was immense.

Three to five square kilometers of metallic surface, smooth, flat, and triangular, like a runway laid across the moon's skin.

It was artificial, unmistakably. Yet there were no structures, no scaffolding, no sign of a shipyard.

According to the old schematics, the Peacemillion was meant to be about three hundred meters long, roughly the size of a Sagittarius-class lunar battleship outfitted for deep space.

"Any bio-signs or heat traces?" she asked her team. "If there's a facility underground, it would show."

"Negative," one pilot reported. "Thermal sensors read a uniform minus one-forty-five degrees. No anomalies."

Cordelia let out a deep sigh. The temperature matched the lunar night. No living crew could be working in such conditions.

"This must have been cleared for a shipyard and then abandoned," she said quietly.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You sound disappointed, Ensign," Lieutenant Ginter said over the line.

"I'm relieved, actually," he replied. "No combat means no casualties."

"I feel the same," Cordelia admitted. "Still, it's hard not to feel that all my work these past months was for nothing."

"You're still young," Ginter said kindly. "It's unfortunate that your first operation didn't end in a victory, but surely an opportunity to distinguish yourself will come."

"I hope so."

Ginter's team began preparations for withdrawal, but Cordelia couldn't shake the sense of failure.

Where did I miscalculate?

Her projections had been nearly flawless up until now.

Was her data incomplete, or too exhaustive to see the truth hidden in plain sight?

"I still have much to learn," she told herself. "At least I'll count this as a lesson."

But Cordelia had not been wrong.

At that very moment, beneath the same crater fields, Howard and Professor G, along with a host of engineers and workers, had resumed construction of the Peacemillion.

The instant Ginter's team retreated, the mechanical work crews came alive.

Under the moon's one-sixth gravity, even heavy industrial labor felt light.

Howard, smiling behind his dark glasses, said as he moved deftly across the scaffolding, "Their mistake was in the scale. We made this ship ten times larger than the plans."

Total length: three thousand meters.

The triangular metal "plate" detected by Cordelia's sensors was no runway at all, it was the deck armor of the ship itself.

If she had erred, it was only in failing to imagine something so absurd: a warship on the scale of a lunar fortress or a small colony.

Professor G let out a derisive snort.

"Hah! Who'd expect anyone insane enough to build something like this? You should be praising my new thermal masking and jamming stealth systems instead!"

Howard laughed. "So you want praise now? You really are a child."

They traded insults, the two geniuses sparring as they worked. The rest of the crew ignored them, continuing their tasks in silence.

Every helmet carried one of G's miniaturized jamming units, tuned, conveniently, to filter out the scientists' bickering.

Lunar Surface, Catalina Crater Underground Base

The training grew harsher by the day.

Inside that subterranean chamber beneath the lunar crust, Alpha and Beta endured a regimen that stripped away everything but instinct.

At first, Beta, the one who had once borne the name Odin Lowe Jr., outperformed his counterpart in nearly every exercise.

Then Doctor J, peering through the glass of the observation booth, made a note in his rasping voice.

"So... memory really does become a handicap."

That single remark marked the beginning of a new atrocity.

He copied Beta's memories and downloaded them into Alpha's brain.

The procedure was called Image Trace.

When they woke, both boys carried the same past, the same Odin's teachings, the same grief over Aoi's death.

Two beings now existed with identical histories, identical pain.

"Now you're both the real thing," Doctor J said, his laughter dry and serpentine.

Soon even their physical abilities evened out.

The early days, horseback riding, fencing, archery, had seemed civilized by comparison. But when the lessons turned to unarmed combat, when they fought without armor or restraint, blood and broken bones became routine.

The matches went on until one collapsed unconscious.

It was no longer training. It was sanctioned murder.

Alpha, the darker of the two, showed the greater cruelty. He attacked without hesitation, driven by the shadow within him.

Doctor J observed from above, muttering,

"When they start looking identical, that becomes troublesome."

He stepped down, tore the sweat-soaked tank tops from their backs, and tossed each a new one.

"Black for Alpha. Green for Beta. You will not remove them without permission, not even to shower."

"We've never been allowed to shower here," Beta said bitterly, pulling the green shirt over his shoulders.

"Hmph. Listen to you talk, almost human."

Alpha, slipping into black, muttered under his breath,

"...Aren't we human?"

"Of course not!" J snapped. "You're weapons. If you object to that, then become perfect weapons, and kill me."

Silence.

Yet inside, both reached the same conclusion, "That's an idea."

Minutes passed in stillness. Then, wordlessly, they met each other's eyes and drew a breath in unison.

There was no longer time to wonder which of them was the "real" one.

They just wanted out, out of the pain, out of J's control.

Together they lunged.

Doctor J's grin widened. His metal fingers found a hidden switch.

The moment he pressed it, electricity arced through their tank tops.

The fabric had been woven with a conductive mesh; twin shocks hurled both boys backward.

They convulsed, collapsed, gasping on the floor.

"Still incomplete," J said flatly. "Resume training."

The two struggled upright, hatred burning behind their eyes.

“The suffering of space-born humanity is nothing compared to this,” he continued, pacing away. “Suffer more. Hate more. Grieve more. Only through that will you grow stronger. To speak for the colonies, you must first know the pain of the weak.”

With that, he turned his back and disappeared into the darkness.

His voice echoed from the corridor.

“Tomorrow we begin mobile suit training. Don’t worry, it’s no different from today. Just another kind of killing.”

The words lingered long after he was gone.

Back to back, Alpha and Beta forced themselves upright, half-kneeling, their breaths ragged.

“Life’s cheap,” one said.

“Yeah,” the other replied. “Especially mine, ”

Their sentences overlapped and broke, the rest swallowed by the silence of the underground base.

AC-189 AUGUST 01

Far Side of the Moon, Mare Orientale Hertzprung Crater Spaceport

The Hertzprung Crater, at the northwestern edge of the Mare Orientale, was the largest on the lunar surface.

Near the equator, a regular shuttle line connected it with the L-2 Colony cluster, and its spaceport lounge was crowded with laborers passing time between flights, eating, drinking, gambling away their wages beneath the dim artificial lights.

It was night, though lunar night lasted fifteen Earth days.

Three still remained until sunrise.

At a run-down Chinese diner tucked in the corner of the port, Liao Ya, his daughters, and Duo were finishing a dish of “synthetic meat and cultured vegetables stir-fried in lab-made sesame oil,” a concoction no one had ever heard of.

“Didn’t think you could get food this good on the Moon,” Duo said, licking the sauce from his fingers.

To him, it was a feast. Hu Die and Meilan bickered loudly, pulling the platter between them, chopsticks clattering.

Liao Ya, however, hadn’t touched the food. He drank steadily from a bottle of Shaoxing wine, eyes distant.

“What’s wrong?” Duo asked. “You look like you’ve got something on your mind.”

“ ... ”

“You’ve already set up the job. Nothing to worry about, right?”

The “job” wasn’t the theft of Barge as once joked, it was an assassination.

Their true target was a ranking officer of the United Earth Sphere Alliance. One by one, they would cut down the senior leadership, and in time even the impregnable fortress Barge would fall.

Duo believed in that day.

“Like the Moon’s dawn,” Liao Ya said at last. “You have to wait for it, patiently.”

He spoke as if to calm them. So far they had killed three: Captain Ernest Finch, Major Liang Nanaki, and Commander Montgomery Padang.

Each had been dispatched by one of them, Liao Ya, Hu Die, and Meilan, respectively, but all three were veteran officers who, within the Alliance Forces’ hierarchy, might now be called “former prominents,” retired or close to it. Their deaths had only a negligible strategic effect on Fortress Barge.

Duo, who had mostly played a supporting role for other members so far, could not hide his frustration.

“This time I’ll be the one to kill him!” he declared.

The next target was none other than Barge’s commanding officer, General Dotzent.

“We’ll take turns, sure,” Duo pressed, “but this time I’m the one who finishes it. I swear I’ll be the one!”

This time, the opportunity was real.

According to their intelligence, Dotzent would visit a nearby training ground for inspection, then travel to the Mare Tranquillitatis lunar base, by ground transport. The general, it seemed, suffered from acute acrophobia. He never used shuttles or open transports, relying solely on a sealed lunar HLV for return to Barge.

They had already planted the charge beneath his lunar buggy.

When detonated remotely outside the dome, in the airless vacuum, at minus 170 degrees Celsius, no one could survive. Liao Ya tried to put aside the guilt for the aides and drivers who would be caught in the blast, but Dotzent traveled alone so rarely that it was, in Liao Ya’s calculus, his fault.

Still Liao Ya said nothing.

Following his gaze, Duo noticed five men in camouflage uniforms outside, and among them, one woman being half-dragged, half-escorted past the diner’s doorway.

“What the hell? Those guys aren’t Alliance troops.”

“That woman,” Liao Ya murmured, standing. “She was once a rival in my old line of work.”

He rose quietly.

“Dr. Katherine Po, of Team Aoi. Seems fate decided to put her in my path again. I’ll settle a favor while I can.”

Without another word, he left the diner.

At the cargo yard of the spaceport, Zechs and Elev were disguising their machines as lunar work mobile workers and stashing them away. Artemis and the engineers had gone quiet; there had been no contact. If any recall order came through they would have used it as an excuse to decline bodyguard duty for Sally and Iria, instead, for the past few weeks they’d been racing to protect the two women.

Even to soldiers like Elev and Zechs, their energy and resourcefulness were startling. Sally had rejoined the Alliance Space Forces and worked as an apprentice military doctor, using her position to probe for internal information. Iria had hacked the spaceport’s computer systems and tracked every long-range vessel from the Earth Sphere bound for Mars. None of the matching vessels belonged to the Neuenheim Konzern.

Next they laid an information network across every spaceport in the Earth Sphere to trace Neuenheim’s movements. But the company moved with such caution and secrecy that it left few visible traces.

Sally and Iria’s activities escalated: they were detained on suspicion of espionage, and more than once members of the underworld tried to put a contract on their lives. Each time Elev and Zechs came to the rescue, sometimes with near-terrorist force, sometimes with diversionary actions, sometimes with hollow threats that nevertheless worked, and managed to keep them alive.

Today Sally and Iria reported that they had finally caught a lead on Neuenheim.

“Right now Mars and Earth are at their closest,” Sally said. “About one hundred million kilometers. You can make the trip in a quarter of the time and energy it takes at maximum separation. If Neuenheim’s going to move, this is the moment.”

“And at the Hertzsprung spaceport, only cargo ships are leaving the Earth sphere,” she continued, breathless with excitement. “But among those cargoes was something from Neuenheim. And they reported the holds were empty at departure, they’d be packing the return cargo on the way back. Bingo.”

Iria spoke calmly. “Dr. Katherine is definitely somewhere in this spaceport. The Barton Foundation’s tracking is converging on this place.”

“So it’s a scramble for a valuable scientist,” Zechs muttered. He had the uneasy feeling that this would not end comfortably.

“It seems thin,” Elev put in.

"No, it's certain." Iria's cool eyes cut him off.

"The heart of space says so."

Sally's face tightened.

"But she says ominous things."

"Power up your mobile suits"

Liao Ya fought a brawl in a back alley against five hulking men. They carried pistols and knives, but the fight was decided in an instant. The men were knocked out cold by Liao Ya's precise punches and spinning kicks.

After freeing Katherine, Liao Ya asked what had happened.

"They kidnapped me and kept me prisoner in a luxury penthouse for months," Katherine answered, still sour.

"Who sent them?"

"Those hired by Neuenheim."

"What does that Mars development firm want with you?"

"They've got all sorts of departments tangled up in messy problems. Look, I appreciate you rescuing me, but this is where we part ways."

"That depends. You weren't on the frontline when you were Team Aoi, were you?"

"I refuse to be hauled off to your assassination crew. Right now my life's work is creating life, not taking it."

"We're not trying to recruit you. I only planned to keep you under guard for a while."

At that moment a storm of machine gun fire raked down from the upper floor. Bullets fired under one-sixth gravity leave the muzzle faster than normal and carry farther. Even so, Liao Ya and Katherine dropped for cover and narrowly avoided the spray.

"Neuenheim too?"

"Likely the Barton Foundation's men," Katherine said.

Three sharply dressed men in black suits had taken the elevated positions and opened fire. Liao Ya and Katherine scrambled down into the complex stairwell.

"Why would they want you dead?" Liao Ya asked.

"I know the Foundation's secrets... it looks like they chose to silence me rather than use me."

"Figures. You've got a look about you."

"I do?"

"Too defiant for your own good."

The pursuers kept shooting, but the bullets that struck the stairwell's metal plates ricocheted unpredictably and forced them to hesitate. Though air resistance inside the dome marginally slowed the rounds,

those ricochets were far deadlier than anything under normal gravity. The attackers panicked, desperately trying to avoid the unpredictable bounces.

“Amateurs,” Liao Ya muttered as he crawled away, incredulous.

“Starting a gunfight in a place like this, foolish endangerment of life.”

“That’s rich, coming from you after killing my father.”

“General Po was a great warrior. It wasn’t our doing.”

“Save your excuses. Whatever the case, I won’t be working with you.”

The barrage eased for a moment.

“I’ll repay this debt someday!” Katherine cried, breaking from Liao Ya’s grip and vaulting away. Liao Ya resigned himself to drawing one of the pistols he’d taken from the earlier thugs and laid down covering fire.

He’d meant to clear up the misunderstanding. Firing a handgun at an angle above the horizontal produces a gentle parabolic arc, for all practical purposes almost a straight line at these ranges. With that abnormal reach he began to pick off the pursuers’ limbs, deliberately avoiding lethal strikes. He aimed for shoulders and thighs; Liao Ya avoided needless killing.

The attackers groaned, crumpled, and fell silent.

When Liao Ya looked up to see where Katherine was headed, she was already moving toward the cargo warehouse and its broad parking area. Three mobile suits stood there.

For a moment Liao Ya tensed, then breathed out.

“Those are...”

An older Leo I model led the formation, flanked by two dual-eye-type machines he recognized.

“Gundanium mobile suits?” Liao Ya murmured. He had heard of them from his friend and comrade Wu Wanglong (now Master O). He knew the engineers among Wu’s circle had developed these new units for use against the Alliance Forces, and that they were sister machines to the ErIkönig his daughters piloted.

“So they’re on our side, then?” Liao Ya said, more to himself than to Katherine, as he watched her go.

Iria had been right to ask Zechs and the others to power up their mobile suits. Showing these machines to Liao Ya had averted needless bloodshed. But the Heart of Space Iria had sensed had reached its limit here; the uncertain future still branched in ways she could not read. That was Iria’s limit, and it couldn’t be blamed on her. She simply could not foresee the sudden events that were about to unfold.

Sally’s voice came over the Leo’s external speakers.

“Mom! Thank God, you’re okay.” Sally climbed out of the cockpit as the suit advanced and the hatch swung open.

“Sally, get out of here! It’s not safe!” Katherine shouted, and then gunfire rang from the parking area. It was impossible at first to tell where the shot had come from. A super-fast round flew in from long range and passed clean through Katherine’s chest.

Blood sprayed. A clump of it fell in slow motion at one-sixth speed.

“Mom!” Sally leapt from the cockpit and ran to Katherine, catching her as she slowly collapsed and pressing against the flow of blood pouring from her chest.

“This is awful. Hang on, Mom.” Sally’s voice had become little more than a sob. Iria dashed over with a field medical kit, but Katherine, as if expecting this, held the kit back with one hand and, gasping, spoke to her daughter.

“I’m sorry, Sally.”

Sally, tears streaming, shook her head and recited the stock phrases of a trainee doctor.

“You don’t have to say anything. Breathe, steady your mind and focus on staying conscious.” Katherine cried too.

“I never did the things a mother should have,” she said.

“That’s not true,” Sally protested.

“I’ve brought many things into the world... but my greatest masterpiece is—” Katherine closed her eyes slowly.

“You, Sally...”

“Mother—”

“I’ll always love you.”

With those last words her heart stilled.

Iria and Sally immediately tried resuscitation, but it was futile. Zechs and Elev hunted for the sharpshooter. They traced the trajectory from past video frames on the monitors and rushed to the firing point.

The shot’s range was extraordinary. To hit such a small, human-sized target at that distance would require a high-precision scoped rifle, only a properly trained sniper or someone with equivalent skill could make such a kill.

“Was the hit a lucky fluke?” Elev asked Zechs. It seemed unlikely that whoever was stalking Katherine had that degree of professional skill.

“Unlikely... the sound of the shot wasn’t from a rifle,” Zechs said, regret in his voice. “Did someone fire wildly at the Leo and by chance score a hit on her?”

“Hmm...” Elev and Zechs found no one when they reached the scene. The only escape routes led to the underground areas.

In the underground parking area, one of the Barton Foundation men, the one Liao Ya had shot through the thigh earlier, was limping toward a lunar buggy.

General Dotzent of the Alliance Forces was nearby, walking with his driver and aide when the wounded man turned his gun on them.

"Sorry, but I'm taking the ride," he growled, forcing them aside and climbing into the vehicle.

He drove it out through the underground tunnel and into the open, leaving the dome behind and heading from the Hertzsprung Crater toward the Mare Orientale.

The explosion came without warning.

The lunar buggy meant for Dotzent was remotely detonated by Duo. The man who had shot Katherine died instantly, killed by the vacuum and the cold.

"The job's done," Duo reported over the comm.

Liao Ya's reply was quiet.

"Unfortunately, our true objective hasn't been achieved."

"You're kidding!"

"Still, Duo... you have my thanks."

Regret weighed heavy on Liao Ya. His decision to avoid needless killing had indirectly led to Katherine's death, and Duo, without realizing it, had settled the account for him.

He could only see it as the strange fulfillment of cosmic causality, the twisted logic of fate in space.

"If we mean to stand for justice, we must carry it through to the end," he said at last. "Spare evil, and it will always return to you as vengeance."

A heavily guarded Dotzent passed by in front of him.

"So the one I killed wasn't the target after all," Duo murmured.

"Seems that way," said Liao Ya.

Duo had moved from the dingy Chinese diner to the spaceport's top floor observation room. It was from here that he had watched the lunar buggy speed off and triggered the detonation.

He clicked his tongue.

"Tch..."

The first person he'd ever killed with his own hands had been a total stranger, someone with no connection to him at all. The aftertaste was bitter, sickening.

"Well, can't be helped," he muttered, forcing a crooked grin.

"If the God of Death starts getting picky, nothing's ever gonna get done."

That was the only pride he could muster, a dry, hollow bravado.
Outside the window stretched the ink-black void.
Lunar dawn was still a long way off.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

The next instant, from the aurora-colored heavens, came a downpour of light, hundreds of streaks, shining a deep, verdant green like beam sabers, raining down upon Prometheus and Scheherazade.

Both suits instinctively dropped to one knee, their cloaks drawn up as shields.

If those had been beam sabers, the defensive posture would have been sound.

But the phenomenon was entirely different.

These weren't weapons meant to slice.

They materialized dozens of meters overhead, solidifying into luminous vines that coiled downward like tendrils of living light.

Hundreds of those glowing filaments writhed with eerie intent, wrapping around arms and legs, clutching at armor plates as if animated by will itself.

Scheherazade swung its dual jambiya blades, slashing at the mass of tendrils, but for every one it cut, more took its place, winding tighter.

“astard!”

Prometheus was already fused with its massive cruciform heavy gun; even after launching missiles from its shoulder hatches, the blasts only fed the thing, like oil to flame.

The chest-mounted cannons were sealed over entirely by the creeping vines.

“Ngh!”

Inside the cockpits, Duo and Phobos must have been fighting desperately against the overwhelming restraint, the strain and anguish almost audible through the hulls.

The luminous vines continued pulsing with rhythmic light as they rooted themselves into the ground.

The groan of stressed Gundanium echoed sharply, metal protesting against an alien grip.

In moments, both Prometheus and Scheherazade were pinned, immobilized, dragged earthward by a colossal force rising from below.

The number of green tendrils multiplied further still, until even their silhouettes disappeared beneath the growth.

The phenomenon's nature was unmistakable, the trait of the “Sieben Zwerge, Grün” was that of a plant.

The vines' glow faded into a slow, pulsing rhythm, their motion languid.

The two fallen suits now formed a low mound, like a massive earthen grave.

The battle was over.

"Don't interfere with what Relena and I are trying to do."

Displaying an overwhelming gulf in power, Heero spoke calmly from within Snow White's cockpit.

"Otherwise, none of you will live. Tell the others."

Snow White unfurled its brilliant white mantle and rose into the sky, divine in its radiance.

White wings beat like those of an angel against the starlit void.

Then a comm chime broke the silence.

At first, I thought it was Heero.

I expected his usual report, "Mission complete. Obstacle eliminated."

But it wasn't him.

The face that appeared on the comm monitor smiled with devilish clarity.

"Good morning. How have you been, Lucrezia?"

That eternally youthful, luminously beautiful boy, Vingt Khushrenada.

Few people ever call me Lucrezia.

The only living one who does is my husband, Milliardo.

"First, a formal notice," Vingt said evenly. "You have disregarded the terms of our ceasefire agreement. I explicitly ordered that the presidential craft be disarmed."

"....."

"Have Heero Yuy disembark from Snow White immediately. If he refuses, we will resume our assault on Relena City."

I nodded in silence.

No amount of justification from our side would matter; the Martian Southern Union had no interest in hearing excuses.

"I must admit, I'm relieved you're still the pacifist you always were," he continued smoothly. "It means this planet will finally be freed from the dominion of the 'God of War.'"

I remained wordless.

The Vingt I'd known back in AC-187 had been older than me.

As the man who claimed to be the founder of OZ, perhaps it was natural he still addressed me that way, but his unaging face evoked nothing but unease.

There was something in his arrogance, his polished insolence, that reminded me uncomfortably of my own brother, Dixneuf.

“War,” he said, “is the very embodiment of risk to humankind. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that risk itself, in human history, has always been war.”

His cold smile never faltered.

“To avoid risk, one must first understand its nature. Simply despising it, as you do, solves nothing. President Relena is the same. Implementing ‘total pacifism’ without grasping the essence of war achieves no meaningful result.”

“Then tell me,” I asked quietly, “what is the essence of war?”

“It lies in humanity itself. Humanity is a system of malfunctioning control, built from irregular parts. People like to believe war is caused by bellicose leaders, but blaming such ‘human error’ makes true crisis management impossible. Every human being is a defective model. So long as flawed humans are the ones managing global security, risk cannot be avoided.”

The smile faded from his face.

“Humans are jealous, self-absorbed, and riddled with fear and mistrust,” Vingt spat.

“If all humanity is imperfect, how can anyone truly believe in the possibility of perfect peace? I cannot fathom President Relena’s reasoning.”

“The President believes in people,” I answered. “She loves them, deeply, more than anyone.”

“A relic of a bygone age,” he sneered. “Humanity now possesses a new world, Mars. From here, we can construct a new order.”

“A new order of control? I fail to see how that avoids the risk of war.”

“We change it at its root,” he declared, eyes glinting with conviction.

“By managing war itself, ensuring it never disappears. A reversal of logic. Maintain conflict under supervision, and govern ‘peace’ through hazard. Control then becomes simple.”

It was a monstrous idea.

“And how long would you sustain this? Until all humanity is wiped out?”

“Not quite. Until the imperfect portion of humanity dies out. There already exist a few individuals, rare, but real, who restrain their impulses, who neither fear nor envy, who reject comparison. When such adaptive humans become the majority, war will wither away naturally.”

Vingt’s expression suggested that he, of course, was one of them.

“Once Mars is unified,” he continued, “I will declare war on the Earth Sphere Unified Nation. Only through continued conflict can we bring true order to humanity. Surely you understand, my brother wished the same.”

"You're wrong," I said flatly. "That vision is not what Treize desired."

"No, Lucrezia, it's you who's mistaken. My brother could have controlled war. He could have managed peace as well. It was your betrayal of OZ, your abandonment of Treize Khushrenada, that led to this."

Vingt's tone hardened.

The AC-195 Eve Wars, we were forced to live with their outcome.

We failed to end war.

It continues still.

And the impotence of total pacifism has already been proven.

That made countering his logic all the harder.

"Vingt Khushrenada... So that's your goal."

The heir to Treize's will had appeared in this new age.

Perhaps it was Relena herself, champion of total pacifism, who had drawn him forth.

Then a new transmission cut through the line.

"You're wrong about everything."

Heero's voice.

"You understand nothing. Treize accepted humanity's imperfection."

Their faces appeared side by side on the monitor, eyes locked in mutual challenge.

"Revolution or rebellion, it's all the same," Heero continued. "Leaders forcing their personal ideals onto the masses, brainwashing and manipulating them. That's where Treize and you diverge completely."

He was speaking more than I'd ever heard him speak before.

"So, we finally meet, Heero Yuy," Vingt said with an elegant nod. "It's been a long time."

"This is the first time," Heero replied, his mouth twisting in mockery.

"Treize's brother? No, you're nothing but Vingt Khushrenada's spare."

It was uncharacteristically provocative for him.

I sensed there was intent behind it.

"Heh... And can you prove you're not someone's spare?"

"I don't need to. I am who I am."

"Perhaps you only think that, because you were programmed to."

"Then ask the ZERO you're synchronized with," Heero shot back, "see what it says."

"That's impossible," Vingt said, feigning regret. "Neither the Heart of Space nor ZERO can predict you, Heero Yuy."

He tilted his head, genuinely puzzled.

"It's still a mystery. Why is it that only you exist beyond celestial mechanics, beyond the causal laws of the universe?"

Heero's reply was sharp as a blade.

“Vulcanus, isn’t it?”

The word came suddenly.

Vingt froze. “What are you talking about?”

But the tremor in his voice betrayed him.

Heero pressed on, certain now.

“So Dixneuf’s involved too. That would make Fortress Babel, and Zechs, nothing but diversions.”

“.....”

Vingt said nothing.

“Too slow to notice,” Heero muttered.

“Damn you,” Vingt hissed, humiliated by the realization that he’d been outplayed.

He cut the feed abruptly.

Snow White too carried the ZERO System.

Heero’s provocations had been deliberate, a distraction, keeping Vingt from realizing that fact.

Then Heero’s voice came again, low and steady.

“Got the coordinates, WuFei?”

“Of course,” came the reply.

The face of Master Chang filled a secondary monitor window, his expression a confident smirk.

“Leave the rest to me.”

Actions unpredictable even to the Heart of Space or ZERO,

That was Heero Yuy’s one true advantage over Vingt Khushrenada.

I lifted the presidential shuttle into vertical ascent.

The sight of Master Chang’s face had somehow swept away my lingering unease.

Far above, Heero and Snow White soared through the thin Martian sky.

“We’re heading straight for Fortress Babel?” I asked.

“He’s the only one who’s caught on. It’s fine.”

“I see.”

I chose to trust in Snow White’s stealth systems.

Beneath us stretched the snowfields of Isidis, and somewhere within that endless white, President Relena Peacecraft lay immersed in her virtual visor, reliving the past.

AC-189 AUTUMN

L-1 Colony Cluster Rebel Safehouse

Zechs and Elev linked up with Artemis and the others. She greeted them with a bewitching smile.

"I'm relieved to see your faces. I was worried all the failures had you in a funk."

In truth, both men were dispirited: they hadn't been able to stop the resource satellite from crashing onto Mars's Argyle Plain; they'd watched Dr. Katherine gunned down right before their eyes; and they had let the Neuenheim Konzern slip out of the Earth Sphere. Those three recent debacles hounded Zechs and Elev without respite.

"Are you done playing bodyguard to those two lovely girls?"

"Iria's headed to Mars to track the samples Neuenheim stole. Sally formally enlisted with the Alliance Forces, she's set on taking revenge on the Barton Foundation."

"They're more self-reliant than we are," Zechs said, almost admiringly.

According to Iria's report, Neuenheim had made off with hundreds of Dr. Katherine's DNA samples. Most belonged to top Earth Sphere talent; the plan, apparently, was to clone them and use those clones to drive Mars's terraforming program. Iria swore she would stop it. She also said she couldn't forgive the way Katherine's cloning tech had been stolen by nefarious means. For protection, she had hired a squad of brawny men known as the Maganac. After months of babysitting, Zechs and Elev were finally free, though the lavish payment from the Winner family still left them feeling guilty.

Zechs scanned the transmitted roster of samples and found no familiar names. Elev, however, paused over one.

"Vingt Khushrenada, that's Instructor Treize's younger brother, isn't it?"

"Right... so it was," Zechs said. Somehow he'd missed it. He knew the name, but had never met the man; perhaps that was why it hadn't stuck in his mind. It was a lapse that would haunt him much later.

"So you'll be fighting with us again," Artemis said, smiling.

"We're hired hands at the front," Zechs answered, with a hint of self-mockery.

"Good. This next battle will be bigger than anything so far."

"Soon?" Elev asked, reading the taut air around them.

"Preparation will still take time... which is why I want you to handle a simple job first."

In front of Zechs and Elev lay stacks of agricultural plant fertilizer and a pair of Alliance quartermaster uniforms.

"Put these on, pose as supply troops, and deliver the fertilizer to our people inside the mobile Fortress Barge."

"Perfect rehab," Elev grumbled. "Maybe this'll snap us out of the slump."

Zechs eyed the sacks.

“What’s in the fertilizer, gunpowder?”

“Mostly the real deal,” Artemis said. “But a few bags are cut with desflurane, volatile anesthetic. What we lifted from the medical center should come in handy.”

Disquiet gnawed at Zechs. Assassinations and bombings carried out in hospitals; corporations like the Barton Foundation and Neuenheim pulling strings in the shadows; both Alliance and rebel forces behaving like looters at a fire, none of it felt like the conduct of the ‘just.’

“So this is what a wartime age looks like,” was all he could do to lament.

Space Fortress Barge

Liao Ya and his daughters had infiltrated the fortress as agricultural-plant workers, Duo alongside them. But they couldn’t execute the assassination yet; day after day they toiled in the fields. Weapons were the problem. The intake security for workers was strict, no chance of smuggling in arms or ammunition. They’d considered killing Brigadier General Dotzent with farm tools at hand, but Liao Ya had forbidden it in the strongest terms.

“If we are to assassinate a soldier, we use the instruments meant for that task. The noble tools that till the soil must not be turned to other ends.”

“What’s the harm?” Duo said, sowing wheat seed. “Back in the old revolutions, peasants fought with hoes and plows, didn’t they?”

“When the oppressed rise because they must, that may be permitted, there were no other weapons for them to take up. But for warriors like us to use them in battle is an affront to the tools themselves.”

More than twenty years ago, during the colony construction era, Liao Ya had fought the Alliance Forces in a work mobile worker.

“I still feel ashamed of it. Likewise, we must avoid treating civilians, who should not fight, as soldiers.” He went on, face carved with bitterness. “It is unforgivable to lead citizens into battle. And certainly not to indoctrinate the young. Dragging innocents into war is worse than mass slaughter.”

“Agreed,” Duo said. “Leave the dirty work to us.”

Around them, ordinary people tended crops, an island of peace, strangely untouched by war, in the heart of a fortress.

“But hey, old man,” Duo added, “it’s easy to tell a weapon from a tool at a glance. How do you tell with people?”

"You mean the difference between a warrior and one who is not... It's the eyes, the resolve to fight. Look into them and you know."

Maybe so, Duo thought. He himself had made peace with that line a long time ago. But what about Liao Ya's twin daughters, did they truly have a warrior's resolve?

He glanced at Meilan and Hu Die, working beside him. Despite their youth, both had clear eyes that hid a fierce will.

"I have a betrothed," Hu Die murmured during the break. Liao Ya was off on an errand and not in the rest area.

"When I turn fourteen, I'm to marry the Chang family heir. If the Long clan has no sons, he'll be adopted in."

To Duo, there was a fragile look about her as she said it. Unlike her sister, the tomboyish Meilan said, "That's an ancient rule. I'd never. Marriage just binds you, doesn't it?"

"You live as you please," Hu Die said gently. "I intend to follow the clan's destiny."

"That's so dull, truly dull! You should decide your own fate."

"I know. But I think it's better than the alternative. Maybe... I don't want to die."

With that long, heavy sigh, the "resolve to fight" faded from Hu Die's eyes.

"What's he like?" Duo asked.

"I've never met him. A student at the Erste Gymnasium, they say. Supposed to be a scholar someday."

"Huh. An egghead... Sounds like he and I are heading down very different roads."

Somewhere in all this, Duo felt the faint outline of a man he'd one day fight beside as a Gundam pilot. Perhaps Hu Die, dreaming of a husband she'd never seen, had begun to feel cramped by a warrior's life. Maybe it was time to take her off the roster, he thought.

Just then Liao Ya returned, pushing a handcart piled with farm tools. Hidden beneath them were a compact rocket mortar and several remote-plant explosive charges. Beside them sat the raw desflurane that Zechs and Elv had delivered.

"At last, our proper instruments are assembled. Now we wait for the moment."

Meilan nodded firmly. Hu Die averted her gaze, staring out over the agricultural plant. Duo looked at her profile, ready to say something, but no words came that suited the place they were in.

AC-189 WINTER

Lunar Surface, Catalina Crater Underground Base

Beta and Alpha were training in close-quarters mobile suit combat using early-model Leos. There was no pulling punches between them. The only armament the Leos carried was a shield mounted on the left shoulder; the rest was bare-knuckle fighting, punches, kicks, grapples. They fought on to prove that each was himself, denying the other's existence, hating one another, turning what Doctor J had called a "mere killing match" into a duel of mobile suits.

After each bout, they had to service their own machines. It was grueling work, lashing their exhausted bodies onward. This time, instead of routine maintenance on the main motor, Beta pushed into a higher tier of tuning to improve drive efficiency. To go that far, he had to strip off battered exterior plates. The internal frame had been polished throughout; from overall assembly down to the smallest fittings, it was flawless, brooking no compromise. The meticulous finish suggested custom, hand-crafted work. It had the presence of an artwork, like a master sword.

For a mere training unit, the suit's condition was almost suspiciously pristine. He checked the stamped manufacture date and serial embedded deep in the core frame.

AC-176 AUGUST 08

OZ-06MS LOT A12-00001

It was proof that this was the first Leo Chief Engineer Seis Clark ever built. The lot code "A12" meant twelve Leos produced in the prototyping phase before mass production. By rights, it was a historic machine fit for a museum.

"Why would Doctor J give this to me?" Beta wondered.

Seis had married Beta's mother; he was Beta's foster parent. Beta respected him quietly as the greatest engineer of the AC era, the man who developed the mass-production mobile suit. As a child, his Leo toy had been his treasure. And somewhere in his heart he still mourned that Seis had died aboard the Mobile Fortress Barge, trying to protect Aoi, Beta's mother, and Beta himself. Even if Doctor J knew all of that...

"I can't believe that man assigned me this machine out of sentiment."

For all he knew, Alpha had been given an even rarer unit, A12-00000. He told himself it was coincidence.

Still, Beta found he could feel a real attachment to his foster father's machine. He threw himself into the work with care and devotion. The main motor tune was a complete success; drive efficiency surged. In the next day's sparring, he overwhelmed Alpha.

Doctor J watched and said, "You did the work yourself... You've got a good touch." Praise was rare from him. "No surprise, you were under Seis."

For weeks thereafter, Beta notched win after win. Alpha grew anxious. Perhaps his feelings toward Seis were thin; in servicing as in tuning, he could not surpass Beta's technique. At this rate, his very existence would be denied, erased.

But it turned out to be needless worry.

"We're changing machines. Now the real thing begins," Doctor J announced abruptly.

They wheeled in XXXG-00W0 and XXXG-01W. One was the frame known as "Proto Zero." The other was a stripped-down "Wing Gundam," its frame laid bare.

Beta listened, already sensing which one would be his.

"This one isn't finished, is it?"

"No," Doctor J said. "I'm giving you a handicap, there's a gap in pilot talent." He glared at them in turn. "Alpha takes Proto Zero, its ability level is higher. Beta takes Wing, the lower spec. Make up unfinished sections and performance gaps with pilot skill."

Their only armament would be beam sabers.

"If I gave you rifles, this base would be riddled with holes."

Beta glanced back at the Leo he'd been piloting.

"What about this Leo?"

"I'll take care of it. Needs 'adjustment.'"

So it really was a rare, precious unit, Beta thought, only for Doctor J to look up from the Leo's feet and spit out, "Sloppy work, Seis. 'Greatest engineer of the AC era,' is it? I've heard enough."

He climbed into Proto Zero's cockpit, powered it up, drew its beam saber as he turned, and in a blur carved both Leos in two.

Beta shouted despite himself.

"Wh-what are you—"

"A test cut for the beam saber. With Gundams in play, this kind of failure's only good for that."

Proto Zero showed no mercy, slicing the Leos to scrap.

"Hmph. Pathetic that this is all he could do based on the Tallgeese!"

The Leos were reduced to scrap metal. Beta had to sever himself from yet another piece of the past.

"Mm. That's about right for beam saber output," Doctor J said as he stepped down from the cockpit. "Mobile suit piloting skill is something anyone can acquire equally, regardless of talent or knowledge. But that notion applies only when you're in mass-produced units built for killing."

Beta listened, forcing down a surge of anger.

“To pilot a Gundam requires inborn genius. These machines trespass in the realm of gods. Their pilots must match them, carry a high-minded spirit to suit.” For once, Doctor J was talkative.

“You two have thought of combat as nothing but a ‘mere killing match.’ For mass-produced weapons, of course it is. But if you’re to be Gundam pilots, you must change that consciousness.” Then, suddenly, his mouth softened and his tone gentled. “No matter. Whether you train until you reach the divine, or content yourselves with being simple murderers, that you decide. But if you pilot a Gundam, understand this choice will be your lifelong task.”

He took a switch from his breast pocket, the one that delivered electric shocks.

“I won’t use this anymore. If you want to run, run. If you want to kill me, do it. I’ve handed the Gundams to you; I have no more regrets in this world.”

He dropped the switch to the floor and crushed it underfoot. Strangely, the two of them only watched. Neither tried to flee.

Alpha and Beta each answered vaguely, an “Ah...” or a muted “Understood...”

The meaning of Doctor J’s words eluded them. They looked up at the two Gundams, machines said to have reached the realm of the divine.

L-5 Colony Cluster, Academy Habitat Erste Gymnasium

Some time after the new term began, a black-haired boy enrolled at the school. He was still only nine, small for his age, yet he’d finished the four-year Grundschule in three and advanced as a scholarship student.

Adjusting his black-rimmed glasses as he stepped into the classroom, the boy gave the standard greeting.

“My name is Chang Wufei. Pleased to meet you.”

Nearly every other boy was Anglo-Saxon; as an East Asian, Wufei stood out starkly among them.

It was November at the Gymnasium, so late it felt beyond what anyone would still call late autumn. He took a seat by the window and spent his time staring outside. A simulated vista of a black forest called to mind southern Germany’s Bavaria, projected across the artificial sky.

The daily lessons bored Wufei terribly. His clear, incisive mind had already completed the entire upper-secondary curriculum on his own.

“You look like the living dead,” rumbled a big chemistry teacher in a lab coat, addressing Wufei as he napped in the shade of a tree.

It was Master O. He was using a convenient alias to teach at the Gymnasium while, on the side, developing a Gundam.

"Perhaps the academic path doesn't suit you," he said.

Wufei answered without opening his eyes.

"Not your concern. Leave me alone."

"Your suffering is what they call the 'darkness of ignorance,'" Master O said. "If you pilot my Gundam, that will be resolved."

Whether he'd marked Wufei because he knew him as a descendant of the Chang clan, or simply because he, too, was an East Asian, was unclear.

"It's still a long way from finished, though," he added.

Wufei cracked one eye, curt.

"Hmph. If that day ever comes, let me know. Might be a way to stave off the boredom."

"You're a good kid," Master O said. "You just haven't realized it yet." With that, he walked off.

A small bird fluttered down and perched on Wufei's shoulder as he sat up. He put on his black-rimmed glasses from beside him and murmured to himself, "A good kid, me? If a weak, cowardly child who does nothing but run away isn't a 'good person,' then who is?"

The small bird chirped softly.

AC-190 SPRING

Space Fortress Barge

Brigadier General Dotzent was on his way from his private quarters to the command center.

Lieutenant Cordelia, his aide-de-camp, fell into step behind him.

"General, the rebel movements have been unusually quiet lately."

"That's good news," Dotzent said. "They're frightened. They've learned to keep their heads down."

"Perhaps," Cordelia replied, "but I'd still advise we prepare for the opposite."

"..."

"It's too quiet."

Dotzent scowled. "My lunar buggy was bombed at Hertzsprung, remember? Since then, I've been more than careful."

"I understand, sir. But what I'm warning of might be far greater than a single assassination attempt."

Cordelia suggested that the rebels could be regrouping for a major counteroffensive.

Dotzent paused before the elevator that would take him up to the command bridge, and turned toward her.

“Lieutenant Fitzgerald, ever since the colony drop incident, your analytical ability has been highly regarded. But if you keep rushing for glory, you’ll repeat the same mistake you made with that battleship incident.”

With that, he stepped into the lift and the doors closed.

Cordelia said nothing. She simply watched him go.

Then a sudden wave of dizziness struck. At first, she thought it was fatigue from too many sleepless nights.

Then she smelled it, the sharp, medicinal sting of chemicals in the air.

“No... this isn’t exhaustion. It’s sabotage.”

She clamped a hand over her mouth, but it was already too late.

Her vision darkened, and she collapsed face-first onto the floor.

Through the ventilation shafts above, a colorless gas hissed into the corridor, the volatile anesthetic desflurane.

*

Dotzent stared at the ascending floor numbers in silence.

He wasn’t alone. In the corner, a boy sat with his cap pulled low over his eyes.

“Finally... I found you,” the boy murmured.

Dotzent turned sharply.

“What? Who the hell are you?”

The boy lifted his gaze, wide eyes glinting from beneath the brim.

“Agricultural plant worker, sir. Must’ve taken the wrong lift—”

“Get out at once! This elevator is for senior officers only!”

The boy, Duo Maxwell, drew a silenced pistol and raised it level.

“Sure, I’ll get off. As soon as I’m finished.”

He pulled the trigger.

The suppressed shot cracked like a whisper. The bullet punched through Dotzent’s skull.

The elevator reached its stop. The doors slid open onto the command deck.

Dotzent’s body fell backward, landing with a hollow thud.

Every operator in the room turned at the sound.

Duo slammed the close button, dropping the lift back down.

“Damn it... separate air ducts. The command center wasn’t gassed after all.”

*

Back on the lower levels, he found Cordelia unconscious in the corridor.

The Desflurane haze was thinning, but her pulse was weak.

Just then Hu Die and Meilan appeared, each carrying an astro-suit.

Meilan had a compact rocket mortar slung across her back.

“Did you get him?”

“Target’s down,” Duo said. “Would’ve been cleaner if I’d taken that with me, command deck stayed awake.”

“Didn’t matter,” Meilan said curtly. “One shot wouldn’t have made a difference anyway. This is for getting us out.”

Hu Die flashed a reassuring smile.

“Father said from the start that stealing Barge was impossible, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Duo muttered. “Guess I was the idiot for thinking we could.”

They regrouped at the agricultural sector, where Liao Ya was waiting. Together they sprinted through the vast wheat fields under the fortress dome.

“Where are the other workers?”

“I sent them to the shelters,” Liao Ya said, lagging slightly behind. He was slower, weighed down by both his suit and the thought of pursuit.

“Meilan, now!”

“Got it!”

She fired her rocket mortar into one of the light-paneled windows.

The explosion blew a man-sized hole through the wall. Air screamed out into space.

One by one they leapt for the breach, Hu Die first, then Meilan, then Duo.

“Come on, old man!” Duo shouted.

Liao Ya had stopped, his back turned toward them.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Go,” he said. “All of you, get out.”

Following his gaze, Duo saw what held him there.

A group of Alliance soldiers were aiming their machine guns at a terrified plant worker, an unarmed civilian, frozen in panic.

He remembered Liao Ya’s words.

‘Dragging the innocent into war is worse than mass murder.’

“Tch...”

He clicked his tongue and dove through the breach. There was no other choice.

Automatic sealant foam was already expanding around the edges, closing the hole behind him.

Outside, in the black of space, Zechs's shuttle and Elev's Prometheus waited in formation.

Hu Die, Meilan, and Duo were pulled aboard. The shuttle and Prometheus fired their thrusters, breaking away from Barge.

Inside the cabin, the girls turned on him at once.

"Where's Father?!"

"Why didn't you bring him?!"

"He stayed behind," Duo said quietly. "They took hostages in the plant. There was no other way."

Liao Ya's seat was empty. Only his erhu lay there, resting against the straps.

That somewhat melancholy timbre could not be heard.

"Don't worry," Duo said, eyes fixed on the void ahead. "I'll bring him back. I swear it."

The assassination of Brigadier General Dotzent aboard Barge would go down in history as the spark that ignited the Second Lunar War of AC-190.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

I can only imagine what part of the past President Relena is reliving now.

The Second Lunar War began in the spring of AC-190, on March 10. When Treize summoned us, we answered and made for the Moon.

Many soldiers died in that campaign. It was then that my hatred of war became absolute. Even so, perhaps we should say we were fortunate that few civilians were caught up in it, though that judgment only holds when set against the misery of Mars today.

A transmission came in from Fortress Babel. Styling himself "Chairman of the Southern Confederate States War Crimes Commission," Major General Zechs Merquise rebuked us for our late arrival. The sight of that face, identical to my husband's in his youth, made it all the more loathsome.

"The war crimes tribunal will convene today at 1300 hours in Fortress Babel's command room, one hour from now. If you are late, we will immediately launch Zwölf Zwerg at Relena City."

"Understood. We will bring President Relena by then."

On the horizon of the Isidis Plain, the dodecahedron of Fortress Babel came into view.

The moment of fate was drawing nearer with every tick of the clock.

Audio Drama

Move Out! Snow White & Warlock

SNOW WHITE LAUNCH SEQUENCE

[Snow White Activation]

Heero: This is Snow White. Pilot codename: Heero Yuy. VOYAGE, scramble standby. Main comm, start; password cleared. Bio-scan search commencing... lock-on; memory complete. Virtual monitor, screen open. Skipping takeoff checks one-zero-eight through two-one-seven, and three-five-five through four-two-one. Magnetic-control segments nominal. Energy gain, startup program on.

[soft beeps cascade]

Heero: Injecting PTD and ARI into Impulse-Drive reactor "MARA." Chamber pressure, good. Right manipulator, normal. Left manipulator, nominal. Auto-balancer line, blue. Vernier turbines and sub-verniers, all green. Energy gain, eighty-nine and climbing. Injector level six-two-one and holding. Energy gain, ninety-nine. Ignition coils connected. Taxi to stand up. Runway one-seven; catapult lock.

[Snow White spools up]

Duo: Warlock, checks...?

Heero: Snow White... on standby.

Duo: What're you waiting for! We're almost on top of them!

Heero: Quiet... the plasma drive for the magnetic-shield cloak isn't set yet.

Duo: Let the auto handle it! You're slow because you're fiddling with it by hand!

Heero: Snow White, ready.

Duo: W-Warlock, roger.

Heero: Voyage, open Gate one-seven.

[gate irises wide; wind howls through the bay]

Heero: Cleared for takeoff. Wind one-six-zero at five. QNH nine seven nine four. Locks off, catapult, go away.

Duo: Warlock, let's roll!

Heero: Snow White, launching.

[both Gundams blast out]

[throttles slam forward]

Heero: Full throttle... All-Range, RED!!

*[both machines drop through the murk; capes whip and snap]
[impact thuds as they touch down on desert hardpan]*

Duo: Warlock here, target, tally-ho!

Heero: Visual contact confirmed. Enemy strength: forty units.

Duo: Warlock, roger, but f-forty?!

Heero: We move now... this sandstorm will clear shortly.

Duo: Copy! Then let's make this fun while it lasts!

[sand roars, grit pelts armor]

Duo: You're the Winner family girl, aren't you?!

Heero: Confirming... You truly intend to go to Relena Peacecraft?

[sand lashes harder]

Heero: Understood... In that case, Quaterine, I'll kill you.

Duo: Hey, here they come!

Heero: You cut into the left wing. I'll drive from the right into the center.

Duo: Forty mobile dolls is a bit much, don't you think?

Heero: Twenty apiece. Your father could've done it with his eyes closed.

Duo: Fine by me, let's do this!!

Afterword

After much searching, I finally managed to locate the long-lost script for the audio drama we talked about previously. I'm publishing it here as a special appendix. And I owe that entirely to Ms. Tetsuko Takahashi of Sunrise, who combed through mountains of archival material to dig out the original data file. She's truly exceptional, a consummate professional who has overseen every single one of my projects with Sunrise. Frankly, if it weren't for her meticulous guidance, a lazy screenwriter like me could never have handled something as intricate as series composition. Between us, the model for Lady Une, back when she was still the young Cordelia, was actually Ms. Takahashi herself.

Because of her uncompromisingly earnest nature, she's the kind of person who can sit across from titans like Executive Producer Hideyuki Tomioka, the Great Master Yoshiyuki Tomino, or Yoshikazu Yasuhiko without flinching and still tell them exactly what she thinks. She's got the nerve of Sima Qian defending Li Ling. As for me, I'm nothing more than one of the nameless bystanders hovering somewhere behind that gallant figure, just another face in the crowd. But, Ms. Takahashi, you must understand how nervous you make us all. "Do everything elegantly...", remember?

Actually, Ms. Takahashi also compiled a magnificent complete chronology of the AC and MC eras, down to the ages of every major character, which I had hoped to include here as well. Unfortunately, space constraints made that impossible for now. I'm hoping Kadokawa will someday publish *Frozen Teardrop* in paperback form, and when that happens, I'll beg them to include it. Studying that timeline always makes me realize how many missing pieces I still need to fill in, so when the time comes, I'll do my best to close every gap, as long as I still have the energy. Then again, perhaps it will never make it to paperback at all. So please, don't get your hopes up. My apologies in advance.

And now we arrive at Volume Twelve. The next one, Volume Thirteen, will be the final installment. There's something fateful about ending on Treize's number. Speaking of Treize, I should have written about Ryotaro Okiayu much earlier, my deepest apologies. I still remember sitting in the break room of a certain recording studio when Okiayu casually mentioned, "I just auditioned for a new Gundam project." I didn't say a word about being the one writing the script. I just sat there grinning like an idiot.

Okiayu's voice possesses that rare duality, tender enough to envelop you, yet resonant with the commanding dignity of true charisma. No matter how abstract or challenging the dialogue, he delivers it with such conviction that the audience can't help but believe every word. We were all utterly entranced by his self-assured performance. I recall one wrap party where he told me, "I'm not sure I really understand what Treize is saying in these lines." I remember feeling a little disappointed as I replied, "When you speak, Okiayu, meaning doesn't matter. Whatever you say transcends interpretation. You're not playing Treize, you are Treize."

He didn't look particularly convinced by that. Ever the earnest professional.

But I had my reasons for saying it.

Explaining the meaning behind Treize's words takes time and patience. In fact, it's no exaggeration to say that's why I began writing this novel in the first place. Long ago, I had planned a book for Kadokawa titled *Endlich Eroica* (The Last Hero), a story told entirely from Treize's perspective, covering the events of Gundam Wing.

It's taken me twenty years to get here.

The rest, I'll leave for my rambling notes in Volume Thirteen.

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.12 Concerto in Serendipity (Part.03)

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