

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP

13 SILENT ANTHEM

新機動戦記ガンダムW
フローズンティアドロップ

Written by
Katsuyuki Sumizawa

Cover Art by **Sakura Asagi**
Hajime Katoki

Original Work by
Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino



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The Second Lunar War

AC-190 SPRING

Earth, Luxembourg

Since the end of last year, Treize Khushrenada had begun receiving strange emails.

The sender called themselves “The Heart of Space.”

At first, he ignored them. But as the new year began, their number swelled to an absurd degree. Taking the proper precautions against potential viruses, he finally opened one.

What he found was a long, meaningless string of numbers, an endless Fibonacci sequence.

Some of the emails, however, were divided into shorter numerical clusters. When Treize saw that, he knew immediately.

“This is a cipher.”

He tried every possible method of decryption, yet nothing formed a coherent language.

Only one attempt produced something resembling words, though the result was absurd. The output was a string of syllables like “meow” and “mrow,” the mewling of a cat.

“So, the Heart of Space speaks the language of cats, does it?”

He laughed softly. “Someone’s idea of a joke.”

That thought should have been the end of it, but a memory surfaced, unbidden: his grandfather Cinquant’s library.

Most of it consisted of the expected fare, political theory, philosophy, weighty tomes bound in sober colors. Yet, tucked among them had been one strange volume.

Guided by that faint recollection, Treize searched the old study and soon found it. Between two thick academic works lay a slim book, almost like a picture book.

Its title was in German: Katze Wörter.

The subtitle read, A Study of Cat Language. On the cover was an illustration from Charles Perrault’s Puss in Boots.

The author was Heero Yuy. Published in AC-171, the year Treize himself had been born.

“I’d thought it nothing more than a hobby piece, written by the colony leader in his spare time,” he murmured.

Opening the cover, he found a dedication written in Heero’s own hand.

“Upon the birth of your first grandchild, this was written at your suggestion. I am grateful. To my eternal friend, Cinquant Khushrenada.”

His grandfather had died the following year, AC-172. A year later, in AC-173, Heero Yuy would deliver his famous ‘Heart of Space’ Declaration, calling for the colonies’ independence.

“I see...”

Now the phrases “Heart of Space” and “Cat Language” were joined by a single thread.

In theory, Cinquant and Heero had stood on opposite sides. What lay between them, whatever bond, was now lost to history.

Further in the book, Treize discovered a chart: a numerical notation of feline vocal tones, each correlating to letters of the alphabet.

Using that key, he began to translate the emails.

The result was a fragile, trembling kind of message, like a stray kitten mewling in the rain, begging to be taken in.

“Please connect me to ZERO.”

Treize opened the drawer of his desk and withdrew what had long lain untouched: Pandora’s Box.

It was a device entrusted to him by Zechs three years ago, in AC-187. At the time, Zechs had called it “an interface that can access predictive data, a system that can see the future.”

Until now, Treize had never felt compelled to use it. But something, an invisible urgency, drove him.

His reasoning was tenuous at best. The impulse was closer to that of someone who, unable to ignore a drenched, shivering kitten, takes it in from the cold.

Perhaps it was his grandfather’s voice whispering to him.

Perhaps it was the will of Heero Yuy, the leader who had once spoken for the Heart of Space.

Whatever the cause, Treize acted.

The emails, written in cat-language code, contained precise data on the required computer capacity and configuration. Following the instructions, Treize linked the ZERO System to OZ’s most advanced quantum computer.

A strange exhilaration overtook him, like the miller’s son in Puss in Boots, heedfully following the cat’s advice to change his own fate.

“Then I suppose that makes me the naked Marquis of Carabas,” he mused with a smile.

Instantly, the monitor flooded with images, countless, impossible to take in all at once.

Treize Khushrenada gazed into the futures that ZERO revealed.

In the dim light of the library, he sat alone, wrapped in regret.

“Another war... on the lunar surface?”

He cursed himself.

If only he had acted sooner, if he had accessed ZERO within those three years, might he have prevented this conflict?

“And even this war will solve nothing. Unless we can end war itself, it will only repeat... forever.”

From that moment, Treize began to search, alone, for a way to bring true and final peace.

Orders went out to summon the scattered OZ Specials.

The first graduates of the Lake Victoria Academy, the ones Treize had personally trained, assembled once more in Luxembourg.

Only two were absent: Zechs Merquise and Elev Onegel.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the battlefield is the moon. As a new generation of OZ Specials, we must continue to fight through the age that awaits us.”

Among those gathered were Lucrezia Noin, Izumi Tarnov, Broden Dies, and Solrac Delbrück, each appointed to command their own mobile suit company.

AC-190 March 07

Space Fortress Barge

After Dotzent's assassination, his successor was named: Brigadier General Septem, previously the front-line commander of the L-3 Army. Septem was incandescent with fury, furious at the sabotage carried out by the colony insurgents that had culminated in Dotzent's murder.

“We will purge these terrorists without mercy!”

He declared it openly and without shame. He went so far as to denounce the colony fall incident of AC-187 as an act of sabotage and to designate the L-2 and L-5 colony blocs as designated terrorist states.

“That was a declaration of war by the colonies!” he thundered.

He had no evidence and no material proof. His aide Cordelia found her temper with this raging superior wearing thin.

Almost as soon as he took command of Fortress Barge, Septem told his officers bluntly, “All the terrorists currently detained in Fortress Barge will be executed publicly. We must teach them how reckless it is to raise the banner of ‘anti-Alliance.’”

Those labeled “terrorists” had not been tried in any fair court; most of them were ordinary colony residents who had been forcibly stamped with the label “anti-Alliance.” Among them were agricultural plant workers and even Liao Ya.

“Please, General Septem, executing prisoners requires authorization from Alliance High Command in Brussels,” Cordelia ventured, careful and restrained.

“In a state of emergency, ordinary procedures are void,” Septem replied.

“A state of emergency?” she echoed.

“Do you see it? We are under attack from the colonies.” His hardline posture never wavered. “I am supreme commander of Fortress Barge. I need not run every little matter up to Alliance High Command.”

“Of course you need not. But organizations always try to pass responsibility down to the field. For the sake of preventing this from becoming a future problem, I ask you to judge this with caution.” Cordelia couched her opinion, but it was sound counsel, and Septem accepted it.

“Fine. Report to Brussels. But we do not have time to wait for permission.” He issued the order, then fixed Cordelia with a stare. “And Lieutenant Cordelia, you are no longer permitted to argue with me!”

Cordelia had tried to give her overzealous commander a moment to cool.

Her true motive was to dissuade Septem from his foolish belief that spectacle and terror served as the great deterrent. A public execution would only inflame the colonists' anger, unleash every pent-up grievance, and harden resistance. Any sane person could see it would backfire.

Predictably, Alliance Headquarters would not authorize such a thing.

"Unilateral action undermines military discipline. A public execution is out of the question!" came a near-furious dispatch from Alliance Forces Supreme Commander General Noventa.

Septem ignored it entirely.

"We will carry out the executions. If we yield to terrorists, the United Earth Sphere Alliance's world order will collapse. This punishment is the expression of our resolve to defend our universe!" he declared.

The time and place were announced. One week later, March 15th. The site: the firing range beneath the mass driver rails at the Alliance Space Base on Mare Tranquillitatis. The hour: colony standard time, 00:00:00.

Cordelia busied herself issuing notices and preparing the departments. Septem stopped her as she came to report completion.

"Lieutenant Cordelia, are you familiar with this machine?" he asked, and laid two photographs before her.

The photos were grainy and poor, but they showed an unregistered mobile suit, Prometheus, cloaked in a mantle.

"One was taken recently; it was recorded guarding the terrorists who escaped following the Dotzent assassination. The other is an enlarged image taken, by chance, from an observation satellite during the colony drop incident three years ago."

"They look alike," Cordelia said.

"It's the same machine, without a doubt. This will be clear proof of colony sabotage. It proves our actions are legitimate."

Cordelia drew a breath. She knew, however, that this very machine had been responsible for towing a stricken agricultural plant from a shattered colony into cemetery orbit, an action that had averted an unprecedented disaster. She kept that truth to herself.

"But these photographs alone are thin as material evidence," she said.

"Find that machine and its pilot. Secure them by any means necessary. Use whatever back channels you require. Now is no time to worry about method." Septem barked.

"Understood," she replied, voice heavy with sorrow. Privately, a different resolve flared within her. She would run an off-the-books inquiry, expose the darker side of this commander, and report his misconduct to High Command in hopes of bringing about his downfall.

L-4 Colony Sector

From the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, a resources satellite had been collected and prepared for long-haul tow to the lunar orbital point known as 07U1. At the same time the exhausted mining satellite MO-IV was scheduled

for recovery. The Winner family had been contracted by the UESA to perform this heavy lift.

"Father's against war. So why would he agree to transport a resource satellite that's going to end up as military supplies for the Alliance?"

Quatre seethed with anger at what he saw as his father's hypocrisy. In truth, the cargo contained no munitions; it was civil material, water, soil and other natural resources for colony environmental maintenance.

Quatre hated it, but Zayeed, his father, offered no excuses.

"This is not a matter for a child's concern," he said, refusing to discuss it.

Quatre sneaked aboard the tow vessel, intent on severing the link to the resource satellite.

"It's precisely things like this that keep war alive in our world," he muttered. The work proved stubborn. A ten-year-old could not do it alone. The tow left before he could finish, and the crew discovered him.

He was scolded, and told the truth.

"Master Quatre, this resource satellite is not for military use."

Quatre felt ashamed, but his resentment for his father did not evaporate.

"It's your fault for not speaking clearly to me," he thought.

Once a satellite begins transit, its course cannot be reversed. Over the comms, Zayeed reprimanded him.

"Do not expect a rescue. As punishment for this foolishness, you will work beneath the crew of that tow vessel!"

Quatre spent the journey to lunar orbit as menial labor, scrubbing decks and washing dishes, under the very crew he had tried to trick.

L-1 Colony Cluster Rebel Forces Safehouse

Hu Die and Meilan had resolved to go fetch their father by themselves.

The Erkönig had already been serviced and was ready to sortie at a moment's notice.

Duo, of course, was aiding them, but he spoke up with his habitual blend of optimism and sudden practicality. "You two alone? No way. That's impossible."

"We've still got a week," he continued. "Let's round up more help before then. The rebels aren't going to just stand by and let an old man die, are they?"

Hu Die and Meilan accepted the suggestion and went to plead their case with Artemis, the rebel commander.

"Perfect timing," Artemis said with a smile. "We've just finished drafting a rescue plan and wanted you to hear it." She brought up the mission on the monitor and began to explain.

The outline ran as follows: on the day of the public execution, the elite Nemea squadron, Leo V types, led by Scheherazade and Prometheus would stage a frontal assault on the northeastern sector of the lunar base. Once the base's forces were drawn to the northeast, the resistance, including the

Erkönig, would smash the dome over the execution grounds in the southwest and pull Liao Ya and the others to safety.

“By the way,” Artemis added, “this is the same method Six Merquise and the Sherwood outlaws used about forty years ago in AC-147 to rescue prisoners.”

Artemis’s father, Sedichi, had even taken part in that operation as a member of the Pumpkin Tank squad. Hu Die and Meilan felt a rush of relief at the reference.

“The problem is the Fortress Barge, that didn’t exist back then. If it shows up, things get messy.” Artemis hesitated.

“The Barton Foundation says they’ll take care of Barge,” her aide Quinze replied.

“Dekim? What on earth for?” Artemis’s laugh edged with derision.

“It seems Dekim’s private engineers, Doktor S and Professor H, succeeded in developing a mass-production mobile suit. They call it the Aquila. Over one hundred and fifty new units are already on the production line.”

The Barton Foundation had deep pockets and had secured both materials and manpower. It had shoved the Ein faction aside and become central to the rebellion’s power structure.

Artemis sneered.

“So, they just want to play with a new toy. The rebels’ thinking hasn’t matured a bit.”

“No, Dekim’s goal is to mass-produce mobile suits made of Gundanium alloy based on that machine,” Quinze said.

“How? The lunar GND ore is exhausted, isn’t it?”

“There’s word that the Alliance Space Forces mining team discovered a massive lava tunnel, a deep vertical shaft similar to the Oceanus Procellarum Marius, under the Aitken basin in the South Pole.”

“You think there’s GND ore there?”

“Given how similar its shape is to Marius Hills Hole, it’s almost certain a huge deposit of GND ore lies buried there.”

“So, they plan to cut in and seize it.”

“Probably.”

“Then we’ll need to deal with any space fortress that could become a future nuisance...” Artemis’s expression hardened. Even within the rebel ranks there was no real cohesion, no guarantee that allies wouldn’t turn traitor. The Barton Foundation, after all, was an ambition-driven juggernaut seeking dominion of space.

It was a dangerous gamble, but Artemis decided to prioritize the immediate rescue mission above internal power struggles. First, get these girls’ wish granted. Internal politics could wait.

“We appreciate the cooperation, but you’ll want something in return, won’t you?” Artemis said.

“Of course,” Quinze replied. “Dekim’s a businessman, nothing’s free.”

“But they’re offering a pretty steep discount on their terms. The Barton Foundation demands our Prometheus.”

Artemis blinked, surprised. She had expected arrogant demands, command of the rebel force, subordination to the Foundation, not a simple equipment swap.

"That's quite a concession," she said, considering. Trading a Barge strike for a single mobile suit might be acceptable. "Alright. I accept. The feint will have to be carried out by the princess and the Nemea girls and no one else."

A few hours later, a Barton Foundation mobile suit transport arrived to take Prometheus in. Elev was forced to part with the machine he had piloted for so long.

"Are you sure about this?" Zechs asked.

"Sure," Elev said in a dry tone. "A test pilot falling in love with a prototype doesn't do the job." His words were brisk, but a note of wistful sadness showed through. The two men watched the transport lift off and saluted the legend of careful courtesy one expects from a test pilot.

L-1 Colony Sector

A maintenance crewman with no name, "No Name", had been taken aboard the Barton Foundation transport as a mechanic. Doktor S had recruited him. When an emigrant ship bound for the L-3 colonies suffered engine trouble, Doktor S handled the repair and No Name assisted.

"He's rough, but he's got talent as an engineer," Doktor S observed.

"I'm not a tech," No Name replied. "I've been a soldier since the day I was born."

"I see... so he's got soldier's instincts too," Doktor S said.

No Name remained silent.

"What's your name, boy?" Doktor S asked.

"I have no name," he answered.

"Fine. I'll take you in. You've nowhere to go, I imagine."

"Yes."

For No Name it was not that he lacked somewhere to go; he lacked anywhere to return.

Earlier that year, No Name had met a girl named Middie on the Eastern European front and spent some time with a mercenary camp. But when Doomed Roberto's force was wiped out, they were left with nowhere to go. No Name later learned that Middie had been a betrayer: to feed her poor family she had given positional data to the Alliance forces.

Tearfully, she confessed the truth.

"You're better off than I am. You have a home to go back to," No Name told her and tried to leave.

"Wait, No Name," Middie called after him. He didn't look back.

"You've got the wrong person... I'm not No Name," he said, eyes fixated sadly on the stars. "I'm a traveler searching for a place to return to."

Then No Name departed for space.

No Name busied himself with the final tuning of a new mobile suit. Model number WMS-01 Aquila, the eagle, named for the mythic bird that tore Prometheus's liver in Greek legend. It would later serve as the prototype for the WMS-03 Maganac.

The Aquila was built on a radically different design philosophy from the Leo: it sacrificed mobility and close-combat agility for heavy armor and concentrated firepower, including a twin gatling armament. The machine reflected Doktor S's eccentric tastes. Yet its handling was remarkably refined. The cockpit offered exceptional visibility, and its simplified control scheme allowed even novices to master it in a short time, credit to Professor H, the cockpit systems authority.

Compared with the Alliance's mass-produced machines, No Name thought as he finished adjustments, there was no comparison.

During a break he leafed through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the sole memento left by Roberto's losing-force.

"You're reading something heavy. Is it any good?" Doktor S said from behind him.

"Not really... I finished it long ago, but it's dull," No Name replied.

"Then come with me. I'll show you my masterpiece just received." No Name followed and was stunned by Prometheus hanging in the hangar. Its blocky yet refined silhouette transcended the idea of mere military hardware.

"What do you think? Do you like it?" Doktor S asked, with pride.

"I've never seen anything like it," No Name breathed, eyes wide.

"You like that? We'll make it the flagship for the Barge assault. Prometheus leading Aquila, the Titan followed by the eagle. Pretty clever, eh?" Doktor S said, as if the plan had been set from the start.

"The problem is who will pilot Prometheus. That brat of Dekim's can't handle it," Doktor S added.

At that moment, a young man named Trowa was storming about, berating the mechanics. "What is this thing? It's a powder keg! Who would fight in something like this? If it gets hit and explodes, everything goes up! The design's garbage!"

No Name was told that this man was Dekim Barton's only son and one of Prometheus's candidate pilots.

"Poor fool," No Name thought. "He's terrified of dying."

L-5 Colony Cluster

WuFei was spending his gymnasium spring break en route to the moon with Master O. Officially, he was accompanying the old master as an assistant to survey and procure chemical substances. In truth, their aim was to rescue Master O's ally, Liao Ya, who had been taken prisoner.

"Mobile suits?"

WuFei repeated the word, hearing it for the first time.

"They've only been around fifteen years. No surprise you don't know them yet."

"Wouldn't fighting in such things dull a warrior's resolve?"

"The opposite. Without the resolve to fight, you cannot pilot a mobile suit."

"What machine am I to wield?"

"Tallgeese Zi-Long."

The machine was stowed in the transport's hangar.

"I thought it was to be called Gundam," WuFei said.

"Shenlong is not yet complete. Three years more, at least."

"That's a tall tale... Why insist so much on humanoid weapons?"

"Because war is not mere killing. The wars of this age are slaughter, nothing more. True war is the clash of souls at their utmost. It transforms the spirit of both the one who fights and the one who is fought. Gundam is what makes that possible."

"Sounds like pretty words to me."

"Once humanity acquired nuclear weapons, it lost the ability to wage war in any true sense. Pursue efficiency in war, and that's where you end up. Mobile suits, however, these inefficient weapons, are different. In them lies the answer to the war humans were meant to wage. Glory and honor are granted to both victor and vanquished. If people are to fight with pride, the weapon must have the shape of a human."

"..."

"Pour your soul into every motion, every step, every strike. Rage is acceptable; mourning is acceptable; even atonement is acceptable. But never fight with hatred. Hatred is a sign of weakness, of shoring up what you lack with malice. From hatred comes only more hatred, and you are trapped in an unending chain of revenge."

WuFei was keenly aware of his own weakness. Can I truly fight? He asked himself that question again and again.

"If you fight with soul in every act, you will inevitably touch the feelings of your opponent. Think of your blow as the god's judgment of life and death. Making the other understand that, that is the mission of a Gundam pilot."

"I thought I was to ride the Tallgeese," WuFei said.

"It makes no difference. From now on, consider Zi-Long a Gundam."

Lunar Surface, Catalina Crater Underground Base

Beta and Alpha continued their mock close-quarters bouts, Beta in the Wing Gundam, Alpha in the Proto Zero. Beta had begun to grasp what Doctor J meant by "a machine that trespasses into the realm of the gods."

The sensation was one the Leo could never provide. Every jab of the arms, every driving kick, flowed without friction. The machine moved as if his senses extended into it. Even when slipping Alpha's attacks, it responded in fractions of a second.

"So, it truly is this far beyond..."

He couldn't hide his astonishment. Doctor J hadn't been speaking idly.

It was genius made manifest, frightening in its technical supremacy. And that, in turn, made Beta's humiliation all the sharper.

"Why does this burn so much?"

At first, he couldn't locate the source of the feeling. Was it because of Seis? Because the enemy who tormented them, a being to be hated, was so perfect as to be unassailable? No, neither. All of it came down to the man before him: Alpha's very existence offended him.

Why was there another him? Why was that other self-given a completed Proto Zero while he had a frame-bare, unfinished unit? He could not accept it. No matter how precise his strikes, they could not bite into the Proto Zero. Its ironclad armor simply absorbed them. In return, even a glancing blow from Alpha rattled Beta hard enough to verge on concussion.

Only with the beam sabers, crossing blades, could they fight as equals.

One day, Beta noticed it. In the instant he was knocked back from a saber bind, the Proto Zero's movement stopped, there was a clear opening, and yet Alpha did not press the attack. This was no equal fight.

"He's holding back."

When the bout ended, Beta called to Alpha as they climbed down from their cockpits.

"I hate to think it, but..."

Alpha turned, puzzled.

"Are you mocking me?"

"I'm not."

"Then why hold back?"

"...I can see it."

"See what?"

"What's about to happen... I can see the future."

Beta took it as mockery all the more.

"That's impossible."

"It's the machine's capability. The future pushes into my mind as images."

There was no clouding in Alpha's eyes, no hint of teasing. He was perfectly serious.

Doctor J had said it before: "Only one of you needs to survive." Taking him at his word, their kill-or-be-killed matches had been nothing but earnest. Still seething, Beta pressed on.

"If that's true, all the more reason. Why not use that power to kill me?"

"Because you are me. If someone must die, it's me, not you."

Beta couldn't grasp what he meant. Had seeing the future brought Alpha to that conclusion? Or had the exhaustion of this regimen made him reckless? Perhaps both.

"He wants to die."

"His frustration runs deeper than mine."

Beta remembered what Odin Lowe had taught him: live according to your feelings.

Doctor J arrived carrying two astro-suits.

"Today we go topside for rifle training. It may be a bit early, timewise, but circumstances no longer allow us the luxury." The constant smirk on his lips remained a focus for Beta's loathing.

"A large-scale war will break out on the moon soon. Naturally, you will be thrown into it. So, you'll need shooting before then. Think of it as training with live ammo, that's all."

They suited up as ordered.

Doctor J wheeled out two buster rifles, charged their capacitors, and moved on to fitting six Messer Zwerg units to one of the Twin Buster Rifles.

As Beta sealed his suit, he spoke sotto voce to Alpha.

"This is our chance. Use it. Find an opening and run."

"Running together isn't on the table?"

"No. The Wing can't fly yet. And I want to join the fight. I want to die in battle."

"I see."

They climbed into their respective cockpits.

Two Gundams rose into Catalina Crater.

Model XXXG-00W0, Wing Gundam Proto Zero.

Model XXXG-01W, Wing Gundam.

Beta spoke over the comm.

"Hurry and take bird mode. One death is enough, mine."

Proto Zero began its transformation. Alpha's voice came through as the mechanisms shifted.

"Are you sure? You're the real one."

"That doesn't matter anymore... Live. For my share as well."

Proto Zero completed its change to bird mode, rose straight up, and streaked southward into the distance.

AC-190 March 10

Lunar Surface South Pole, Aitken Basin

A flash streaked out from the massive lava tunnel that held vast deposits of raw GND ore. It was fired from the Drei Zwerg Doppelt mounted on the Proto Zero.

An immense chain of explosions followed, rippling outward until the very shape of the moon seemed to change.

"With this, there's nothing left to fight over," Alpha murmured in the cockpit. "The war should end before it begins. And now, no one will ever build another Gundanium mobile suit."

Before him, the hemisphere of the ZERO System glowed in silence, its light steady, indifferent.

But things did not unfold as Alpha had hoped.
That very day, the Second Lunar War began.

Lunar Orbit

The first shot of the war was fired, by the rebels.

Dekim Barton's rebel space fleet charted a course from the L-2 colony cluster toward lunar orbit. Though small in scale, its formation carried the dignity of a full-fledged armada: one cruiser (flagship Jaybally), five destroyers, ten mobile suit transports, and two carrier vessels loaded with escort fighters.

"Target locked on Mare Serenitatis," the sensor officer reported on the Jaybally's bridge.

Acting in place of Supreme Commander Dekim Barton, the adjutant gave the order.

"Begin Operation Sagitta."

Sagitta, Latin for the Arrow, was a minor constellation said to represent Zeus's lightning bolt borne by the Eagle, Aquila. A fitting name for a prelude to war.

This assault aimed to cripple the United Earth Sphere Alliance's lunar base at Mare Tranquillitatis. A secondary goal: to serve as a rehearsal for coordination between Aquila and Prometheus ahead of the coming offensive on Fortress Barge, set for five days later.

Two massive Sagittarius-class Alliance lunar battleships, the Chiron (Third Ship) and the Pholus (Fourth), had been conducting routine patrols, sailing northward from Mare Tranquillitatis toward Mare Serenitatis.

At lunar dawn, the long ridge known as Dorsa Smirnov cast a shadow that stretched five hundred kilometers, serpentine, coiling like a great snake across the plain. In older days, it had even been called Serpentine Ridge.

Their patrol route usually traced that ridge northward toward the lunar Caucasus Mountains, then westward from Mare Imbrium to Oceanus Procellarum. Lunar geography often borrowed from Earth; Caucasus was taken from the mountain range between the Black and Caspian Seas.

In Greek myth, it was Mount Caucasus, where the Titan Prometheus had been chained.

The attack came just as the Chiron and Pholus reached the end of Dorsa Smirnov.

For years, there had been no rebel movement, these patrols had become a mere formality, more for training than surveillance. Then, without warning, the rebel fleet appeared over the lunar surface and began its bombardment.

There was no defense.

From the five destroyers, over two hundred tons of depth charges rained down on Chiron and Pholus.

Neither ship mounted the massive beam cannons once seen on the Sagittarius or Centaurus class, removed after General Million Riddelhart's catastrophic failure in AC-186.

Their only anti-space weaponry were 260mm triple turrets, well out of range. A hundred dual anti-aircraft batteries spat fire blindly into the sky, but the explosions blooming on the ground below kicked up towering plumes of dust that quickly smothered visibility.

The moon's thin atmosphere and one-sixth gravity kept that dust suspended like a dense fog, an unbroken curtain across the plain.

Once that obscuring haze was confirmed, ten transport vessels descended, releasing ten Aquila mobile suits apiece, one hundred in total.

The units deployed at the base of the lunar Caucasus, seizing the terrain's advantage. At once, the Aquila pilots sent out the operation code.

"The eagle has descended upon Caucasus."

Below them, Mare Serenitatis lay drowned in smoke.

Moments later, the command unit Prometheus descended as well, landing awkwardly but completing the mythic tableau Doktor S had envisioned, Greek legends brought to life.

Inside the cockpit, Trowa Barton shouted,

"Prometheus, on-site! Commencing combat!"

The first volley erupted from the Aquila formation. From the rear, Prometheus raised its massive cross-shaped heavy rifle, firing homing missiles in quick succession. Then the shoulder and chest armor panels split open, unleashing a full salvo of micro-missiles.

Trowa intended to empty his payload before he could be hit. The target was the roiling center of the smoke field, broad, but certain to contain the enemy.

The Aquila units fired blindly into the haze, guided only by metallic signatures. Anything that emerged from the smoke would be struck down instantly.

It was a textbook surprise assault, utterly one-sided.

The Alliance battleships Chiron and Pholus, realizing the bombing had shifted to a mobile suit engagement, scrambled their Leo squadrons.

Each battleship carried fifty Leos, stored in the hangars where the giant beam cannons had once been installed.

One hundred Leos against one hundred and one enemy machines. The numbers were even, but the balance of power was not.

Leos burst from the smoke only to be shredded before firing a shot, torn apart by the Aquila's twin gatlings. Worse, their equipment was incomplete, the scramble had been too sudden. Most were armed with mid-range bazookas, useless at such close quarters.

The Aquila CQB teams were already in knife-fighting range, slashing with beam sabers the instant the Leos emerged.

Hand-to-hand combat raged beneath a sky of drifting ash.

Soon, heaps of Leo wreckage littered the lunar surface.

On the bridge of the Jaybally, the air buzzed with reports, enemy kills flooding in from Aquila pilots.

"A brilliant victory for our forces," the adjutant remarked. Dekim only nodded silently.

"Enemy losses exceed fifty percent. Approximately fifty Leos destroyed."

“Good. Every triumph in battle is a cause for celebration. Order all units to withdraw. We have no need for prisoners or spoils. Operation Sagitta, mission complete.”

At once, Aquila and Prometheus began their retreat, swift, clean, almost artful in precision.

Trowa’s Prometheus, heedless of his role as commander, led the withdrawal himself, racing back toward the transport ships waiting over Mare Imbrium.

“As long as we’re alive, we can drink to it. Tonight’s for a toast.”

The rebels suffered not a single casualty. Dekim hailed it as a complete victory.

Yet their true objectives had not been achieved. The lunar battleships Chiron and Pholus remained operational, hardly crippled. Nor had the coordination between Prometheus and the Aquila units improved; Trowa Barton’s reckless independence made organized tactics impossible.

To call it victory, under such circumstances, was naive at best.

The Alliance Space Forces command, however, was even more farcical.

Upon hearing Chiron’s distress report, they dismissed the incident as “a reconnaissance-in-force.” The notion that rebels would wage a full-scale war in the brutal conditions of the lunar front seemed unthinkable to them.

Even two days later, when General Clarence and his senior staff personally inspected the battered Chiron and Pholus at the lunar base, they toasted “a valiant defense and the successful repulsion of the enemy.”

The delusion that “the rebels are incapable of a major offensive” had sunk deep into Alliance headquarters. They believed the rebel factions were too fractured to coordinate, and even if they did, their military, organization, and finances were far too weak to challenge the Alliance.

Their own complacency and cowardice, they projected onto the enemy.

But it was nothing more than wishful thinking.

Only one Alliance commander reacted with true alarm: General Septem, at Fortress Barge.

“The fires of rebellion have been lit! We cannot sit idle! As reprisal, the executions of the terrorists must be advanced!”

He immediately barked new orders to his adjutant, Lieutenant Cordelia.

“Track the rebels’ fleet! Scour the moon’s far side, every crater and trench, find them!”

Cordelia followed orders and extended the radar net, tracing suspicious ship movements. The rebel fleet was soon located.

But she withheld the report. Among those ships was one belonging to the Barton Foundation. That was enough to raise her suspicion.

Her private investigation confirmed it, there was indeed some connection between Septem and Dekim Barton.

“I’ll catch that whiskered rat yet.”

By now, Cordelia’s disdain for her blustering, incompetent superior had curdled into pure contempt.

AC-190 March 13

In the quiet of the hangar onboard the small transport, Duo heard a girl singing.

The voice was faint, barely audible, and the words were English. He recognized them at once.

It was the lullaby “The Cat and the Fiddle,” beginning with “Hey diddle.” He’d often heard it back in the church that had taken him in as a child.

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

He pictured Hu Die singing, her soft voice carrying through the narrow metal chamber.

But when he climbed up to the cockpit, he found it was Meilan who’d been humming.

He always told the twin sisters apart by their hair. Meilan wore hers parted in two braids tied with clips; Hu Die kept hers gathered in one. From behind, that was all he needed to tell them apart.

Meilan’s profile looked fragile somehow. She was gazing quietly at a small white blossom cupped in her hands, a cosmo-flower, an engineered space-bred species that resembled a daisy. Its pistils spiraled outward from the stamen in a Fibonacci pattern.

“I thought you were Hu Die,” Duo said.

Meilan turned, startled.

“Don’t sneak up like that! You scared me.”

“So, you do have a gentle side after all.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” she shot back with her usual fiery glare.

Duo studied her face for a moment.

“What?”

“Just thinking, you really do look alike.”

He remembered Hu Die back at the agricultural plant on Fortress Barge, wearing that same quiet, lonely expression. At the time, she hadn’t looked like a warrior prepared for battle. Meilan looked the same now.

He couldn’t help feeling sorry for both of them, for being dragged into this ugly business of killing.

“The old man’s got a lot to answer for,” Duo muttered. “Turning his own daughters into soldiers.”

“Father bears no sin,” Meilan said firmly. “We chose our own paths.”

"Really?" Duo thought.

"Wasn't it more like 'following fate'?"

"That's my sister. Hu Die fights as Natakū, guardian god of the Dragon clan. I fight for myself, to win freedom!"

"While singing 'Hey, diddle, diddle,' huh?"

"Diddle...?"

"You were singing it just now."

Meilan quickly hid the flower in her pocket, and a faint blush crept into her cheeks.

"It's a lullaby Mother used to sing," she said. "An old one. I don't even know what the words mean."

Duo grinned mischievously.

"Want me to tell you?"

"No need," she said curtly. "I sing to calm my heart. Meaning doesn't matter."

Her reason, Duo realized, was the same as her father Liao Ya's when he played his erhu. The instrument now sat in his empty seat, standing in for the man himself.

For a while, Duo and Meilan simply stared at that chair in silence.

Then Hu Die entered. She'd just returned from routine communications with rebel headquarters at L-1.

"Septem of the Alliance has arrived at the lunar base!" she said breathlessly. "The public execution's been moved up!"

Two days sooner than planned, set for the thirteenth instead of the fifteenth.

"We're ready anytime," Duo said. "But what about Artemis's team? Will they make it?"

"It'll be close," Hu Die admitted, anxiety showing in her face.

"I see."

And then, softly, Meilan began singing again, the same lullaby.

Duo listened, his expression hardening with resolve.

"It'll be alright," he said quietly. "All we can do now is believe."

Mare Tranquillitatis Alliance Lunar Base

Treize Khushrenada, Special Commander First Class of the OZ Specials, arrived alongside General Septem. Treize intended to halt the public execution Septem meant to force through.

"General Septem, are you prepared to take upon yourself the colonies' hatred, every last drop of it?"

The senior staff of the Alliance Space Forces had gathered in the lunar base's grand conference hall.

"Hatred?" Septem snorted. "They carried that from the start. Trying to pin it on me is absurd."

He brushed off Treize's remonstrations.

"But as a soldier, I do not evade responsibility. I'll explain as much to Generals Catalonia and Noventa."

"You don't understand, you would be opening a war without end."

"This is no beginning. It's the midpoint. Our fight with the anti-Alliance has gone on for over fifty years."

There was no reaching him.

"The public execution will proceed tomorrow!"

General Clarence accepted Septem's demand and signed the authorization.

In resignation, Treize assigned his subordinates to guard the periphery of the lunar base.

"Starting a war is easy. Ending one means stacking corpses into mountains and turning rivers to blood... I knew it would come to this. I knew, and still..."

The tragedy was moving into place. The Earth Sphere War born here would run on to the EVE WARS.

Treize felt himself sinking into despair. Behind him, Lieutenant Cordelia spoke in a low voice.

"Your Excellency..."

"Don't call me that. I am only an officer among the Specials."

"With respect, I will call you 'Your Excellency.' I have something you should hear."

Cordelia reported the latest data she had withheld from Septem: precise positions of rebel vessels, and her projections of their likely strategic and tactical moves. Treize was impressed by the rigor and accuracy of her analysis.

"We've met before, haven't we?"

"Yes, three years ago, during the colony drop incident."

"The operator from that day... Cordelia, "

"Lieutenant Cordelia Fitzgerald, Your Excellency."

"I remember you well. You are an exceptionally capable officer."

"You honor me. I, too, am devoted to your integrity. I will do anything you require. Say the word."

"In that case, I have one request," Treize said, face drawn. "Tell me how many die in this war, and give me all their names."

"The names of the fallen? What will you do with them?"

"I must carve them into my heart. Their deaths are my responsibility."

Cordelia did not fully grasp his intent, but she would carry out the request, continuing to do so until Treize himself fell in EVE WARS.

*

By Treize's order, an OZ Specials escort detachment, five Greif units (Leo IV types) under Specialist Solrac Delbrück, moved to the southwest of Mare Tranquillitatis. Their mission was to stand watch along the boundary with Mare Nectaris.

Solrac learned that a ten-unit Alliance reconnaissance-in-force, the Nemea (Leo V types), had pushed deep into Mare Nectaris.

"Nemea unit, there's no need to scout as far as Mare Nectaris. Return at once."

No reply.

"What's this? Asleep on your feet?"

There was no contact with the commander, or any of the nine other suits.

Troubled, Solrac led his men toward Mare Nectaris.

On the broad, nearly level plain, ten Nemea stood together, upright and still.

As he closed in, the sight shocked him: each Nemea's cockpit showed a neat, searing hole where a beam had punched straight through.

"Wh—what is this..."

Every pilot was dead. A whole squad wiped out on their feet.

"Enemy! Sniper nearby!"

Solrac pulled his team back, weapons up, every sensor straining.

To the east of Mare Nectaris, the lunar Pyrenees, 164 kilometers long, rising to 2,200 meters, presented a grandeur worthy of their terrestrial namesake. Halfway up that range lay the Wing Gundam, unfinished frame shrouded beneath a camouflage mantle, prone with its buster rifle leveled.

Beta sat in the cockpit.

He had tightened the rifle's convergence to the absolute limit, maximizing penetration and range, then accessed the onboard memory to borrow Odin Lowe's sniping protocols, and picked off the Nemea unit.

If Solrac's Greif team continued a few more kilometers south toward Catalina Crater, Beta would pull the trigger without hesitation.

"Lucky you... sharp instincts," he murmured, easing his finger off the trigger as he watched them withdraw.

It takes a toll to aim for the cockpit and take a pilot's life rather than simply destroying the machine. In his mind, words resurfaced:

"It's like that for everyone at first."

"From the second time, it gets a little easier."

Odin's old attempt at comfort. But Beta did not feel it that way.

"I can get used to it, but it never gets easy."

This was the second time he had killed by intent, and this time, ten soldiers at once. Even so, it felt less hideous than erasing Leos wholesale.

"Am I still hung up on Seis Clarke?" he wondered. He couldn't untangle his own state of mind. In these past months, something in him had broken.

"So, you helped Alpha escape, didn't you?"

"I wouldn't know," Beta answered curtly. "And you're the one who said, 'One Gundam pilot is enough.'"

"Hmph. Hard man to read."

The line clicked off.

"That's my line," Beta muttered into the static-ridden channel.

Doctor J pressed no further. That strange mix of indifference to minutiae and impossible readiness to let go fit, in its way, against the cracked places in Beta's mind.

AC-190 March 14

An emergency council was underway in the briefing room aboard the cruiser Jaybally. With the public execution advanced, there was no denying that preparations were incomplete, yet they had no choice now but to begin the assault on Fortress Barge.

As reference material, a recording from AC-186 played across the screen: Artemis's failed attempt to besiege the fortress with mobile suits. When the Barge Cannon fired and twenty-two Schwarz Greif units vanished in an instant, the room fell into horrified silence.

"This is insane! Impossible! How are we supposed to bring down that fortress with mobile suits alone!?"

Trowa Barton, the appointed commander of the Barge assault, was visibly trembling.

Quinze, seated as an observer beside Dekim Barton, looked on with disappointment.

"So, this is the man we're supposed to entrust with our future? Pathetic."

Among the rebels, it was said that Trowa Barton would one day become the movement's next leader. Quinze found the idea absurd.

Compared to Zechs Merquise calmly analyzing this same footage, the difference couldn't be starker.

"Calm yourself, Trowa," said Doktor S, his tone almost fatherly. "We've already found a way to silence the Barge Cannon."

"The firing aperture houses a central core. Destroy that, and the cannon dies. We proved it three years ago."

The screen showed archival footage, Proto Zero's Messer Zwerg beam slicing through the barrel, the Barge Cannon's energy collapsing before it could fire. A miracle shot, precise as a thread through a needle.

"The suit you pilot, Prometheus, is made of the same Gundanium alloy, and its weapon capabilities far exceed Proto Zero's."

"But—!"

Trowa's voice cracked as he protested.

"If it fires before we can act, everything ends!"

"Exactly," Doktor S replied evenly. "So shoot before it shoots. Don't forget that, Commander Trowa Barton."

"..."

Later, in the hangar, Trowa found No Name working on the Prometheus. The pilot's face was pale, his composure unraveling.

"Hey, No Name... what's the range on Prometheus's missiles?"

"With the homing rounds, maybe forty-five hundred meters, if you don't care about accuracy," the mechanic replied, voice cold.

"And if I need pinpoint precision, threading that needle?"

"Then you're asking the wrong machine to do it."

"So, you agree, it's suicide?"

"It's reckless," No Name said flatly.

"What should I do, then? Tell me, what am I supposed to do?!"

"There's one way."

No Name looked at the frightened man and felt an unexpected pang of pity.

"I'll take Prometheus myself."

The words left his mouth like a calm verdict. He almost smiled, it was the same resigned warmth he'd felt reading *The Happy Prince*.

"You?" Trowa said, blinking.

"Yeah. The battlefield's where I belong. Maybe it's the only place left that feels like home."

Lunar Surface 1,500 km Above Mare Tranquillitatis

A massive rebel MS transport cut through space, carrying Artemis's forces.

Artemis herself piloted the *Scheherazade*; flanking her were Zechs and Elev in their *Schwarz Greif* units. The strike force poised to assault the Mare Tranquillitatis base's northeastern sector consisted mainly of fifty newly acquired Nemea (Leo V types).

"One more day and we could've fielded a hundred," Artemis said, "but there's no room for luxury now."

Their sortie, moved up ahead of schedule, had left them little time to prepare.

"Our priority is stopping the executions," Zechs answered.

"To rescue the captives, we'll have to overextend ourselves."

"Elev," he went on, "OZ Specials are stationed at the lunar base. This mission may be too heavy a burden for us," Elev warned, voicing the unease of fighting against his own will.

Zechs's tone hardened.

"Even if we must face Treize himself, we cannot hesitate."

He remembered Treize's own words to him years ago, during the Mogadishu offensive in AC-186: Do not hesitate. It is the path to glory.

Yet he had never truly lived by that creed.

"I've hesitated too many times, and made too many people suffer for it. I won't waver again."

"You speak of Dr. Katherine Po?"

"Not only her..."

As Zechs gazed back into the past, a sorrowful concerto played in his memory: the faces of Ein Yuy, Lucrezia Noin, Sally Po, and Iria Winner drifted before his eyes.

"We launch!" Artemis's voice suddenly rang through the comms.

"Follow me, boys!"

The *Scheherazade* dove first, followed by the two *Schwarz Greif* and fifty Nemea, all descending toward Mare Tranquillitatis.

*

"Artemis has launched!" Hu Die cried, ripping off her headset.

"Then let's move!" Duo replied, his voice bright.

"Wait for us, Father," Miran whispered, her heart tight with resolve.

Their small transport lifted off from its hiding place southwest of the base. Under the blinding lunar daylight, the craft's silhouette would have been glaringly conspicuous, but its ECM shielding and optical camouflage let it slip past the Alliance's sensor net undetected.

In the hangar, the Gundanium-alloy mobile suit Erbkönig waited in silence, cloaked in darkness.

Meanwhile, an OZ Specials squad of eight Space Aries, commanded by Captain Broden Dies, was flying southwest across Mare Tranquillitatis. Their objective: link up with Solrac's retreating Greif team from Mare Nectaris.

For a moment, their flight paths nearly intersected with Duo's transport, but the vessel's stealth systems held. Broden's Aries forces sped onward, never realizing how close they'd come.

*

When Solrac's Greif unit reached Mare Tranquillitatis again, they spotted a lone deep-blue mobile suit standing tall atop a ridge.

"A blue Greif?" Solrac muttered.

But it was no Greif. It was the prototype Tallgeese Zi-Long, piloted by Chang WuFei.

The Zi-Long bore the armament known as the Four Beasts.

"I am Chang WuFei. By righteous duty, I will punish you."

His calm declaration preceded a storm.

Blue lightning cut across the Sea of Tranquility, the Tallgeese Zi-Long, its high-output Zhuque thruster blazing.

Inside the cockpit, WuFei endured crushing G-forces that would have splintered another pilot's ribs and burst their organs. His body was uniquely hardened, why Master O had chosen him. Only Long Liao Ya, the warrior before him, had ever mastered the machine. WuFei had been found through Liao Ya's own biometrics.

The Zi-Long slid between two Greifs, swung its physical blade Baihu, and split them cleanly.

Solrac lunged from behind, beam saber raised, but the Zi-Long crouched, catching the strike on its circular shield Xuanwu and counter-thrusting Baihu straight through the Greif's head.

Then the Zi-Long extended its beam glaive Qinglong from behind Xuanwu, locked it together with Baihu into a twin-bladed spear, raised it high, and spun it in a blinding whirl.

He charged the remaining two Greifs and cut them down in a single sweeping arc.

The Greif series, descendants of the Leo, famed for close combat prowess, had never been so utterly overwhelmed.

Not one pilot died. Every cockpit had been struck to within a millimeter of penetration, divine precision, the literal enactment of a god's judgment between life and death.

The Greif pilots' defeat was total, physical and spiritual. Solrac himself would later say, "That battle taught me what it means to live on despite humiliation."

But WuFei felt no satisfaction in victory.

"To master the martial path, yet feel nothing... How is this different from a performer showing off acrobatics?"

Through the comm, Master O's voice replied.

"If your battle is always certain victory, your soul cannot dwell in it. To perfect the martial way, you must know defeat."

Hidden within a nearby crater, Master O's transport observed the duel in silence.

"You want me to lose?" WuFei asked.

"No. Keep winning, as you always have. But when the day comes that you do lose, that will be the beginning of your true battle."

"Hmph... I doubt that day will ever come," WuFei muttered.

Moments later, eight Space Aries appeared above him, Broden Dies's unit.

WuFei raised his voice once more.

"I am Chang WuFei! In the name of justice, I neither flee nor hide!"

Then, with full conviction.

"If there are brave souls who do not fear this Zi-Long, come at me from any direction!"

Broden ordered his men to attack.

Missiles rained down, but the Tallgeese Zi-Long did not budge.

Its Zhuque thrusters flared to maximum, scattering lunar dust in a vast storm as the machine vaulted skyward, reaching the Aries' altitude in an instant.

In a blur, its twin-edged spear of the Qinglong and Baihu slashed through four Aries; the fifth, turning to flee, was struck dead-center by a beam shot from the Qinglong.

Five pilots ejected; five suits exploded almost simultaneously.

WuFei watched the fireballs without emotion. Then, abruptly, he coughed, a fist-sized clump of blood burst from his lips, carried backward by the G-forces. His body screamed in protest; bones and organs felt on the verge of rupture.

"So, this is my limit..."

Broden, stunned, realized that more than half his squad had been neutralized in mere seconds.

"Such mobility... I never dreamed the rebels possessed a machine like that!"

He had no choice but to withdraw.

"All units, scatter and retreat!"

"Running away?" WuFei asked, contempt in his voice.

"Chang WuFei, was it? I'll remember that name," Broden replied. "I'm Captain Broden Dies of OZ's Specials. We will meet again."

The Tallgeese Zi-Long descended to the surface and simply watched them go. He could have pursued and destroyed them, but there was no honor in cutting down retreating foes.

He wiped his mouth; a dark smear of blood stained his hand.

"No... it's me who was spared this time."

He would cross paths with Broden again, only that time as a Colonel, long after he took his place among the Gundam pilots.

*

Artemis Sedichi's assault force opened fire on the base's northeast.

In the opening clashes, Zechs and Elev, both in Schwarz Greif units, cut a swath, Elev's heavy-caliber Dober gun pulverized the defensive wall, and five sentry Leos went down in an instant to Zechs's twin beam sabers.

Sirens blared as nearly a hundred Leo escorts surged onto the field.

But the Scheherazade and fifty Nemea punched straight through in a spindle formation, storming into the base interior. Their momentum matched the earlier Prometheus-Aquila raid in ferocity; what set Artemis's force apart was a clear objective, free the prisoners. For a diversion, spectacle was the point; the louder, the better. Alliance strength began massing toward the northeast.

*

Inside the base, Alliance command reeled.

They scraped together every remaining unit and sent them at a run to the embattled sector. In a rash decision, they even pushed the two massive lunar battleships, Chiron and Pholus, out to the front while both were still mid-refit.

When Noin relayed the news, Treize could only lament such incompetence.

"Half-repaired battleships, of what use are they?"

"And General Septem has ordered Fortress Barge to move," Noin added.

"Absurd... does he mean to commit all Alliance strength over a raid of this scale?"

Worse yet, Septem himself had already fled the base. The gravest fear now was obvious, the Barge Cannon turning its barrel on this installation. A man like Septem, who grasped at victory by any means, might well do it. Treize's most hated thing, a vulgar way of war, was about to be enacted.

"Specialist Noin, ascend space with Specialist Izumi. The Barge Cannon must not be allowed to fire."

"Understood," Noin answered at once, then, ever thorough, asked, "Are you certain about this?"

"I'll take care of Zechs and Elev myself. As for their commander, Artemis is my sworn foe. Leave her to me."

Treize was climbing into the cockpit of his pure-white Greif when Lieutenant Cordelia arrived at a run.

"Please wait, Your Excellency! Allow me to sortie with you!"

"No, Lieutenant. I won't put a lady through that."

"On the contrary, because I am a lady, I believe I must fight."

Treize smiled. "Very well, Lady Cordelia. You have permission to sortie in a mobile suit."

"My thanks."

*

Fortress Barge began its advance, and ran headlong into the rebel fleet led by the cruiser Jaybally. Destroyers opened fire; then a hundred Aquila suits fanned out in a wide line from the transports and loosed a coordinated volley. In their center hovered Prometheus, launched from the Jaybally.

Its fighting style had utterly changed.

Where Trowa Barton had once panicked at the first hit and dumped his entire payload in a single reckless salvo, the machine now meted out fire with surgical efficiency, every shot placed to effect against Barge. None of the Aquila pilots knew that No Name had taken Trowa's place.

"Guess the commander can rise to the occasion," someone muttered, and the line naturally fell into step with Prometheus's cadence, shifting from wasteful massed fire to measured waves that landed with punishing accuracy.

Battered by precise bombardment, Barge began to cant the entire fortress, bringing its main gun to bear.

No Name's voice cut across the net.

"All units, cease fire for one hundred eighty seconds."

Even as the order snapped through the formation, Prometheus surged ahead alone, straight for the Barge Cannon. Pilots drew breath in a collective gasp. In the Caucasus action this machine had sat safest at the rear, then bolted first in the retreat; now it flung itself at the most lethal task.

"Commander Trowa means to silence Barge," someone said, and none of them knew whose hands were truly on the sticks.

No Name flew Prometheus into the cannon's opening just as the shutters yawned. He leveled the massive cross-shaped heavy gun at the charging core in the heart of the barrel and set his sights.

"At this range, I could hit it with my eyes closed."

He did exactly that, closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger. The central core blew apart in a clean, blinding burst.

"The cleanup's yours, cross," he said. "But this thing is not to my taste."

He had no fondness for crosses. On Earth, the girl Middie had hidden a guidance beacon inside one. He armed the cross-gun with a time charge and kicked Prometheus free of the barrel.

A heartbeat later, the Barge Cannon flared like a second sun, and detonated.

The fortress once deemed impregnable reeled, half its structure torn apart.

From a small shuttle nearby, Noin and Izumi saw it up close, and blanched.

“Th-this can’t be real...”

“Is this the end of the Alliance?” Izumi breathed.

“I wish it were the end of war,” Noin said softly, a hope too fragile to hold. The Second Lunar War would grind on, a string of localized battles for the next half year.

The mauling of Fortress Barge was a staggering blow to the Alliance. From that day, the fortress ceased to play any offensive role in the lunar war. However small their overall strength, the rebels’ upper hand now owed, undeniably, to No Name.

Years later, when No Name would call himself Doktor T and rebuild Prometheus, he would regret this day bitterly. The giant cross-shaped heavy rifle was essential to Prometheus; he would redesign and recreate it, wrestling with the choice.

“Call it youthful folly,” he’d say. “A stupid stunt. Not so different, in the end, from the cowardice of Trowa Barton.”

Lunar Base Southwestern Sector

The four-legged mobile suit Erköning, piloted by Hu Die and Meilan, used its stealth systems to the fullest, smashing through the execution dome in the southwest sector of Mare Tranquillitatis Base and forcing its way inside.

Duo’s lunar buggy slipped through the crossing legs of the Erköning, racing down the near-empty corridors. Most of the guards had been sent to reinforce the northeast defense line. Duo sped unhindered through the halls; hacking through security locks and bypassing control nodes was second nature to him.

He quickly located the cells holding Liao Ya and the other condemned prisoners.

“We’re here to get you out, old man!”

Inside, Liao Ya looked calm, too calm, with the expression of a man already prepared to die.

“What are you waiting for? Move!”

“Duo... I’m sorry you’ve gone to such trouble. But I intend to face my execution.”

“I’ll tell you two things I hate, tomato sandwiches, and people who throw their lives away!”

He dragged Liao Ya out bodily and shoved him into an astro-suit. The other four prisoners were freed the same way and piled into the buggy’s rear seats.

“Meilan! Hu Die! Got the old man out, just like we planned!”

“Xie xie, Duo.”

He couldn’t tell which sister’s voice it was over the radio.

“What’s the enemy’s status?”

“No visible movement on our front.”

“Got it. Stay sharp, both of you.”

*

At the same time, the battle raging in the northeast had become a deadlock. Nearly two hours in, the rebel Nemea force was down to thirty machines. The arrival of Treize and the elite OZ Specials tipped the tide back toward the Alliance.

“Looks like this is as far as we go,” Artemis murmured aboard the Scheherazade.

She’d just received confirmation that the captives had been rescued. The diversion had done its job; the mission was complete. Plans were already in place to withdraw, using the captured lunar battleships Chiron and Pholus as cover.

“Though I doubt they’ll let us leave quietly,” she added, eyeing the two mobile suits blocking her path: a pure-white Greif and a violet Chimera, Treize and Cordelia’s machines.

The Scheherazade, after relentless front-line combat, bore over a hundred points of damage and was moving sluggishly.

“Commander Artemis, leave this to us.”

It was Zechs in the Schwarz Greif, his voice calm.

“We’ll hold them off,” Elev added.

“I appreciate it, but—”

Artemis hesitated. The rear guard’s job meant near-certain death. Only the strongest and most steadfast could fill that role, and these two certainly qualified. But they were former OZ officers, could they truly fight their old comrades?

“You needn’t worry,” Zechs said coldly.

“Treize Khushrenada’s pursuit will go no further. We’ll stop him.”

“You have no obligation to go that far for us.”

They had been prisoners of the rebellion once, not idealists, nor colonists, merely soldiers hired to fight. For such men to act out of loyalty to the rebel cause was rare indeed.

“We’ve served with the rebellion longer than we ever did with OZ,” Zechs replied.

“And these last few years... haven’t been bad,” Elev added with a grin.

Artemis saluted them.

“Thank you. Come back alive.”

She gave them a wink before turning away.

The Scheherazade and the remaining thirty Nemea began their retreat.

Lunar Base Southwestern Sector

Having left Erbkönig behind, Duo raced the lunar buggy toward the small transport waiting in an unmarked crater in Mare Tranquillitatis.

But three Space Aries suddenly appeared overhead, Broden Dies's squad, returning to base after their encounter with WuFei.

The buggy had no stealth systems. Duo cursed.

"Damn it, they spotted us! Guess I got careless!"

"Can we outrun them?" Liao Ya asked.

"The crater's still a ways off... We'll try, but—"

Then Erbkönig arrived, the sisters rushing to their father's aid.

"Run, Father!"

"We'll draw their fire!"

They shut down their stealth fields deliberately, making themselves the obvious target.

Broden felt a chill.

"Another unregistered mobile suit...?"

He couldn't afford to lose more men. The smart move was to disengage.

"All units, avoid unnecessary combat and return to base immediately."

But two of his subordinates, young, zealous loyalists, refused.

"To retreat without firing a shot? That's not the way of OZ!"

"What face would we show Special Aide Treize if we did?"

Ignoring orders, the two Aries dove toward the buggy and Erbkönig.

"They're splitting up!"

"We have to help Father!"

Erbkönig dodged a volley of missiles and moved to cover the buggy, but one of the Aries abruptly climbed and flipped in a sharp chandel, looping back. The feint had been bait. Erbkönig was caught between the two.

The reversing Aries fired its beam rifle in a wild pass; alarms screamed through Erbkönig's cockpit.

In the rear seat, Meilan manned the anti-air turret. She locked on to the attacker, then to the pursuer coming from the front.

"Target lock, fire!"

Two homing missiles streaked out, both Aries were struck and exploded.

Broden, shaken but pragmatic, veered away and set course back to base.

They were lucky, miraculously so.

But fortune and tragedy often walk side by side.

"We did it, Sister!"

The cockpit alarms still wailed. Hu Die didn't respond.

"Sister?"

Meilan turned, shaking her from behind, her body slumped, lifeless. Only then did Meilan notice the small, perfect hole burned through the cockpit glass and her sister's suit.

"No... Hu Die!?"

The beam shot had pierced the canopy and her chest in one line; decompression and flash-freeze finished what the weapon began. Death came instantly, no words of farewell.

"Sister! HU DIE!!"

Meilan's voice broke into raw screams, echoing through the lunar silence.

Lunar Base Northeastern Sector

The two Schwarz Greif units piloted by Zechs Merquise and Elev stood before a wall of Alliance machines, more than two hundred, outnumbering them twenty-to-one. Every Leo in the formation had been ordered to pursue and annihilate the retreating rebels.

"This might really be it for us," Elev said, swallowing hard.

"We knew the risk," Zechs replied, and moved to charge when a commanding voice rang out.

"Wait!"

From between the ranks of Leos emerged a pure-white Greif, pushing the front line aside with stately force.

"In honor of the courage you've shown, I offer you a duel!" the pilot declared. "I am Treize Khushrenada, Special Commander First Class of OZ Specials!"

"Your challenge is accepted!" Zechs answered instantly.

The duel would buy time for the rebel withdrawal. Zechs silently thanked Treize for the courtesy.

"Very well! No one is to interfere. This duel alone will decide the contest between us; revenge is forbidden. If any object, speak now!"

Treize's voice resounded. Neither Elev nor Cordelia raised objection; the surrounding troops stood frozen, awed into silence.

"Then, let us begin."

"..."

Black and white Greifs met in a blaze of beam sabers, a torrent of light erupting between them.

"I never thought I'd cross blades with you," Treize said. "But on this pure battlefield there is no room for hesitation! Come at me with all you have!"

"That was my intent from the start," Zechs answered. "I'll show you the kind of blood-stained fight OZ never permitted me!"

The duel was a dance, at times elegant, at times violently splendid. In swordsmanship Treize held the edge, but in pure piloting Zechs was superior.

They struck and parried endlessly while friend and foe alike watched, transfixed.

Lunar Base Southeastern Sector

Because Hu Die's lifeless foot still pressed the accelerator, the Erbkönig thundered blindly across the lunar plain. Meilan sat numb, hands slack on the controls.

"It's my fault," she murmured. "I was so focused on firing that I didn't notice... If I die here, maybe that's what I deserve."

The machine tore ahead at reckless speed—until Duo caught up.

After loading his lunar buggy onto the small transport, he'd launched again in pursuit. He'd already understood what had happened from Meilan's screams over the radio.

When his ship passed above the running Erbkönig, he leapt. Clinging to the canopy, he forced open the reinforced glass, pulled Hu Die's body onto his knees, and stamped down on the brake.

Silence settled around the motionless machine.

Duo gazed at her still face. "...Is this what war really is? One moment you're talking, the next you're gone. No time for fear, no time for good-bye."

"Her last words were, 'We'll save Father,' " Meilan said flatly, her voice drained of tone.

"You all right, Meilan?"

"Don't call me that anymore. I've taken my sister's will."

"Then what should I call you?"

She took the small white flower from her pocket and placed it on Hu Die's chest.

"I'm Natakū now... and I'll never sing 'Hey, diddle, diddle' again."

Lunar Base Northeastern Sector

The duel between Zechs and Treize neared its end. The movements of the Schwarz Greif grew heavy, its joints sluggish from accumulated strain. The beam saber's tip had shortened slightly, the tell-tale sign of fading output.

Treize saw it instantly. He closed the distance in one burst; his white Greif crossed both sabers in a swift ten-stroke pattern and sheared off the black Greif's arms. The fight was over.

"I... yield," Zechs said through clenched teeth. "Finish it."

But the white Greif deactivated its blades.

"A fine battle," Treize said quietly, without pride. "Zechs Merquise, your fight gives me courage once more. Will you not return to OZ?"

"But..."

"Lucrezia Noin waits for your return."

"..."

"Come with me. Together we'll bring down this rotten Alliance from within."

"Can I believe that promise?"

"Completely. History will need you, and your strength."

Zechs agreed to return under Treize's command, and Elev naturally followed. Cordelia, watching Treize's mastery firsthand, was left utterly entranced.

"Magnificent victory, Your Excellency Treize."

"No, Lady Cordelia, the one who won was this white Leo."

"Yes, sir."

"You handle your own suit well. If you wish, I would have you in OZ Specials."

"It would be an honor."

“And one more thing—” Treize’s voice softened. “I know better than anyone what kind of lady you are. Cordelia doesn’t suit you. Be Une, that name is more truly you.”

She smiled through sudden tears. From that day she called herself Lady Une. That same day she submitted her report listing the number and names of the soldiers killed. Treize bowed his head, committing each name to memory as if carving them into his heart.

*

Several hours later, in the central mound of a nameless crater, a space coffin was buried, Hu Die’s final resting place. Duo shoveled lunar dust over it in silence.

“Leave the rest to me,” he said.

Liao Ya and Meilan nodded and returned to their small transport without a word. In the cockpit, Liao Ya began to play his erhu. Meilan no longer wept; her composure made her father ache with pity and age.

After some time, Master O’s long-range ship arrived, the Tallgeese Zi-Long standing beside it. Duo straightened from the grave marker as WuFei stepped down, his gaze falling coldly on the battered Erlkönig nearby.

“So, this is Erlkönig,” WuFei said. “With such an arrogant name, no wonder it met this end.”

“Yeah... maybe ‘Warlock’ would’ve suited it better,” Duo replied.

*

A civilian resource satellite drifted close to the moon. Quatre, who had been forced into menial labor, learned that war was raging on the lunar surface.

“Why does humanity keep waging war?” he asked aloud.

No one could give him an answer.

“To fight here, on the barren moon, always a step from death, what sense can there be?”

“Thinking about meaning is pointless,” another boy replied.

He wore a black tank top, hair unkempt, his body rank with days of sweat. Two days earlier, the satellite crew had recovered a drifting mobile suit in flight mode. The pilot inside had called himself Black Alpha.

“War itself has no meaning,” Alpha said. “I destroyed the GND ore that started all this, and still people fight. Humans must just like war.”

“You tried to stop it?” Quatre asked.

“I only followed ZERO’s orders.”

“Zero, who’s that?”

“I don’t really know... maybe the will of space itself.”

“Then you’re its voice, the heart of space.”

“Only when I’m inside Proto Zero.”

Quatre glanced toward the hangar.

“Is that Gundanium mobile suit yours?”

“Not anymore. Do what you want with it, pilot it or scrap it.”

At that moment, a transmission came from his father Zayeed, who was approaching the sector.

“I’m not here to fetch you,” Zayeed said sternly. “With this war on the moon, the satellite’s at risk.”

When his shuttle docked, the Proto Zero was secured nearby. Zayeed eyed it with disdain.

“It’s things like this that make humanity crave war. Dismantle it immediately, dump it with the resource satellite MO-IV.”

The crew hesitated, unqualified for such work. Zayeed stepped out, adding another order:

“If there are any other Gundanium suits, recover and dismantle them too. Until every cause of war is erased, humanity has no future.”

Then, without warning, the shuttle launched back into space.

“What the, who’s aboard?”

“No one should be!” the technicians shouted.

But someone was. The boy called Black Alpha had taken the shuttle.

Where he went afterward, no one ever knew.

AC-190 March 21

The lunar nearside lay under a long night.

Over the past week, the Alliance’s fortunes had grown still darker. Yet on this day the OZ Specials, at the center of a counterstroke, finally struck back to pay the rebels in kind. Acting on coordinates pinpointed by Second Warrant Officer Lady Une’s independent investigation, the rebel fleet found itself encircled by one hundred Leo VI Löwe units and fifty Space Aries Golden Fleece.

Where Alliance mobile suits prized interchangeability and standardized continuity, OZ fielded a profusion of customized prototypes tuned to their pilots. Outwardly, the Löwe and Golden Fleece looked no different from their base frames; in truth, they were machines of an entirely different class.

The Aquila units scrambled to meet them, and were cut down one after another.

The Aquila, co-developed by Doktor S and Professor H, was a superb machine, equal to or better than its peers on paper. But the gulf in combat experience between rebel and OZ pilots proved decisive.

Judging the moment, Prometheus launched from the cruiser Jaybally. At the controls was not Nameless but Dekim’s son, Trowa Barton. Lauded as the hero who brought down Barge, he had grown comfortable in the glow of admiration, comfortable enough that, in time, he convinced himself he had destroyed the Barge Cannon. Now he believed just as firmly that Prometheus could handle Leos and Aries with ease.

The instant he entered the fray; Prometheus took concentrated fire. Micro-missiles in its racks cooked off in a chain of explosions. Only then did Trowa see the truth.

"I should have fired before they could."

Had he still carried the giant cross-shaped heavy rifle, perhaps that would have been possible.

But things had gone too far.

Trowa barely managed to eject. His escape pod was snatched almost casually by a Löwe, and he became an Alliance prisoner.

The Jaybally fled the sector in defeat, bleeding from a dozen wounds. Half the fleet had been sunk; the survivors limped for the repair docks, barely holding together.

Doktor S raged at the loss of Prometheus.

"If OZ gets their hands on it, we're finished! Why didn't I install a remote self-destruct?"

His fears proved unfounded. Warlock arrived on the field and, entering Feibi Chongtian mode, broke into ten components, swallowed the crippled Prometheus, and spirited it away. Its pilots, Duo and Meilan, then dropped toward the lunar surface.

"If we hand it to Master O and the Tallgeese pilot, they'll put it right in no time," Duo said.

"I hate whoever's in that Zi-Long," Meilan muttered.

"Because he never gets out of the cockpit?"

"Because he's always acting superior."

"Can't argue with that..."

At this point WuFei offered his name only to those he fought.

Neither Duo nor Meilan had seen his face, nor even knew his name.

When Warlock returned to the nameless crater, the Tallgeese Zi-Long and the long-range transport were gone. Liao Ya waited alone by the small ship.

"Where'd they go?" Duo asked.

"Back to L-5," Liao Ya said. "Apparently spring break is over."

"You're kidding me. They're fighting a war on vacation time?"

"Why did you let them take the Zi-Long?" Meilan pressed. "That machine is yours, Father!"

"No... I entrusted it to a warrior greater than I. I can no longer master it."

Hu Die's death had struck him deep.

The iron resolve that once radiated from him was gone.

"Artemis will come for us here tomorrow," he said at last. "We'll rejoin her and fight at her side."

"Great," Duo said, voice edged with bite. "Safety in numbers."

Liao Ya said nothing.

The towering, solitary man was no more.

Duo could feel it.

AC-190 March 22

The captured lunar battleships Chiron and Pholus took aboard Duo's team and their small transport from an unnamed crater, then continued south, charting a course from Mare Tranquillitatis toward Mare Nectaris.

Beneath Catalina Crater lay Doctor J's mobile suit development plant, the only place capable of repairing and refitting the three damaged Gundanium suits now aboard.

On the bridge of Chiron, Artemis stood with her aide Quinze, contacting Doctor J.

"Understood," came his brief reply.

As she watched the moon's night stretch beyond the viewport, Artemis outlined her vision.

"Dekim's fleet may be crippled, but we still have Chiron, Pholus, and our Gundanium suits. With Aquila and Nemea coordination, we can drive the Alliance off the moon."

"And after that, Commander?"

"Then comes revolution, colony independence."

"If it is you who carries his will, you will make a worthy leader."

"No. He will."

"He?"

"Milliardo Peacecraft. Surely even you have no objection."

"Hah..."

An engineer burst in.

"We have a problem! The Scheherazade, Prometheus, and Warlock, they've vanished from the hangar!"

"What?"

"Impossible! They were *stolen*!"

At the same moment the radar operator shouted, "A small transport has launched! Did you authorize Liao Ya's departure?"

"Has he defected?"

"Unforgivable, scramble high speed attack craft!"

Quinze sprinted from the bridge toward the flight deck just as the comm officer spoke again.

"Message from Doctor J."

The old man's face flickered onto the monitor.

"Forgot to mention, stay clear of the Pyrenees Mountains. I ordered him to destroy any Alliance-aligned vessel on sight."

A chill ran through Artemis.

"Navigator, our position!"

"Mare Nectaris, ma'am."

"Exact coordinates!"

"South 15.5°, East 41.2°."

"And the Pyrenees?"

"Hard to see in the dark, but, probably—"

A pin-prick of light flared far ahead.

It was the Wing Gundam's buster rifle shot from the mountain's flank.
The beam pierced Chiron's bridge. In the blinding explosion, Artemis and her bridge crew vanished.

The next shot ripped through Pholus's command tower.
On the airless surface there was no fire, only silent blasts.
Beta lowered his eyes from the targeting scope.
Doctor J's voice filled the cockpit.
"Too late... those were our allies you hit."
"They were Alliance battleships."
"No matter. You avenged your parents."
"Avenged...?"
"Artemis Sedichi led the October 26, AC-186 attack on Fortress Barge."
That date was carved into Beta's memory.
"Aoi and Seis died because of her."
"I see..." Beta said without a flicker.
"But it has nothing to do with me."

*

Liao Ya's small transport sped toward the derelict resource satellite MO-IV near lunar orbit.

He had already asked Zayeed Tabra Winner to dismantle the three Gundanium suits.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Zayeed asked.

"Yes. We can't let more lives be lost to them."

The two had known each other since childhood.

"Very well. Then let this be your daughter's requiem."

Behind Liao Ya's ship, Quinze closed in aboard a high-speed attacker.

Seeing the resource satellite ahead, he sneered.

"So, you'd sell them to the Winner family for profit? I'll see them destroyed first!"

He unleashed a volley of missiles and laser fire.

The hits were perfect, the transport smashed into the satellite and exploded, scattering even the Gundanium suits into vapor.

Liao Ya perished with them.

"There's still GND ore on the moon," Quinze spat. "Gundams can be built again."

But fury drove him further.

"And I'll bury the Winner head as well!"

An explosion cut him short. His attacker's engines went up in flames.

"What, ambushed? From where?"

The shot had come from far astern: the bird-mode Proto Zero.

Quinze's craft spiraled downward, vanishing into the lunar shadow.

"Sorry for shooting you in the back..."

In Proto Zero's cockpit sat Quatre.

"War is tragic... but to protect the ones we love, we must fight. Please understand, Father."

Zayeed's face remained impassive as ever.

"Fool! Get out of that machine and dismantle it, now! You're the only one who can!"

Thrusters ignited on the resource satellite MO-IV.

Towing the disassembled Gundanium suits, it began its slow drift toward the L-4 colonies.

AC-190 Autumn

The pointless, profitless war dragged on.

Dekim Barton's forces continued their assaults on the Alliance base at Mare Tranquillitatis, scoring limited gains.

At headquarters, General Clarence and his staff met daily, unable to find an answer, until Treize and Lady Une entered the chamber.

"There is a simple way to end this," Treize said.

"General Septem. Execute this prisoner, Trowa Barton."

"Preposterous!" Septem barked.

"He's the son of Dekim Barton, the one currently commanding the rebel forces," Treize countered. "Kill him, and Dekim's morale will break; he'll sue for peace."

"It could be an alias! Such an act would only inflame the colonies!"

"Strange hearing moral qualms from you, General. When did you become a humanitarian?"

"Grrrrrr..."

Septem could only grind his teeth.

Lady Une adjusted her silver-rimmed glasses and took the floor.

"Even if the name is false, he is unquestionably Prometheus's pilot, he's confessed, and both the serum and lie detector agree. He was responsible for the colony drop incident three years ago, for Admiral Dotzent's assassination six months ago, and for the half-destruction of Fortress Barge."

"Then he's an S-class war criminal," Clarence said in shock.

"No, that isn't quite right..." Septem faltered, wiping sweat from his brow.

"General Septem," Une pressed, "six months ago, it was you who ordered the search for Prometheus's pilot, was it not?"

"Yes, but..."

"And when you served in the Third Space Army, you were quite friendly with Dekim Barton during the X-18999 colony's construction. Did you intentionally commit acts of treason to steer this war toward victory for the rebels?"

"Stand down, Cordelia!"

“Une, Ensign Lady Une.”

Clarence rose, eyes cold.

“I’m disappointed, Septem. Until a court-martial clears you, you’ll remain in confinement.”

Guards escorted Septem away.

The meeting resumed. It was agreed that Trowa Barton would be freed as a precondition for cease-fire talks with the rebels. The negotiator would be the distinguished Vice Foreign Minister, Twelve Darlian.

October 26, AC-190, the very date four years earlier when Fortress Barge had first been completed.

Dekim Barton and General Clarence signed the armistice.

The Second Lunar War was over.

Silent Anthem
MC File.7

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Relena Peacecraft slowly removed her virtual visor and turned toward the monitor where Heero was speaking with Noin.

"I'm Relena Darlian..." she said, reaching a hand toward the screen.

"And you are?"

Heero, on the other end, only glared back at her in silence.

It was not the first time she'd introduced herself this way, there had been two such moments in her life before.

In AC-191, and again in 195. Both times, the person she'd addressed had left before hearing her out, never answering her question.

She had long believed those two encounters were with the same person. It turned out she was mistaken.

The man on the monitor was indeed that Heero Yuy, but...

He didn't answer her question. Instead, he countered with one of his own.

"Have you accepted what it means to throw away the name Peacecraft?"

"Yes... at last."

"I see."

That was all.

The exchange ended there, as if words were unnecessary between them. A single meeting of eyes was enough to convey meaning.

Before them, the dodecahedral fortress Babel loomed closer by the minute.

"Entering landing sequence. Miss Relena, are you ready?" came Noin's voice.

Heero cut in.

"Noin, I just received word from Naina. Cyrene Wind has regained consciousness."

"My brother?"

It was Relena, not Noin, his wife, who reacted first.

"Yes. This might mean we're in time after all."

Heero's tone held a quiet weight, an unspoken implication behind the words.

*

The Aries Orbital Spaceport, floating on the Arcadia Sea of Mars's northern hemisphere, was deserted. The Southern-Northern War had placed the entire region under martial lockdown; no ships had launched or landed for months. No one should have been there at all.

And yet, Father Maxwell had been summoned to its empty terminal.

The one who had called him was Lady Une.

She was no longer with the Preventers, now she served as Chief Aide to the President of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation.

She must have come on a chartered flight, quietly arranged for this meeting. The kind of discretion only someone in her position could command.

Rumor had it the Earth Sphere was mired in a deep economic crisis. But if the administration could still afford to send its chief aide to Mars on a private ship, things couldn't be that dire.

These were the thoughts that crossed Father Maxwell's mind as his footsteps echoed through the hollow terminal.

He stopped in front of a sofa in the center of the vast lobby.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said.

Lady Une stood at once. Her straight hair had lost its luster with age, yet the posture, tall, composed, and framed by round silver spectacles, was the same as ever.

"Forgive the abrupt summons, Father."

"No need for courtesy," he replied with a crooked smile. "I'm just a washed-up fake priest, remember?"

Seated beside her was a man in a well-cut suit, a soft-brimmed hat pulled low over his face. Bodyguard? Father guessed. Though if so, he was a bit old for the role, past forty, by the looks of it.

"So, the rumors are true," Father said, eyeing the stranger. "The ESUN really is broke, if you're hiring a worn-out SP like that for protection."

"You're mistaken," Une said calmly. "He's not my hire. He's yours."

The tall gentleman rose to his feet, now meeting Father eye to eye. Removing his hat, he gave a polite bow, dark hair streaked faintly with silver.

"Pleased to meet you, Father Maxwell."

He smiled, but the eyes behind that smile were cold, razor-sharp. Father had seen those eyes before. Somewhere.

"Tell me," Father asked slowly, "is this really our first meeting?"

"Yes," the man replied. "Though... you seem acquainted with the other me."

It was an odd, cryptic statement.

"But you and I," he added, "are meeting for the first time."

Father studied his face, trying to picture it as it must have looked years ago. A memory stirred, impossible yet undeniable.

"No way," he muttered. Then, hesitating, he gave voice to the thought.

"Heero? Is that you?"

The man gave a quiet nod.

"If you'll hire me, I'd like to use that name again."

"Hold it right there," Father said, taking a step back. "Just what exactly are you two roping me into?"

"This," Une answered, "is part of our Mars Reconstruction Initiative."

Her tone was soft, almost kind.

Heero adjusted his hat, pulling the brim low once more.

"Work with me, Father," he said. "Let's rebuild this world, through politics."

"Politics?" Father barked a laugh. "You've finally lost it."

"Think of it as a start," Heero replied. "A revolution. We'll rouse the Martian people to stand on their own."

At his feet sat a small carrier case. Inside, a long-haired Norwegian Forest kitten blinked up at them.

"Meow."

Heero glanced down.

"The Heart of Space has agreed to lend its support, too."

Father blinked.

"You can understand that thing?"

Heero's face was deadly serious, his eyes gleamed with that same unblinking intensity from years past. There was not a hint of mockery in them.

What Father didn't yet know, what he couldn't know, was that this man had once been called Alpha.

When Lady Une had still served as Director of the Preventers, she had also taken on the care of Mariemaia Khushrenada, left paralyzed from the waist down.

It wasn't until AC-204 that Une learned the truth, that Mariemaia was in fact a clone of Leia Barton.

That revelation coincided with the same year Father Maxwell had secretly crossed into Mars.

The name of the scientist responsible was Dr. Katherine Po, mother of her own trusted subordinate, Sally Po.

When Sally reported that her mother had cloned herself, and that the result had been raised as her daughter, Une had been left speechless. Sally handed her the old research data, dating back to AC-187 to 189. The cloned girl had been named Kathy, and unlike the many other lab-born humans that followed, she possessed a legitimate citizenship registration number issued by the Earth Sphere Unified Nation.

While going through the files, Une's eyes stopped on another name: "Odin Lowe Jr."

A second clone, created during the same period as Mariemaia.

Unlike ordinary clones raised from infancy, this one had been replicated directly in the form of an adolescent boy.

Two identical "Odin Lowe Jr." existed now, and Une couldn't help but wonder what had become of them.

Her investigation eventually uncovered that one of them had taken the codename Heero Yuy, and had once piloted a Gundam.

But by the time she learned that truth, Heero had already entered cryogenic stasis alongside Relena Darlian, sealed in the twin capsules known as The Little Prince and Sleeping Beauty.

There were no other clues to follow.

And naturally, clones unrecognized by the ESUN were never issued registration numbers.

In fact, Une's inquiry exposed that there were countless such unregistered humans scattered throughout the Earth Sphere.

The Preventers classified these individuals as "Irregulars." They worked tirelessly to track them down, one by one, and to force their registration into the national database.

Unregistered citizens were seen as potential terrorists, a threat to the delicate balance of peace. To prevent war from ever igniting again, a pervasive surveillance and data-control system had been established.

It was true that the number of weapons had declined throughout the Earth Sphere. But the cost of that peace had been the tightening of social control, an erosion of free thought and movement.

A society built on management was one that suffocated its own creativity, persecuting independent minds.

For the moment, such restrictions were tolerated under the banner of Peace Above All. But Une knew, eventually, this rigidity would turn to sclerosis. Nations would either collapse under their own weight, or welcome tyranny in the guise of order.

That was the hidden price of "eternal peace."

Freedom and peace, two ideals that could never truly coexist.

And so, one day, people would again reach for weapons, craving freedom. The revolution after peace was inevitable.

Within ten years, most of the Irregulars had been located and officially registered. Yet a few, like Father Maxwell, who had smuggled himself to Mars, had slipped through the net.

When Agent "Water" Sally Po delivered her latest report, she couldn't hide her frustration.

"Director Gold, Mars is dangerous. It's overflowing with Irregulars and illegal immigrants. If we leave it unchecked, it'll become a powder keg."

"Do Wind and Fire not suffice to keep order?" Une asked evenly.

"Not with the Perfect Peace Program aboard The Little Prince. The situation could turn volatile at any moment."

"Then we'll take no chances. Send in Cloud."

"Understood. I trust WuFei can handle it."

And so, Agent Cloud, Chang WuFei, was dispatched to Mars. For several years thereafter, no major conflicts broke out on the planet.

Back in the Earth Sphere, the Preventers' hunt for remaining Irregulars continued, but the clone of Odin Lowe Jr. never surfaced. Even Une, relentless as she was, had to eventually entrust the search to her subordinates.

Then, in AC-216, Dorothy T. Catalonia declared her intent to run for President of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation.

That same year, disaster struck Mars: a reconnaissance satellite fell into the Sea of Lanagreene, killing or disappearing over ten thousand people.

Une, at Dorothy's invitation, resigned from the Preventers to serve as her campaign strategist.

Her successor as Director was Sally Po. Mariemaia, meanwhile, had long since recovered her independence and was happily married.

Perhaps the thought of a new age or a passing of generations had already begun to take root in Une's mind.

But the turning point came during Dorothy's campaign tour of the colonies.

In L2, at a colony ravaged by poverty, citizens' resentment finally boiled over. A mob surged at the limousine carrying presidential candidate.

Sally was on-site, and immediately summoned the Preventers to contain the chaos peacefully.

But when a rookie officer drew his sidearm, Sally moved to stop him, and in that instant, the gun went off.

The stray bullet pierced her heart. Sally Po died instantly.

It was, by every account, an accident. Yet grief quickly turned to rage among her loyal subordinates, and that fury was directed at the very citizens they had sworn to protect.

When the riot ended, Preventers began rounding up the poor and homeless en masse, accusing them of participation.

Once, they had been the purest defenders of peace. Now, for the first and only time, they had become its oppressors. Left unchecked, they might well have evolved into a full-fledged military machine.

"The organization's grown too large..."

Une uttered the words softly when the number of detainees exceeded a hundred.

Wracked by guilt, she ordered their release.

Her authority as former Director carried weight, her order was obeyed.

Among those one hundred detainees were several Irregulars.

Une personally interviewed each one, urging them, not commanding, to register as citizens.

One of them, a ragged man in torn clothes, spoke up.

"I wasn't part of the riot. I was just watching. You've got no reason to arrest me."

His long, unkempt hair and the beard covering his face gave him the look of a vagrant. But when Une glimpsed the sharp gleam of his eyes beneath that tangle of hair, she felt a shock of recognition.

"You're Odin Lowe Jr., aren't you?"

"You've got the wrong man. I go by Black Alpha now."

She hadn't been mistaken. At last, she had found the one she'd sought all these years.

After crossing paths with Relena in AC-191, Alpha had abandoned the resistance and wandered from world to world. He had arrived at L2 only a few months prior.

"Then, Alpha, register as a citizen. You'll be free to go, no strings attached."

"Free?" He laughed bitterly. "The moment I register, I'm no longer free. I'll be under your surveillance for the rest of my life."

"From the look of you, I'd say you're already enjoying quite a bit of freedom."

"You're wrong. I've never known freedom, not once since the day I was born."

His words were steeped in contradiction, but his tone was dead calm.

"Just being alive feels like a form of imprisonment. What's the point of enduring a life filled with pain? I don't understand it."

"Then tell me," Une asked quietly. "Why do you live?"

"Because... the other me told me to."

She knew who that "other me" was, Heero.

"You truly are an intriguing man," she said at last. "Forget the registration. Join me instead. Let's find a life with meaning. I'll respect your freedom, your will."

That was the moment Lady Une and Alpha first met.

From then on, the two of them would move together in the shadows of Earth's political stage.

Alpha learned a gentler bearing, a calm voice, but his piercing eyes never softened. They couldn't.

And now, that same Alpha stood once more at a crossroads of fate, seeking purpose alongside Father Maxwell, in the effort to rebuild Mars.

Mars

Secondary Satellite Orbit

The automated mobile doll manufacturing plant Vulcanus had shifted from the outer rim of Mars's first satellite orbit to this sector, where it now circled in steady revolution. Few resource asteroids had led a fate as strange as Vulcanus.

In AC-195, the resource satellite, once a space force base of the United Earth Sphere Alliance, was seized by the Romefeller Foundation and rebuilt into a mobile doll plant by Chief Engineer Tubarov. It then drifted between Earth's and Mars's orbits until the summer of the following year, when an armed group calling itself the Perfect Peace People, the "P-3" of rumor, reactivated the facility in a bid to conquer the Earth Sphere. That attempt was thwarted, just barely, by the Gundam pilots.

As an aside: during this affair Chang WuFei, who would later face Brodin Dies in the Second Lunar War, reunited with him to form a joint front to retake Vulcanus. Brodin was a man who dreamed of the advancement of humankind itself and cast his thoughts toward the distant stars. Betrayed by his subordinates, he died with his ideals unfulfilled.

At Quatre's suggestion, it was decided that Vulcanus would be scrapped, cast into the sun along with the Gundams. In the midst of that disposal operation, an uprising by Mariemaia's army erupted in the Earth Sphere near the end of AC-196. Lady Une considered deploying Vulcanus's Virgo units as a countermeasure, but, at "Wind," Milliardo's urging, the scrapping continued.

Even so, on the way sunward, special operators from the Neuenheim Konzern boarded the satellite and altered its trajectory. Over the next thirteen years they shepherded it into Mars's satellite orbit, initiating development of Mars Suits and production of Virgo IV.

They managed to move it covertly by choosing a brutal, sun-skirting transfer that bathed the satellite in intense radiation. Its final path settled into an elliptical track where the inner orbit of Mars's first satellite, Phobos, and the outer orbit of its second, Deimos, cross.

At the far edge of the satellite orbits, a multilayer-membrane mirror, Janus, had been installed to concentrate sunlight onto Mars. Its mirror coating used electromagnetic fluid metal. The powerful electromagnetic field and fierce

radiative heat around it rendered radar, thermal search, and the like useless; there was no way to pinpoint Vulcanus short of visual confirmation.

The time: Mars Calendar (MC) 0016, AC-210, the year before the Martian Federation Government would declare independence from the Earth Sphere Unified Nation. The existence of Vulcanus was a major reason the Earth Sphere, lacking armed force, adopted a timid diplomatic posture. Dixneuf, who had stolen the name of the first president “Milliardo,” is said to have won Mars’s independence through steady negotiation, but in truth he pushed through demands little different from threats, leaning on force, the Perfect Peace Program, Vulcanus, and more.

With that independence, the histories of Earth Sphere and Mars parted ways: After Colony and Mars Century.

Vulcanus, could rightly be called the rare resource satellite that had stood witness to the pivot point of both histories.

Vingt Khushrenada launched three black OZ-20MSX-D Cerberus units from Vulcanus. Heirs to the OZ-16MSX-D Scorpio that had once been called Vulcanus’s watchdog, they were transformable Mars Suits built for base defense. Where the Scorpio had been red, these Cerberus frames wore black.

Their name came from Cerberus, the three-headed hound of the underworld in Greek myth. They were so complete as defense units that neither changes to the suit itself nor reprogramming of their onboard computers were necessary. More than enough force to brace for a strike by Master Chang’s Gundam Epyon Bai.

All three Cerberus could be remote-controlled from the command room. Vingt settled into a cockpit linked to the ZERO System.

“Given that Nataku carries ZERO, he’ll already have our entire deployment mapped,” he murmured. He would not repeat the mistake of letting Heero pinpoint this place. A crooked smile touched his lips.

“That’s what makes it interesting.”

“War isn’t a game. It’s a clash of souls with life and death on the line.”

Master Chang spoke softly in Epyon Bai’s cockpit.

“But, Nataku, seeking that here is pointless.”

He deliberately cut the ZERO System. At the same moment, the console’s hemispherical display went dark.

“Let’s go, Nataku.”

In his mind’s eye rose the face of his wife, Long Meilan, who had died in AC-194. He addressed his beloved machine by the name she had once borne: Nataku.

Epyon Bai shifted into its flight mode, the three-headed wyvern, and shot off for Vulcanus.

*

Outer Rim of the Martian Satellite Orbits Solar Concentration Mirror Janus

Its name came from the ancient Roman god with two faces. Installed at its current position at the end of MC-0011 to accelerate Martian warming and further the spread of Europa algae, the mirror raised average temperatures the very next year, MC-0012, and helped form an atmosphere in which one could breathe without a helmet.

Using fluid metal for the mirror surface had been the best answer to meteoroids and debris; but to stabilize that coating, a powerful electromagnetic field had to bind it in place. Janus funneled not only sunlight and heat to Mars but also the magnetic storms of solar flares.

Before terraforming, Mars's core had cooled and its geomagnetism was weak. But after the resource satellite MO-VII fell onto the Argyle Plain in MC-0003, the impact stirred the core and generated a planetary magnetic field. The fierce magnetic storms that raked the surface were the product of these two causes working in concert.

The battleship Grand Chariot had come alongside the far side of Janus. Ordinary spacecraft would be overwhelmed by the electromagnetic onslaught, controls dead long before they could approach. But Doktor T piloted without any electronic instruments at all. He had come this far on little more than gut and line of sight. Pulling off such feats with a straight face was precisely what one expected of a former Gundam pilot.

On the bridge, Professor W, wearing an astro-suit, returned with Catherine.

"We've set the charges on Janus," he said, a furrow between his brows betraying his distaste for sabotage above all else. Catherine, by contrast, flashed a blithe smile.

"Now we can save Relena Peacecraft."

"Save her? Will that truly be the result?" Doktor T asked quietly.

Janus's structure consisted of a central mast from which countless wire frames radiated. The fluid metal adhered like skin to those innumerable wires. Blowing the mast would be enough to collapse the whole.

Once unmoored, the massive sheets of fluid metal would drift in space for a time, then yield to Mars's gravity. The result: a silver rain sheathed in electromagnetism falling across the entire planet. A forest of lightning would veil the sky, through all 24 hours and 37 minutes of a Martian day.

Most of the fluid metal would vaporize in the heat of atmospheric entry, but the charged electromagnetic energy would remain. The anomalous EM storm produced then would silence every electronic system on Mars. Power across the planet would fail. Networks to Earth Sphere computers would be severed. Citizen ID databases would be erased; every internal memory would vanish.

Only then could one say Mars and the Earth Sphere had been completely cut apart.

Even the ultimate of electronics, the ZERO System, would be no exception; the holographic AI "Major General Zechs Merquise" would reset.

At the same time, the Perfect Peace Program entwined with the nanomachines in Relena's body would go inert for 24 hours and 37 minutes. If they killed Relena within that window, they could prevent a genocide, some three billion deaths, spreading to encompass the Earth Sphere.

This would deliver Relena from the guilt that had tormented her for so long. But it would not save her life.

"We'll leave a simple relay satellite on Janus's far side," Professor W said, pained. "That way it can be operated remotely from the surface."

"Let her choose it," he added. "Mars's independence and the choice of life, the decision should be hers."

A planetary blackout would ramify in every direction. Weapons like mobile dolls going dead might be exactly what Relena wished for, but if hospitals, extravehicular work, or the life-support control on old para-terraforming blocks, where the poor were many, were to fail, the casualties would be catastrophic. She would never choose that. And yet, even then, it would still be less than three billion murders...

"What does the Heart of Space say? Which way does it point?"

"Neither. Or rather, Heero won't let it come to a choice."

"I see... Then our only path is to go to Vulcanus."

"Yes."

Doktor T and Professor W nodded to one another.

Catherine had been tracking Master Chang's trail. In the sector she had under visual watch, beams crisscrossed in savage flashes.

"So that's where Vulcanus is."

Mars Secondary Satellite Orbit

Combat between Cerberus and Epyon Bai erupted in the Vulcanus sector.

Both remained in flight mode, trading long-range beam fire in a running space duel.

Yet this was not the stately, face-to-face style once favored by Chang WuFei.

Epyon Bai, encircled by Cerberus's coordinated assault, did nothing but evade; it launched no counterattacks at all.

Cerberus's vaunted neoplanet defender struck at empty space.

There was a reason Master Chang had become so restrained.

At the bedrock of his consciousness lay atonement, for Treize.

"Even if he's only his brother's clone, if he truly means to avenge Treize, I'll let him strike me down.

So he had thought. But the way the enemy fought was far too different from Treize.

"He doesn't understand why I pilot the Epyon Treize designed."

Emptiness welled in him.

"Vingt Khushrenada... you're far too weak."

There was no surge of spirit to set his soul ablaze.

“At this rate, that holographic Major General Zechs Merquise was the better opponent.”

Vingt, after confirming the strategic-tactical-level victory scenarios presented by ZERO, moved to future prediction at the combat level, when he noticed something wrong.

“The processing speed is dropping.”

At first, he suspected a computer virus had been injected to delay the program.

But with ZERO, that was impossible.

Preparing perfect security against any predicted attack was the system’s highest priority.

The same applied to malfunctions, bugs, and SRK model errors.

Then why the lag within the ZERO System?

One plausible answer: a ZERO-versus-ZERO engagement, with both sides complexly reading each other’s futures to the point that the win condition could not be resolved.

In such cases, the tiebreaker would lie in the cockpit, with the pilot.

Even with three Cerberus units, it was still one pilot versus one.

“Do I deploy the Virgo IV?”

Vingt hesitated, escalating force yet further.

Over a hundred and fifty Virgo IVs stood by inside Vulcanus.

No matter how exceptional Epyon Bai and Master Chang were, sheer numbers would guarantee victory.

That was the first strategic-tactical-level win scenario ZERO had proposed.

“No. If I can’t win as things stand, adding numbers won’t change the result.”

Vingt rejected that option out of OZ founder’s pride.

The prediction lag originated with Master Chang’s cutting the ZERO System.

With accumulated experience, ZERO’s cognitive skill set had continued to evolve.

Once, like any other computer, it prioritized rules to output predictions; but even with quantum-domain computation, that method took too long.

So it began using skip-thinking, choosing the shortest route based on past experience. Yet when the opponent used the same kind of system, still greater speed was demanded, and slip errors, human-like judgment mistakes, occurred frequently.

In this battlefield, such a mistake meant:

Although Natakū should be using ZERO, his actions diverged from prediction, leading ZERO to misinterpret that he must be seeing even farther into the future.

If so, faster computation would be required, prompting even heavier reliance on skip-thinking, ballooning the volume of indeterminate data.

It took several seconds to reach the conclusion that the opponent wasn’t using ZERO.

ZERO-vs-ZERO combat experience would have to be reset.

Once that misjudgment occurred, reverting to baseline settings consumed a massive amount of time.

That was the lag Vingt felt.

Master Chang's craftiness lay in toggling ZERO on and off on a whim, a countermeasure conceived from his bout with Zechs Merquise's Gundam Epyon on Olympus Mons.

A chime rang through Epyon Bai's cockpit.

Using a Preventer-exclusive line resistant to radio interference, Vingt Khushrenada opened a channel.

"It seems I overestimated you. Even if you can toy with ZERO, I've already caught on. How very underhanded of you."

"Feh."

Master Chang snorted.

"Cutting loose against remote-controlled toys would be unsporting. If a coward like you claims the title of OZ founder, Treize won't rest easy."

"I'm a coward?"

"Are you not?"

"No. I chose this method because I intend to defeat you for certain. I hate you, for killing my brother!"

Master Chang's lip curled.

"Then tell me, how many people have died for your sake to date?"

"That's easily checked. Shall I download the tally and transmit it to you now?"

"Heh... Unfortunately, you're not even worth killing. And you will not defeat me."

"That—"

"You're about to say, You won't know until you try."

"!?"

"And then you'll say this: Nevermore."

"..."

"Such bluffs might rattle the children. They don't work on me. If you want psychological advantage, you've picked the wrong opponent."

Epyon Bai, dancing through the fire of all three Cerberus units, committed to a headlong penetration of Vulcanus.

Nearby, Deimos, Mars's second satellite, the "frozen teardrop," as some called it, kept pace in its orbit.

The two surface craters, Swift and Voltaire, stood out in stark relief.

"The only one who can defeat me is Heero Yuy."

"Likely so... but I've no intention of defeating you. I'm here to convey Treize's way of thinking."

"My brother's... thinking?"

"In a single line, then, 'Do not wish to be loved. Keep loving.' Treize lived that to his final breath."

Master Chang's voice softened with pity.

"Your parents who loved you, and Treize, all gone now. There is no one left in this world who loves you."

"I've always known that. No one loves me, and I love no one. You couldn't possibly understand what it's like, to be unloved by anyone."

"That is why you are weak!"

From Epyon Bai's three dragon heads speared a blast of searing beam, Master Chang's first counterattack.

"At best, your motive for fighting is vengeance."

The three Cerberus units tightened the noose, intensifying their fire on Epyon Bai.

"I fight to sustain controlled war."

"I don't deny those who fight for revenge, once, I did the same. But even as I hurled my hatred at him, Treize still called me a 'beloved friend.'"

Epyon Bai wove through the barrage with a Cuban Eight, circling out and crossing back through its own track to slip the guns.

"True strength is to keep respecting, and loving, your opponent even in a losing fight."

Epyon Bai threw its thrusters wide, slammed into hard acceleration, and broke the encirclement.

"I take pride in being the loser."

Treize had said, in life, that the Gundam Epyon was a machine for the defeated.

Into their sector swept the battleship Grand Chariot. A transmission from Doktor T came through.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, WuFei."

"I've been waiting, all right... ended up saying a lot I didn't need to."

Vingt stared, aghast, at the Grand Chariot's sudden arrival.

"From behind Deimos, then..."

Had Master Chang baited him just to keep him from noticing? Vingt cursed his own stupidity.

Exactly the same as with Heero Yuy.

To make the same mistake twice was unforgivable. Pride no longer mattered.

"You've left me no choice, launch the Virgo IV!"

At that moment, an unidentified code hit Cerberus's command network.

"5-6-W-1"

A password meaning Vienna, AD 1956, the time and place where Romefeller's glory began.

It had once been used to control Scorpio, and during the P-3 seizure of Vulcanus in AC-196 as well. Vingt did not know this.

The password overruled ZERO, hard-wired deep in the onboard computers.

He had relied entirely too much on remote ZERO control.

All three Cerberus units lost control and shut down on the spot.

Doktor T, Professor W, and Miss Catherine boarded the now-opened cockpits.

Epyon Bai and the three Cerberus units turned their guns on Vulcanus's outer hull, and forced their way inside under fire.

Mars

Isidis Planitia

The command room inside the fortress Babel had been converted into an ad-hoc Southern Confederation War Crimes Committee tribunal.

The proceedings were broadcast live by the media to every corner of Mars, both to make unmistakably clear that the Martian Civil War had ended in a Southern victory, and to project an image of fairness and impartiality.

Major General Zechs Merquise, Chair of the Southern Confederation War Crimes Committee, presided from the bench.

President Relena sat at the defendant's table. There was a token attorney at her side, but he had no intent of aiding her.

Among the observers were Heero and Noin. Once Relena's sentence was set, Heero would serve as the executioner.

The inquiry moved forward with grave formality.

The prosecutor read out an indictment spanning one hundred and seven counts, and entered her plea for each.

As the ultimate authority of the Martian Federation, Relena could not deny the charges, save for the final item, which she could not accept.

"Incitement of the Federation citizenry through the false ideology of total pacifism, and the crime of driving the Federation citizenry to war."

Relena spoke, quietly.

"I have done everything in my power to avert any act of war by the Federation. If ending this war requires it, I will gladly accept the harshest sentence. But I cannot reject total pacifism."

The anxious, tight-wound prosecutor snapped back.

"The Martian Federation was neither unarmed nor nonviolent. Do you mean to erase that fact?"

Judge Zechs spoke.

"Once, the Lanagreene Republic realized the ideal of nonviolence and disarmament, aiming for total pacifism. The one who trampled that ideal was none other than the Northern Federation Government. Do not presume we've forgotten the MC-0019 reconnaissance satellite fall."

The war had begun with the worst act of terror in Martian history, over ten thousand dead or missing.

At that time Relena had been in cryosleep; she was not in a position to bear responsibility. Nor did any conclusive proof exist that the Federation government had been involved.

Even so, tears welled in Relena's eyes as she bowed her head in apology.

"I am truly sorry. To those who suffered, I offer my deepest condolences. From this day forward, the Federation will make any reparation and apology required."

The tears that spilled from her eyes fell to the desk and sank into the wood, real tears.

"We are still investigating in earnest, but we will apprehend the one who issued the order to the perpetrators and levy the severest punishment. Whatever sentence I receive, I will charge my successor in government to carry this out."

She wiped her tears and, voice trembling, pleaded.

"What pains me is that, because of a few who lacked conscience, your lofty ideals have been darkened. Please, I beg you, your thinking is not wrong. Build a world where freedom and peace coexist."

Zechs's smile was cool.

"That is the contradiction of total pacifism. Freedom and peace do not coexist. To sustain peace requires strength of arms. To gain freedom one must fight. The two are irreconcilable. That is the truth. It's time you realized, Relena, that this benighted ideal of total pacifism is precisely what drives people to war."

"Contradiction or benighted, it doesn't matter."

Relena's reply cut cleanly through the chamber.

"I understand the desire to reach a conclusion quickly. But what truly matters is not the conclusion, it's continuing to think. If contradiction exists, we must keep thinking. Total pacifism is the sustained discussion of every possible choice, with weight placed on the motives that lead us toward conclusions."

The prosecutor interjected from the side.

"Then nothing would ever be settled!"

"Exactly. Unlike war, peace doesn't require a settlement. That is why we can keep debating rationally. In truth, debate does not require force. People are driven to war when they stop thinking, when they reach for force as an easy way to seize a conclusion."

The prosecutor seemed ready to continue, but Judge Zechs stayed him.

"Very well... We have no intention of absolutely denying total pacifism. The court will consider the defendant's petition and strike the final count."

"Thank you."

Zechs fixed Relena with an icy gaze.

"But this court must still render a verdict. The court now pronounces sentence upon the defendant, Relena Peacecraft."

Relena met his next words with clear, steady eyes.

"The sentence is death, this court's reasoning is as follows."

Zechs then spoke at length of the depth of Relena's sins.

"If there are no objections, sign this Instrument of Surrender. The Martian Civil War ends here. The sentence will be carried out afterward."

"I understand."

Relena bowed deeply and received the document from the clerk.

"I offer my profound apologies here for the great suffering I have caused all people."

In the gallery, Heero rose, withdrew a pistol and a fountain pen from his breast pocket, and stepped to Relena's side. He held out the slender white pen and murmured.

"A message from Quatre."

“Huh?”

“There’s a detonator for Janus hidden in the cap.”

The pen’s nib functioned like any ordinary pen, but the cap’s top, its decorative crown, was a press-activated trigger.

“It’ll shut down every electronic system,” Heero said, cutting a side-glance at Zechs.

“We can purge Mars of weapons by the thousands, starting with Zechs Merquise.”

Relena’s eyes widened.

“Press it, and the path to total pacifism presents itself. The war itself won’t end, of course.”

“ ... ”

Wordless, Relena closed her hand around the pen, when a thunderous blast rocked the whole of Fortress Babel.

Lights flipped to emergency, klaxons shrieked, and an operator’s report rang out over the din.

“Major General Zechs, it’s an attack from the Martian Federation!”

“What?”

Isidis Planitia Northern Skies

The Tallgeese Heaven spread its great white wings and leveled its long-range Dober gun.

In the cockpit sat the white masked Cyrene Wind.

“This is Cyrene Wind. Commencing attack on Fortress Babel! I will issue no orders, each of you, attack Babel by your own judgment!”

Across the vast plain, fifty-two Mars Suits had formed up in the shapes of playing card suits.

Thirteen in the Spades detachment.

Thirteen in Hearts.

Thirteen in Clubs.

Thirteen in Diamonds.

At the head, the King of Spades was piloted by Mille, heir to the Peacecraft line.

The Queen of Hearts was flown by the family’s princess, Naina.

The remaining fifty machines carried aboard them a host of fearless, merciless fairies.

“I’m honored to stand on the same battlefield as my father.”

Usually taciturn, Mille spoke his pure heart aloud.

Cyrene Wind smiled genially beneath his mask.

“I’m glad as well. You have grown strong in our time apart, my son.”

“Father, is this fight just?”

Naina asked. Cyrene Wind answered.

“My beloved fairy, in truth there is no such thing as a ‘just’ battle. There is only the radiance of life, staking one’s very reason for being.”

“Understood.”

All fifty-two Suit Mars Suits opened fire on the dodecahedral fortress Babel. Counter-salvos of homing missiles screamed up at once.

Tallgeese Heaven flew to draw them off, absorbing hit after hit, by the dozens.

“Father!” Naina and Mille cried together.

“Pay it no mind! I will take the missiles! You spear the fortress!”

Fortress Babel

War Crimes Tribunal (Command Room)

Major General Zechs seethed with quiet fury.

“What is the meaning of this? Did the Martian Federation not accept our terms of surrender?”

Relena opened her mouth to speak, but Heero cut her off.

“The President hasn’t signed the surrender documents yet.”

He fixed Zechs with a razor-sharp stare.

“The war isn’t over, Zechs.”

“Hmph. So, we’ve been had. Typical of that cunning, cowardly Federation of yours.”

Turning toward the cameras, Zechs began to declaim for the media.

“We of the Southern Confederation convened this signing ceremony only after the Northern Federation declared its defeat. And yet they have resumed hostilities in a treacherous ambush worthy of terrorists. This proves beyond doubt how warlike and hypocritical their ‘false pacifism’ has been!”

His words were transmitted across all Mars.

Elysium Island

Relena City

On the giant screen in the city square, footage of Federation Mars Suits assaulting Fortress Babel played side by side with Zechs’s broadcast.

“We can no longer permit such deceit! The corrupt Martian Federation must abandon its sovereignty and submit to the Southern Confederation! What we seek is true, untainted peace!”

“Yeah right!” shouted Father Maxwell, his voice booming over the crowd.

“Since when does a nation that ‘seeks true peace’ go around declaring war?”

He had climbed onto a raised platform beneath the screen and addressed the masses.

“No matter the reason, there’s no forgiving the slaughter of ten thousand innocent souls here in the city! Look around you, children crying, old folks with nowhere to go, people who’ve lost lovers and family and are left staring into nothing! Who did this to them?”

Someone in the crowd yelled back.

"Wasn't it President Relena who brought this on us?"

"You got it wrong, pal! That girl's taking the blame for everyone else's sins.

The real villain is that slick old man spewing holy-sounding nonsense after doing the dirty work himself! Don't you dare let a bastard like that rule you!"

Murmurs spread through the crowd; Zechs's speech suddenly rang hollow, its righteousness sounding like mockery.

"And as for Relena Peacecraft," Father went on, "don't direct your ire at her. She did nothing wrong, she's just trying to shoulder the government's sins alone."

Another man shouted back:

"Fine, but will that put food on our tables? Maybe we should listen to Zechs if it'll make life better!"

"Life better?" Father laughed. "Not a chance. This whole planet's a dump to begin with!"

A heckler in front snapped.

"I know you, you're Father Maxwell! You're as big a piece of trash as anyone here!"

"Damn right!" he bellowed. "I'm the worst scumbag of them all, which makes me perfect for this planet! But think about it: if this is the bottom, then the only way left is up. Even trash has the right to climb a few steps higher!"

He grinned wide and threw his arms out.

"So quit staring at the ground. Come on, climb with me."

With that, he dashed up the stairs behind the platform.

Waiting for him in the corridor, collar upturned, stood Alpha.

"Well done, Father Maxwell."

"Tell me something, Heero." He had begun calling him that naturally now.

"Why me? If you're building a government, you could've picked someone better suited to politics."

Alpha opened a carry case and fed a kitten inside.

"You're exactly the right one. A leader must be able to feel others' pain, and to do that, he must have known pain himself. Your days as a 'scumbag' were a precious education."

"You sure I can trust you, Heero?"

Alpha rose, cradling the cat.

"Of course. In politics, I've already completed an image trace of the original leader Heero Yuy."

The Norwegian Forest Cat known as the Heart of Space mewed softly.

"Then why don't you do the politics yourself?"

"Sorry, unlike this little one, I don't care for sunlit places. Besides..."

"Besides what?"

"I don't have a citizen ID number."

"Hell, neither do I."

"You do, actually, James Clarke Maxwell."

Father blinked. The name rang some dim bell.

"When Dr. Hilde Schbeiker filed her marriage papers in MC-0015, your ID was registered. She never filed for divorce, so on record you're still husband and wife."

"You're kidding me..." He slumped, crestfallen.

"I hate tomato sandwiches."

"Come now, don't be like that. Her achievements are impressive, one look at those tears and anyone would believe her."

"Meow," came a cry from the cat again.

Mars Secondary Satellite Orbit

Inside Vulcanus, a storm of battle raged between the activated one hundred and fifty Virgo IV units and the lone Epyon Bai.

But "outnumbered" was a meaningless concept within the tight confines of this resource satellite.

Mobile dolls required open space to operate effectively, here, their numbers only choked their own advantage.

Master Chang's fighting was a one-man army's spectacle, a literal thousand-against-one.

In mobile suit form, Epyon Bai waited at the narrow junction where the hangar met the corridor, striking down any Virgo IV that emerged headlong into the trap.

With a single swing of his beam trident, he shattered five suits at once; eight more fell silent as beams erupted from the twin Dragon Hang cannons.

And yet the flood never slowed, the controller had chosen attrition, a siege of exhaustion, betting that the old master would tire first.

"Fools... this body does not tire."

In the sub-control room, Vingt Khushrenada was tasting the bitterness of total defeat. Control of Vulcanus had already passed to Dixneuf.

Even if he wanted to challenge Master Chang directly, he had no machine left to pilot.

"Brother, what am I supposed to do?"

Only one option remained, to detonate Vulcanus's self-destruct and vanish into cosmic dust, taking the old master with him.

"Yes..."

Vingt drew a breath, resignation hardening into resolve.

"My life hardly matters anymore."

Meanwhile, the three Cerberus units were idle.

Having breached Vulcanus's hull, Doktor T, Professor W, and Catherine were searching for the control terminal that governed the mobile dolls, hacking the internal network as they advanced.

They found it quickly, a single bio-sig pulsing from the central control chamber.

"There," said Doktor T. "Dixneuf Neuenheim."

"The root of all evil," muttered Professor W.

He mapped the fastest route.

"Let's move. We need the deactivation code before Heero executes Relena."

"Right," Catherine said sharply.

Doktor T's reply was a distracted, "Right..." half lost in thought.

They burst into the central control chamber, a room choked with flickering displays and pulsing data conduits.

At its center sat Dixneuf, serene and waiting, as though expecting them.

"Welcome, my guests..."

Doktor T raised his pistol without hesitation and fired.

The bullet struck dead center between Dixneuf's wrinkled brows, jerking his body backward.

"Now then, tell us the deactivation code for the Perfect Peace Program."

Catherine's gasp broke the moment.

"Tro—Trowa! You're supposed to *ask* before you shoot!"

"Don't worry," Doktor T said calmly. "That won't kill him. The assassin on Phobos failed because he didn't confirm it either."

Indeed, Dixneuf wasn't dead. He straightened, dug the flattened slug out of his own forehead, and held it up between his fingers.

"He's modified himself, Jovian-class astro-cybernetics," Doktor T said flatly. "I'd wager his skull's coated with alloy."

"Heh heh... quite right. I've attained eternal life."

He rolled the mangled bullet in his palm.

"You cannot kill me."

Doktor T's expression didn't flicker.

"No. Probably not."

Dixneuf rose to his feet, squaring his stance.

"I may look like an old man, but I assure you, my combat skills are quite intact."

"What a coincidence," said Doktor T. "So are mine."

They clashed at close quarters, brutal hand-to-hand combat. Dixneuf's enhanced body gave him the upper hand, forcing Doktor T back step by step.

Still, Doktor T's voice remained cool.

"You're right, I can't kill you. But..."

Professor W began reading from the manual he'd pulled from a console.

"Press the three buttons on the shoulder blades simultaneously, then flip the switch beneath the second cervical vertebra downward."

Catherine darted behind Dixneuf and performed the sequence before he could even turn.

In an instant, both of his arms detached with a clatter.

"I can, however, take you apart."

"W—wait! Stop!"

Professor W continued in the same calm tone, eyes never leaving the page.

Dixneuf struggled, but Catherine's movements were brisk and precise, like a seasoned physical therapist dismantling a machine.

Moments later, his legs were off too, leaving him crawling on the deck, nothing but a torso and head.

Doktor T looked down coldly at the helpless old man.

"If I tossed you into space, a Jovian-type like you might even survive. An eternity of paralysis and solitude, perhaps not such a bad end."

"N-no, don't!"

Professor W closed the manual with a snap. His eyes were just as frigid.

"Throwing him out would only add more debris. How about aiming him toward Janus instead? The electromagnetic flux of that fluid metal would short every cybernetic circuit he's got."

"Anything but that! I'll do anything!"

"After all those modifications, you're still clinging to life?"

"O-of course I am!"

"Funny," W said softly. "You had no such regard for anyone else's."

There was venom behind his voice now.

"You ordered the reconnaissance satellite dropped on the Lanagreene Republic's sea city, didn't you?"

"That nation's growth threatened the Federation, it was a painful necessity."

"And faking your own assassination?"

"To awaken Relena Peacecraft. Once she revived, the Perfect Peace Program could've given us total control over Mars and the Earth Sphere."

"That power could only be wielded by someone who knew the deactivation code. So, start talking."

Dixneuf fell silent.

"Your Neuenheim Konzern built its fortune on war manufacturing. No one benefited more from Mars becoming a battlefield."

Still silence.

"You sent the A.I. Zechs Merquise and the clone of Vingt Khushrenada to Lanagreene, to ignite this war yourself."

The architect of so much ruin remained mute.

"You're a portrait of Dorian Gray," W spat. "You pinned all ugliness onto Milliardo Peacecraft, hid in the shadows, and lived in comfort. But that ends now."

His composure cracked, rage seethed through every word.

"How many lives have you destroyed? How many have you scarred in the name of your mother's revenge?"

Dixneuf twitched. Just slightly.

"Hmph. What could you possibly understand?"

Professor W exhaled and turned to Doktor T.

"Let's just eject him. I already have a good guess at the code."

"Fool! You'll never—"

Dixneuf spat with venom. W smiled faintly.

"So, there is a release code after all."

Doktor T's thin smile matched his.

"Confirmation enough."

"You... tricked me..."

The color drained from Dixneuf's face.

"The code is 'Astoria.' Your mother's name, isn't it? Don't worry, we won't toss you out. You'll live long enough to pay for what you've done."

Dixneuf's eyes slid shut in defeat.

The only thing left to him, the only rebellion he could still manage, was a single, bitter blink.

Sub Control Room

Vingt's hand hovered over Vulcanus's self-destruct.

"Stop..."

Master Chang stood behind him. With Dixneuf captured, the Virgo IV units had already shut down.

"If you die, who inherits Treize's will?"

"..."

"I could never forgive OZ as an organization, but I didn't hate it. If you intend to build a new OZ, I'll help you."

"I'm a *copy*."

"A person's worth isn't decided by that. Ah, right..."

A memory seemed to surface for the old master.

"You wanted to know why Heero Yuy doesn't move as ZERO, or the Heart of Space, predicts."

"Y-yes..."

"He's got a cloned double as well. Because of that, he slipped outside the causal rails of space."

"What does that mean?"

"Clone or hologram, if two instances of the same person appear, ZERO and the Heart of Space can still recognize them and forecast. But when one of them entered cryosleep, two identical persons wound up with different timelines. That temporal divergence skews judgment. According to Professor W, distortions arise in the time-and-space vectors and the predictions grow fuzzy."

"Hearing the logic, it sounds almost obvious. It's like the feeling when you were tricking ZERO."

"Heh... even so, there are only those two in all the wide universe who can do it. If you want to win, it'll take training."

"Training... That might be interesting."

Fortress Babel War Crimes Tribunal (Command Room)

The tremors from the bombardment did not cease.

Major General Zechs dispatched over five hundred Virgo units for interception and simultaneously ordered preparations to fire the long-range beam cannon Zwölf Zwerg.

To the media he proclaimed: "We will bring righteous judgment upon the villainous Federation! They shall receive the punishment they themselves have invited!"

Relena's composure frayed.

"No more sacrifices—"

At her side, Heero whispered.

"Relena, press the detonator. If you want that Zechs gone, it's the only way."

She shook her head.

"No, Heero... what I can do now is—"

With steady poise, Relena extended the pen cap that hid the switch, gripped its edge with her other hand, and snapped it in two.

"—*this*."

Circuitry, components, and cap fragments scattered across the Instrument of Surrender.

Relena brushed them aside, bent to the document, and signed with the fountain pen.

"Relena Peacecraft, Second President of the Martian Federation."

Heero saw and murmured, almost to himself.

"I see... That's Relena."

She lifted the signed surrender for all to see.

"Major General Zechs! The Martian Federation has surrendered! Cease hostilities at once!"

The cameras caught every detail.

Zechs approached, took the paper.

"Confirmed. The surrender of the Martian Federation is acknowledged. But the fighting will not stop."

"What?!"

"When sparks fall upon you, you must brush them away! This is not my wish, it is a lesson to the fools who defy President Relena's will!"

At that moment, a voice spoke into the earbud pressed into Heero's ear, Professor W.

"Heero! We've just deactivated the Perfect Peace Program!"

"Roger."

Even as the words came, Zechs continued his oration.

"And with President Relena's sublime death, we shall declare this civil war ended."

Heero drew his pistol.

"Mission acknowledged."

He placed the muzzle above Relena's ear.

"Close your eyes, Relena."

She obeyed, lids lowering in perfect calm.

Heero pulled the trigger. A shot cracked through the chamber.

Blood and flecks of brain matter spattered from Relena's head. She collapsed where she stood.

"Mission complete."

In the same breath, Heero swung the gun toward Zechs.

"What are you doing, Heero Yuy?"

"You said you wouldn't tolerate falsehood..."

Heero abruptly emptied the magazine into Zechs, round after round.

Even with the slide locked back he kept squeezing, as if the motion itself could strike. Of course, the holographic Zechs was unharmed.

"How do *you* account for your own falsehood?"

The spectacle went out live across Mars. Zechs did not flinch.

"This will be treated as rebellion against the representative of the victors! Seize that man!"

No one moved.

"Noin, the rest is yours."

Heero slipped from the command room. No one pursued.

Noin stepped forward, facing the media and the Southern soldiers arrayed there, and spoke with ringing clarity.

"That man is a mere projection created by the ZERO System, nothing but a hallucination! Will you entrust your future to such a thing?!"

The soldiers wavered.

"Will you yield yourselves to a computer-run military dictatorship? The Martian Federation is gone, it may be that total pacifism was always a distant dream. But unless we stand up ourselves and desire peace ourselves, this war will never end!"

Zechs pushed through to the front.

"Noin, total pacifism is impossible. How many times must I say it?"

Noin yanked a rifle from the hands of a front-rank soldier.

"A projection has no right to call me Noin."

She fired into Zechs. He did not die; his face only turned sorrowful.

"No one's shot causes me pain, save yours. Yours alone pierces my heart..."

Then she saw it, the body at their feet. Relena's corpse slid away, noiselessly, and vanished.

"So, this Relena was a projection too."

Zechs realized it instantly.

"Dr. Hilde Schbeiker's nanotechnology... To think you can program tears, and even the moment of death."

But the signed surrender was still in his hand.

Projection or not, the document was valid.

Zechs chose not to cry to the media about Relena's disappearance.

Instead, he challenged them.

"Some of you question what I am. The answer is simple: I am the victor. I may be a projection without flesh, but I am indisputably the one who has won this war!"

"That's where you're wrong."

On the giant screen behind them, the masked face of Cyrene Wind appeared.

Noin's heart leapt, her husband's face, after days apart.

"You..."

Zechs glared at the monitor, eyes burning.

"Wrong how?"

"That instrument is invalid. There's an error where it reads 'Second President of the Martian Federation.'"

"Are you claiming that President Relena was an impostor?"

"No. Not that."

Zechs stared, taken aback.

"Then what?"

"There is no 'Second President of the Martian Federation.' Because—" Cyrene Wind slowly removed his mask and showed his true face.

"Because the First President, Milliardo Peacecraft, is alive, and stands here."

A roar of astonishment surged from the press.

"Relena was elected on the premise that I'd been assassinated. That premise was false at the root. My term is not over. I, Milliardo Peacecraft, supreme authority of the Martian Federation, declare: We do not surrender. The war continues."

"Very well!"

Blazing with fury, Zechs hurled a white glove at Milliardo's image.

"Then we finish this, now!"

Zechs boarded the Gundam Epyon and launched.

Mars Isidis Planitia

Even after nightfall, the battle raged on.

Tallgeese Heaven and the fifty-two Suit Mars Suits of the card squadrons clashed against an overwhelming force, five hundred Virgo IV units.

At the forefront fought Mille Peacecraft, the King of Spades.

His beam lance sputtered as its power faded, and the tide began to turn against him,

when a burst of iridescent light tore across the darkness.

Quaterine's machine, Scheherazade, streaked into the fray.

With a single sweep of its Jambiya blades, seven Virgos vanished in explosions.

"Sorry I'm late!"

"Quaterine, are you all right now?" Mille asked.

She had been shattered by the chorus of ten-thousand voices of the dead.

"I'll be fine. I have to fight, for those who can't."

Scheherazade and the King of Spades moved as one, driving straight into the Virgo center.

"I've been waiting for you, Quaterine."

An old-model Mars Suit stood before them.

"Stella...?"

"Good evening, Quaterine. Shall we dance?"

They clashed, machine against machine.

"I'm not holding back tonight!"

"Nor am I, my dear."

To Quaterine's surprise, Stella's aging frame moved faster than Scheherazade, each motion sharper, more fluid.

"Impossible! How are you this good?!"

"An image trace of Zechs Merquise. Can you surpass the greatest pilot in history?"

"Quaterine!" Mille's voice rang from behind.

"If you're fighting Father, then let me, "

"Stay out of this, Mille! This fight is mine and Stella's!"

While dueling, Quaterine pulled up Scheherazade's memory logs.

The names of its previous pilots scrolled past, Duo Maxwell, herself, Trowa Phobos, Artemis Sedichi, Quatre Winner, Lucrezia Noin...

"If it's Zechs you're channeling, then I'll answer with her."

Quaterine set the system to Image Trace: Noin.

"Engaging as Miss Noin!"

The Queen of Hearts, piloted by Naina, swung her massive beam mace in great arcs, crushing Virgo heads one after another.

From the horizon, Duo's Warlock thundered in.

"Naina!"

"Duo!"

"Still as tough as ever! Guess you didn't need backup?"

"You'd better be sweating out there! You always slack off when no one's watching!"

"Didn't pack lunch this time?"

"Of course I did!"

"Then you brought mine too?"

"Naturally!"

"Now that's motivation!"

He flung off Warlock's cloak; the machine shifted into its Fenrir form.

"Warlock, Mars limiter release! Fenrir Mode, set!"

The lupine machine tore through the Virgo line, cutting a blazing path.

The Queen of Hearts followed close, smashing every head that rose beside him.

"You're amazing, Duo! You really are the best!"

"That's tots obvious!"

Fitted with propeller-type flight units (Damsel Fly), Prometheus carried Snow White beneath it, concealed earlier in a nearby forest.

No Name was answering Heero's call, ferrying the Gundam to Fortress Babel.

But the fortress's flak was relentless. Approaching was suicide.

"A rough way to do it... but so be it."

Prometheus hurled Snow White into the air and, in the same instant, fired its cruciform heavy cannon.

The blast erupted below the falling suit, the shockwave lofting it skyward like a leaf on a gale, an acrobatic feat of impossible precision.

Snow White landed perfectly on Babel's roof.

Heero was waiting.

"Sorry to trouble you, No Name."

"We're even now."

"Yeah."

Heero climbed into the cockpit.

The Gundam spread its white wings and soared into the heavens.

From below, Zechs's Gundam Epyon shot upward, pursuit blazing.

Snow White waited in the dark sky.

"I'm glad it's you, Heero!"

They crossed paths and light exploded.

Snow White's buster rifle spun away into the void.

"No one else could give me this kind of fight!"

Snow White drew a beam saber.

Epyon answered with its beam sword.

They collided again and again, lock, break, strike, retreat, crash, each bout a mirror of perfect skill.

Before long Snow White's cloak was shredded, revealing its true form, a machine near identical to the Prototype ZERO from the Second Lunar War.

"So, President Relena's hologram was your ploy. You got me."

"That Relena is no illusion, and neither are her words."

"What?"

"She was Relena Peacecraft herself. Her plea for peace, her apology, her tears, all genuine. Even her resolve to die."

Their fight wove a balance no system could predict.

"But she had already cast off the Peacecraft name. That's why she left the hologram as her proxy."

"I know what I am, the real one."

"Trowa told Dlxneuf something once, , You're a Portrait of Dorian Gray."

"That line was meant for the one calling himself Cyrene Wind, Milliardo Peacecraft!"

Zechs rallied fifty Virgo IVs to his side.

"Target: Snow White! Fire all guns!"

Shells streaked in from every direction.

"So... you're not the real Zechs. The true Zechs Merquise never fights for efficiency."

Snow White spread its wings and shot upward, vanishing into the sky.

Zechs watched it go, then barked an order to the command room below.

"Prepare the Zwölf Zwerg for firing! First target: Snow White, altitude two thousand meters! Second target: Relena City!"

Across the plain, twenty-five Virgo IVs unleashed a torrent of fire.
Through the storm strode Prometheus, its frame heavy with armor.
The Gundanium plating didn't flinch, no matter how many shots struck.
The Virgos panicked, pouring fire until the barrels glowed. Prometheus kept advancing.

Then, suddenly, it leapt, twisting mid-air, flipping clean over the enemy line.
Landing in a crouch, it leveled its giant cruciform gun.
The gatling roared and when the spinning barrels stilled, nothing remained of the twenty-five Virgos but drifting ash.

"Two-hundred eighty-five left," said No Name. "Five apiece. Easy."

The twin moons Phobos and Deimos glimmered over the night sky.
High above the ravaged plains, Tallgeese Heaven, its armor cracked and smoking, managed to draw alongside the soaring Snow White.

Its pilot, Milliardo, barely kept the battered suit aloft.

"H-Heero!"

In the Tallgeese's mangled manipulator, he clutched a golden arrow, which he extended toward Snow White.

"Heero! The seventh and last of the Sieben Zwerge, the Gold Pfeil!"

It was an upgraded form of the anti-mobile doll nano-defenser once installed in the Tallgeese Heaven itself, now refined to unleash a devastating EMP pulse.

"Use it, and you can erase Zechs Merquise from existence!"

Heero said nothing.

"I wanted to lay that ghost to rest with my own hands," Milliardo continued, "but that wish won't be granted. Take it, Heero. End this."

"Acknowledged."

Snow White unfolded the Sieben Zwerge crossbow from its shoulder hatch and set the golden arrow upon the string.

Far below lay the fortress Babel, the crosshair fixed on its geometric heart, when Heero sensed something amiss.

"Zechs, get clear!"

Snow White lunged forward and shoved the Tallgeese away.

A split second later, a keening metallic shriek split the air, and a pillar of searing light speared upward from the surface.

It was the Zwölf Zwerg, Babel's supercannon, discharging.

The column swallowed Snow White whole.

"Heero!"

Milliardo's cry echoed as the Tallgeese tumbled clear, barely meters from the blast's reach.

When the glare faded, Snow White was gone.

For an instant he thought, vaporized.

But Snow White had not perished.

The Gundam had folded its white wings around itself, spiraling down toward Babel in free fall.

“Zwölf Zwerg, second volley ready. Target: northwest quadrant of Relena City.”

One pentagonal face of the fortress glowed blindingly bright.

Heero, bleeding and half-conscious, stared up at the light from within his shattered cockpit.

“I can’t... let it fire...”

Snow White’s frame was torn apart, Heero’s body just as broken.

Still, beneath the ruined wings gleamed the crossbow, the golden arrow notched and ready.

Zechs in the Epyon sighted the descending figure.

“Snow White! You survived!?”

Then he saw the glint, the arrowhead glowing gold, and fear rippled through him.

“That’s a nano-defenser!”

He hurled Epyon upward at full throttle.

“Like hell you will!!”

Falling headlong, Snow White drew the crossbow once more.

“Sieben Zwerge... drawing...”

The bow curved to its limit.

“F-Full draw...”

The strain and turbulence shook the machine; the tip quivered off aim.

Epyon closed in, beam sword raised.

With his last strength, Heero locked the sights.

“Release!”

The golden arrow flew.

A streak of light shot straight into Epyon’s cockpit, piercing through it and out the back.

The two Gundams collided, spinning together in a burning spiral toward the ground.

Just as the Zwölf Zwerg’s second shot prepared to fire, the arrow struck Babel’s pentagonal core.

A surge of radiance engulfed the fortress.

For long seconds it blazed gold, then fell utterly still.

The cannon never fired.

Every system inside Babel had gone silent.

The Virgo IV units across the field froze where they stood; the battle ended in an instant.

Only two suits still moved, Quaterine’s Scheherazade and Stella’s old Mars Suit.

They faced each other, weapons ready and both realized at once how meaningless the fight had become.

After a long stare, they both said softly.

“Let’s stop.”

Stella, running on Zechs’s image-trace, smiled faintly.

"When it matters most, my strength falters. Against you, against Noin, it's hard to be ruthless."

Quaterine, channeling Noin's image, blushed behind her visor.

"I didn't know love could make me feel this strong... and this embarrassed."

Snow White and Epyon crashed into the earth, half-buried in the sand.

Both machines lay in ruins.

Inside Epyon's shattered cockpit, no trace of Zechs Merquise.

The ZERO System remained severed, its hemispherical display forever dark.

Heero kicked open Snow White's hatch and stumbled out.

He managed two, three steps before collapsing.

"Maybe this time... it's over," he thought.

The pain in his body ebbed away, replaced by a flicker of light before his eyes.

He felt the edge of death.

Then, wings. Vast, white, descending from above.

An angel alighted beside him.

"So even a man like me... is met by an angel?"

The angel's voice was soft, unmistakable.

"I have seen the light of your soul."

It was Relena's voice.

"R-Relena..."

That was the last word he managed before darkness took him.

Moments later, a Preventer hovercraft glided to a stop beside the fallen Gundams.

At the controls was Lieutenant Kathy Po.

"Miss Relena, is he alive?"

"Of course," she replied.

Relena cradled the unconscious Heero in her arms.

She had no wings now, but her calm, radiant smile was angelic all the same.

"We should move him to the med-bay immediately," Kath urged.

Relena slowly shook her head.

"You know, Kathy, in every fairy tale, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, they always wake with a kiss."

Kathy froze, speechless, as Relena leaned down.

Her lips brushed Heero's, hesitant but pure.

It was a clumsy, innocent gesture and though Heero did not stir, Relena smiled, content.

His face, too, seemed peaceful, as if sharing her quiet joy.

MC-0023 FIRST SPRING

The Martian Civil War finally ended with the Southern Mars Confederate States surrender.

Milliardo Peacecraft remained as the first president of the Martian Federation until his term quietly expired, and when that day came, he stepped down without hesitation.

"I was never interested in politics to begin with. Calling myself the first president was merely a convenience."

So he said, and with Noin, Mille, and Naina, he withdrew to the northern territories to live the simple life of a rancher.

His successor, chosen through Mars's first full planetary election, was James Clarke Maxwell, officially the second president, though for reasons of his own he styled himself the third.

Rumor had it that his quarrels with First Lady Hilde were constant and loud enough to rattle the presidential residence.

His chief aide was the man who had engineered his campaign, Heero Yuy.

Heero now pursued the will of the original pacifist leader whose name he bore, determined to realize a practical, living peace rather than a hollow ideal.

Peace on Mars had only just begun.

Amid the slow work of reconstruction, each person returned, at last, to their own small measure of happiness.

At the Winner Hospital, Relena and Heero lived a quiet, gentle life together.

Relena stood before her mother Marlene Darlian and whispered, "I've come home, Mother. From now on... I'll remain a Darlian."

Frozen tears, long buried in her heart, thawed and fell down her cheeks.

Heero reached up, brushed them away, and murmured in her ear, "Watch me, Relena."

"Watch you? Do what?"

"Give up the name Heero Yuy, the way you let go of Peacecraft. From now on, I'll let my soul shine. No... I'll keep it shining."

He placed a letter in her hands.

"You finally gave it to me..."

Relena unfolded the paper.

Across it, in careful English script, were the words:

"Your sight, my delight. Will you marry me?"

In quiet affirmation, Relena nodded deeply.

THE END

Afterword

And so, this is it. Volume Thirteen, the end.

But to think it would be released at the same time as Volume Twelve, I honestly never expected that. It's a surprise even to me.

Thanks to Gundam Ace kindly letting me run three times the usual number of pages, I somehow managed to bring it all to a close. It was... a struggle. I would have liked just a bit more room for aftertaste in the finale, so I wrote a short epilogue, a story only about Heero and Relena, for Sakura Asagi's art book.

It's strange to praise my own work, but I really like that little story. It's a sweet, romantic piece, unabashedly so. I hope, if Frozen Teardrop is ever reissued in paperback format, that short story can be included. It might not be, but that's my wish. Since I already said something similar in the art book comments, I'll stop there.

Anyway, this marks a stopping point. The serialization ran for five years and three months.

If I could speak to myself twenty years ago, I'd tell that younger me, "Hey, don't get so worked up. Even if you hate the label people slap on you, just leave it alone, they'll accept you eventually."

Ah, actually, that line applies to me even now. Seems I haven't matured at all.

People often ask, "When will we finally see Snow White without its cloak?"

I doubt any of you expected it to appear on the cover of Volume Twelve, I didn't either!

The figure in front is Snow White, and the one behind it is Proto Zero.

Hajime Katoki had been adamant that he didn't want the design revealed until an anime adaptation happened, but I begged him and managed to have it shown in this form.

What an elegant machine it turned out to be.

Still, knowing Katoki, if Frozen Teardrop were ever animated, he'd probably redesign it entirely. (Or maybe not, who knows.)

The cover illustration for this final volume is a joint masterwork by Katoki and Sakura Asagi.

Its composition mirrors that of the first two volumes as the two covers connect. Relena catching the unconscious Heero as he emerges from Snow White's cockpit, she's beautiful.

When I saw that illustration, I made a decision.

I finally resolved to let go of Gundam Wing.

I never did manage to follow G-UNIT or SATANAS all the way, but I've burned myself out.

If you love Gundam Wing, anyone is free to carry it forward, write the continuation yourselves if you like.

Incidentally, I've never once called Frozen Teardrop a "sequel."

That was Kadokawa's idea, an easy-to-understand catchphrase for readers.

Ah, and I just remembered, I still haven't finished the scenario work for Endless Waltz: The Glory of Losers! Ahahaha...

To Tomofumi Ogasawara and my editor Koji Mitarai, let's see this through together until the very end!

Right now, I'm burning hotter than ever!

I've made you read so much of my rambling nonsense over the years, and I truly apologize.

This will be my last "sorry."

Let me at least be serious for the final acknowledgements.

To Editor-in-Chief Tsuyoshi Ishiwaki, Deputy Editor Tomohiro Zaizen, first editor Yasue Nagashima, second editor Yuzuru Morino, current editor Kei Orikasa, and Mina Matsumoto, all from Kadokawa's Gundam Ace and Comic & Character Division, I'm deeply sorry for the constant delays and missed deadlines.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your patience and tireless effort.

My gratitude also to Koji Nakajima, Tetsuko Takahashi, and Misaki Morie at Sunrise; to Executive Director Hideyuki Tomioka, who gave me the chance to write this story; and to Sayuri Matsuoka of Bandai Hobby Division, whose support in promotion never wavered.

Thank you, all of you.

To the artists who brought such beauty to the series, Asagi Sakura, MORUGA; to the mechanical designers Jun'ya Ishigaki and Hajime Katoki, who not only designed but gave every volume a stylish, striking jacket design,

I offer my deepest gratitude.

My thanks as well to Captain Masakazu Sakai, Helmsman Teruhiko Torii, Professor Shoichi Higashi, and Go Sakurai, the ideas you each contributed became the framework that supported this entire story.

Oh, and to my wife, too: Thank you♥

There are far more people I couldn't possibly list here, including everyone who celebrated Gundam Wing's 20th Anniversary.

Those were joyful days indeed. Thank you, truly.

And finally, to every reader who continued to support Mobile Suit Gundam Wing, who followed this tale all the way to its end, I give you my deepest, most heartfelt thanks.

May we meet again someday, somewhere.

Until then, I lay down my pen.

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.13 Silent Anthem

Written by: Katsuyuki Sumizawa

Illustrations by: Asagi Sakura [Character]
MORUGA [Mechanical]

Mechanical Design: Hajime Katoki
Junya Ishigaki

Original Story: Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino

Cooperation: Koji Nakajima [Sunrise]
Tetsuko Takahashi [Sunrise]

Advertising Support: Bandai Hobby Division

Supervisor: Hideyuki Tomioka

Cover Design: Hajime Katoki

Text Design: Atsushi Doi [Tendo noPolicy]

Editing: Kadokawa Shoten
Tsuyoshi Ishiwaki
Tomohiro Zaizen
Yasue Nagashima
Miwa Matsumoto