

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING FROZEN TEARDROP

新機動戦記ガンダムW
フローズンティアドロップ

Written by
Katsuyuki Sumizawa

Cover Art by **Sakura Asagi**
Hajime Katoki

Original Work by
Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino

3 REQUIEM FOR A PERPETUAL CHAIN (Part.1)



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Kadokawa Comics Ace, "New Mobile War Report Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop (Vol.3) Requiem for a Perpetual Chain (Part.01)"
Released 2011.06.25

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Novel Translation and Book Layout by Zeonic|Scanlations

First Edition: January 2025

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Requiem for a Perpetual Chain

Mars File 1

"Once upon a time there was a person with two names. That person was the direct heir of a pacifist nation, but he wore a mask and changed his name to take revenge against those responsible for the nation's collapse.

He soon became a legendary hero of an army. Today that person says he will punish foolish earthlings.

What has made him go this far? And can one call this an act of pacifism, or are these the instincts of a warrior?

It's possible that this person actually dislikes pacifism, or maybe he dislikes his sister who keeps believing in his father's pacifist ways.

I guess no one really know what his true intentions are..."

AC-195 Dorothy

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

I have no name.

No past, either.

All I've ever been is a disposable piece of hardware, a single-use tool, no different from a rag that gets tossed aside when it's too shredded to do any more cleaning.

That's how I spent my boyhood: tattered, threadbare, trying to survive the harsh terrain of Mars by playing at being a terrorist from as far back as I can remember.

I never really minded not having a name, but apparently those around me found it troublesome. At some point, they started calling me "Nameless."

Strictly speaking, "history" doesn't exist.

It's like me not having a name.

A thing called "history" only comes into being the moment historians and researchers consult the documents of the past, form a perception of them, and record or articulate those perceptions. That is when they say "history happened."

But all we ever do is surrender our bodies to the "time" that drifts through space; we can't possibly recognize the situation we're in now as "history."

After all, just what do we even mean by that single word, "history"? Is it human history? Earth's history? The solar system's? The universe's? We can't know whose perspective forms the narrative, and unless we're crystal clear on the narrator's point of view, it doesn't hold any true meaning.

Given that "history," supposedly the shared property of humanity, is told not by a transcendent being—like a god—but by historians and scholars who are only human, subjective bias inevitably creeps in.

That's why I don't believe in the so-called "past" that everyone calls "history."

No, I can't even find value in the mere concept of "what came before."

To be more blunt, maybe it'd be more precise to say I don't care in the slightest.

If the entirety of humanity felt the same way—if the "past" meant nothing—then "history" wouldn't be anyone's shared property, and "time" would be no more than a disposable commodity.

It was five years ago, in MC-0017, that the Martian Federation government declared independence from the Earth Sphere Unified Nation.

Mars takes nearly twice as long as Earth to complete its orbit, so in Earth terms, that was around ten years back.

The first president of the Martian Federation was Milliardo Peacecraft.

Elected democratically by the Martian settlers, he hammered out a compromise with the ESUN by persistent negotiation, slipped past the sabotage attempts by profit-driven consortiums, and managed to secure self-governance for Mars without resorting to bloody warfare—without spilling a single drop of blood.

In that same declaration of independence, the settlers proudly named themselves the Martian race—Martians.

From that point on, it was decided that the moment humans first set foot on the surface of Mars, the moment they began living on its soil, would be the first year of the Martian Calendar, or MC.

Up until then, people had been using the old Colony Standard Time, or Earth's AC calendar, and it was a hassle to keep converting dates; plus, they had to align the length of a day (24 hours 37 minutes) and a year (687 days) with Mars's rotation and orbit.

In that instant, Earth and Mars parted ways historically.

Yet soon after, Mars descended into chaos.

Social inequality was on the verge of exploding, and within just a few years, conflicts broke out across the planet.

It all began with rival corporations crushing one another for profit.

Factions that favored Earth clashed with those that demanded separation. The Federation's top brass tried to remain neutral and never revealed their true colors, leaving the job of quelling these conflicts and maintaining order to the newly formed military instead of the police force.

Religious differences, racial tensions, ancient grudges that refused to fade...night after night, that endless cycle of vengeance and retribution played on like a perpetual dance with no end in sight.

People assume it was because Mars's peacekeeping systems never reached Earth's level of sophistication.

Soon, ordinary Martians began to grumble that they never should have declared independence to begin with.

Another Martian year or so dragged by.

MC-0021 FIRST WINTER

A grand summit was underway in Relena City, the central metropolis of the Federation government on Elysium Island, situated near Mars's equator.

Countless VIPs from the Earth Sphere had been summoned, their presence lending an air of gravity to the proceedings.

Among them were Lady Une, the President's Chief of Staff, and Ambassador Sylvia Noventa.

At the far end of the conference hall, seated at the chairperson's dais, stood a symbolic cryogenic capsule affectionately dubbed "the Prince of Stars."

Twining around the capsule's casing were thorny vines, and at the tip of one such vine was a single crimson rose. It was only an imitation, yet it looked heartbreakingly real.

Inside that capsule, an eternally youthful maiden lay asleep.

She was Relena Darlian, credited as a key contributor to the terraforming of Mars. Rumor said an unexpected accident occurred on her trip from Earth to Mars, and ever since, she's been trapped in that cryosleep, though the details have never been made public.

Standing before the dais, addressing the assembled government ministers and foreign delegates, was Mars's first president, Milliardo.

He spouted noble rhetoric about peace and the flow of history.

I stood in the front row, disguised as a security guard, but I had my back turned to him.

Partway through the speech, I got the signal.

Suddenly, explosions erupted all over the conference hall.

That had been the plan: my comrades had planted timed devices at strategic points.

In the chaos, my job was to lead President Milliardo and the SPs guarding him to safety, or so it would appear.

But that was just a front.

I shouted, "This way!"

In the same moment, I drew my gun, took aim at the target, and pulled the trigger.

A flat, mechanical pop from the silencer punctuated the air, followed by a bullet ripping neatly through the deep lines on President Milliardo's brow.

Right then, another explosion echoed from elsewhere in the hall, also on cue.

Using the panic, I fled the hall, tearing off my guard uniform as soon as I was outside and tugging my beloved knit cap low over my forehead.

This was a tattered, fraying thing that my crew always teased me about, like I had a rag draped on my head.

Yes, I am the one who killed Milliardo Peacecraft.

They'd raised me as a terrorist, taught me only to destroy the powerful.

But I never cared about politics. I pulled the trigger because some bigshot told me to.

I assume even bigger shots pulled their strings from the shadows: Earth's extremist factions, or Mars's corporate interests, or that rumored secret group called the Preventers. Doesn't matter. I'm nothing but a severed lizard's tail in the grand scheme of things.

I sprinted down a back alley deep in a slum where ragged "para-tent" dwellings huddled together.

I ran until I could hardly breathe, but soon I found my path blocked by the army's security forces.

To make matters worse, my onetime allies, the terrorists, were now hunting me as well.

Betrayal and killing off loose ends, that's standard operating procedure in our line of work.

All I could do was run.

And keep running.

No doubt it's my turn to die next.

I couldn't trust the planned escape route.

I scrambled up a wall using rock-climbing techniques, forcing my way inside some random home's ventilation shaft.

Terrorists like me usually take shelter underground, so I deliberately crept above the rafters this time, managing to dodge the patrols and old allies alike.

For days I crouched in hunger and thirst, trying to hold out. But my hidey-holes were rapidly shrinking.

A week must have passed since the assassination.

That was when I ran into some civilians who had absolutely nothing to do with this. They saw me.

They reported me to security.

I could have killed them before they called it in, but the thought of killing yet another innocent just so I could keep breathing made me sick.

I know that this universe isn't exactly worth living in.

And yet, my instinct still balks at letting someone else take me out.

I did consider using my pistol on my own skull.

"..."

I glanced at my watch.

Soon, I realized, it should be time to see Phobos scurrying across the face of the sun.

I often imagined myself in Phobos's place, identified with it somehow.

Phobos, named after that Greek deity of "panic and fear," moves in a retrograde orbit—rising in the west and setting in the east, speeding along more swiftly than Mars itself rotates.

It appears two or three times a day, diving straight into the slow-moving sun's path from the opposite side—like it's spearing it head-on.

And in less than fifty million years, Phobos will collide with Mars's atmosphere, break apart, and become a ring circling the planet, a cataclysmic fate.

It seems like an obstinate fool, always resisting the natural flow of the era.

"Well, looks like I'm not the only misfit in the solar system."

I've always been drawn to that black bullet of a moon, the sight of it slicing into the pure white sun.

"Maybe I should at least see that one more time before I die..."

With a sigh, I crawled out from under the para-tent's attic space.

Clambering across a solar-paneled rooftop, I gazed at the immense Martian panorama.

Howling dust-laden winds tore through the sky.

Thick layers of cloud smothered both sun and Phobos, no chance of seeing them.

And that second satellite, nicknamed "frozen teardrop," Deimos, was invisible as well.

Nothing ever goes my way.

A grim laugh escaped my lips.

"Hmph... figures."

I let out the words under my breath, then pressed my gun to my temple.

No tears fell.

Of course not.

My tear ducts froze over a long time ago.

At that moment, a mournful violin melody drifted from behind me.

Startled, I whirled around.

"...?!"

There stood a tall man, arms crossed, fringed hair hanging over his face, looking to be an older scientist type, stooped a bit with age. A boy roughly my own age, or maybe a girl, given the skirt, sat at his feet, playing that violin.

She wore goggles over a pair of glasses, she must be meticulous about shielding her large, aquamarine eyes from the Martian dust. The tune was Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade."

They didn't flinch even when they saw my gun. They stood there quite calmly.

I aimed the muzzle at the man's forehead.

He glared right back, lifting both hands slowly to show he wasn't about to attack. His every movement was guarded, his gaze steely.

The girl stopped playing, took off her goggles, and revealed those serious eyes behind her lenses.

I wanted to ask what in blazes they were, but the man spoke before I could.

"I have no name either," he said. "But if I have to give you something to call me, let's go with Doktor... Doktor T."

Either? So he knew I didn't have a name.

The girl tucked her violin under an arm, a fleeting grin on her lips.

"Don't you think it's inconvenient, not having a name?"

"This young lady," the man continued, "is Quaterine Oud Winner, daughter of the Winner family."

He spoke in a calm, measured tone.

"Still, you'd best be on your guard. We're not quite as harmless as we might look."

They hardly looked harmless to begin with, but I kept my pistol leveled, doing my best to remain composed.

"And how the hell would you know anything about me?"

That was the first thing I ever said to them.

"Because you are me," Doktor T answered, lowering his hands at last, his thin lips barely moving.



"I already know everything."

His piercing gaze felt like an arrow sinking deep into my psyche.

"You don't bare your fangs at those who aren't your enemies," he added, "and that shows what an honest man you are."

Even with my gun raised, I could no longer will my finger to pull the trigger.

It felt as though he could see right through me.

I asked, "Do you know who I killed?"

"Milliardo Peacecraft died in AC-195, during Earth's last major conflict known as the Eve Wars. The man you shot was nothing but a ghost."

"That's ancient history," I muttered.

I never believed in stories you'd find in dusty textbooks, and I surely didn't care about the past. Growing up as I did, without schooling or love, it all felt irrelevant.

"All right, then let's talk about what comes next," the girl, Quaterine, said with a cool smile.

"You have three choices in front of you."

She stood up slowly, dusted off her skirt, and spoke in an even, steady voice.

"One, you shoot yourself right here."

Her violin still hung at her side, so I knew I couldn't let my guard down.

"Two, you walk back into the city and let someone else kill you."

I bristled, pointing the gun at Quaterine, cutting her off.

"Don't see any other options."

Then I noticed something: a gentle light in Doktor T's eyes, an unexpected softness like a father or mother might show, feelings foreign to me.

"You need a place to come home to," Doktor T said.

I'd never witnessed such warmth in anyone's gaze before.

"How about it? If you come with us, might that be a third option?"

For a moment, my resolution wavered.

Still, I was as frigid and suspicious as the ragged knit cap on my head.

"How did you even find me?"

A biting crimson wind tore across the rooftop, shrieking.

"It was the young lady," Doktor T said, lightly tipping his chin toward the girl. "Her instincts are uncanny."

"It's a shame we can't see Phobos, Mr. Nameless," Quaterine said. "I really wanted to see it pierce the sun, too."

I fell silent, resigning myself.

There was no point running anymore, not if they already knew everything. They clearly weren't linked to my old terrorist group or the government, judging by their particular aura.

If there truly was some "third path," I figured I might as well see where it led.

I recalled a little French I'd heard somewhere, *troisième chemin*, the phrase for a "third way." That stray thought told me I'd already lost the minute I allowed myself to contemplate it.

Wordless, I handed Quaterine my pistol.

She accepted it gently, smiling, and offered me her violin in return.

"A pleasure to meet you officially... Mr. Nameless."

Turned out, the violin was genuine. No hidden blades or other lethal surprises. My suspicion had just been me chasing shadows.

"Yeah... looking forward to it," I murmured.

Mimicking Doktor T earlier, I raised both hands, the violin clutched in one.

Choosing to live felt oddly like giving myself up as a prisoner.

"Please, there's no need for that," Quaterine said, her green eyes shining earnestly behind her lenses. "We're friends now."

I learned much later that Doktor T himself was once called "No Name."

It made me realize that, in some peculiar sense, he and I really were the same.

They stowed me on a small hover boat and ferried me away from Elysium, heading out from the Utopia Sea to the Acidalia Sea before continuing south.

With nothing better to do, I tried fumbling through a waltz on the violin, a fragment of a tune I'd heard long ago in my dimming childhood memories.

Quaterine tilted her head.

"What's that piece?"

I had no idea.

"It's called 'Endless Waltz.'"

Doktor T spoke quietly.

"One day, that waltz may need to become a requiem."

Where they took me was, astonishingly, a circus tent.

It was pitched on a little island floating in the Chryse Sea, a remote spot that didn't seem like it'd attract many customers.

Was I supposed to work at a circus, of all things?

Could a rag like me be good for anything?

Inside, there were cages for lions and elephants, a trapeze rig draped from the high ceiling, and a slack tightrope swaying overhead.

We crossed the center stage and ventured into a cramped backstage office.

Waiting there was a silver-haired gentleman whose eyes were just like Quaterine's.

I assumed he must be the head of the Winner family.

"You're earlier than I expected," he said brightly, voice brimming with youthful charm.

"It was a blast. You should've come with us, big brother," Quaterine teased.

"Well, I'm still not used to Mars's atmosphere," he replied.

They appeared to be siblings, albeit with a sizable age gap.

"Plus, I'm busy wrangling our own Snow White and Warlock..."

He spoke as though he were a boy, but I'd also believe it if they told me he was Quaterine's father.

"You're our nameless friend, right?" He offered me a cup of coffee. "I'm W... Professor W."

So that was the meaning of "W" in "Winner." Makes sense.

I turned to Doktor T.

"Hey, Doc, what's your T stand for?"

He kept silent, as though words beyond necessity were beneath him.

"Trowa," said Professor W with a mild look.

"No," Doktor T corrected him. "Triton."

Either way, it's basically the number three, but I didn't press it.

"So, this 'third path' you mentioned?"

"Right, about that."

Professor W called up a hologram screen.

"Things have escalated far more dramatically than we expected. Take a look at this."

He showed a feed of Milliardo Peacecraft's funeral.

His grieving family knelt before the coffin in mourning.

"I suppose poor Ms. Noin has more than enough on her plate..."

Professor W murmured sympathetically at the image of Lucrezia, Milliardo's widow, and their twin children, Naina and Mille. They looked around my age, maybe older, and for an instant, I felt a stab of guilt.

"But you don't need to feel responsible," W told me, tapping the monitor. "Look—closely."

The camera zoomed in, sharpening the detail: Ms. Lucrezia, Naina, and Mille weren't actually crying. Their handkerchiefs merely touched dry eyes.

"Judging by that, you might say his murder was within their expectations."

Doktor T, standing against the wall, spoke in a glacial tone.

"The real problem is the young man behind them..."

Professor W paused the image again, zooming in on a tall blond man in a black suit and dark sunglasses. He had a kind of steely aura more fitting a bodyguard or SP than a politician, perhaps a soldier is more accurate.

"Remember his face well," W said. "He served in the President's special operations unit."

I heard Doktor T's low murmur: "Merquise..."

It sounded like a name.

"Because you assassinated President Milliardo Peacecraft," Professor W continued, "the reformists and conservatives in the government have reached a stalemate..."

"A stalemate?"

"Yes. Under normal circumstances, the reformist bloc should have surged ahead until a new president was formally elected."

"So why the deadlock?" Quaterine asked, cleaning her glasses.

"Most of the key reformists have fled... to the Lanagreene Republic, with that man as their leader."

The hologram switched to a broadcast from three days earlier. The same blond man removed his sunglasses, revealing refined features, and wore a deep green uniform.

"Just this morning, he declared on live TV:"

"I am Zechs Merquise, Senior Special Advisor to the Lanagreene Republic. Our republic hereby secedes from the Martian Federation and proclaims its independence. We also declare war upon the Martian Federation."

Naturally, it was rife with the usual statements, "Down with Earth's dominance!" "Enough is enough for the privileged few!" "Rise up, citizens!"

"So, it's Zechs," Doktor T said, loud and clear this time.

"We'd hoped that your 'third path' might be to take on our work, fighting on behalf of those who can't fight for themselves," Professor W explained.

"You know, a philanthropic mission to stop the spread of conflict," Quaterine added with an impish wink.

I realized then that I'd basically been recruited as some kind of clown.

"But war's already begun," I replied.

"And I'm just a terrorist, not cut out for war."

"You'll be trained," Doktor T said, turning his back and heading toward a door. "As a pilot."

He gestured for me to follow him onto an elevator that dropped us deeper underground.

The drought-resistant algae discovered in the oceans of Europa, Jupiter's second moon, revolutionized the terraforming of Mars.

More than two centuries ago by Earth time, Mars had gradually warmed due to the greenhouse effect of artificial fluorocarbon atmospheres. Yet the planet remained inhospitable, its atmosphere still too rich in carbon dioxide for biological respiration.

The warming had teased us with false promises. When the polar caps melted, the precious water simply vanished into the thirsty Martian soil, and any seas that dared to form were reclaimed by the desert's winter grasp.

Lana Greene, a space development researcher from the AC era, who first saw the potential in what we now call "Europan Algae."

Back then, this organism was science's golden child but humanity's headache—a groundbreaking discovery that proved more menace than miracle, threatening to wreak havoc on Earth's delicate biosphere.

Deep beneath Europa's ice sheets, in lightless abyssal waters, lurked this extraordinary algae. When exposed to sunlight, it spawned what the colonists would come to call "Jovian Moss," plankton that multiplied at an astonishing rate.

By propagating this Jovian Moss on Mars, both warming and greening could be dramatically accelerated.

Releasing this moss on Mars promised to accelerate both warming and greening at unprecedented rates. What had been projected as a centuries-long terraforming process could be compressed into decades.

Yet implementation was initially blocked by AC-era scholars' concerns about "planetary-scale environmental destruction."

Then came the accident.

One of the resource satellites being regularly transported to Earth's sphere strayed from its intended orbit and, incredibly, crashed into Mars.

This satellite was supposed to have been designated "MO-VII."

It impacted in the Argyre Plain of Mars's southern hemisphere, a region that, like the Hellas Plain, had already been formed by an ancient meteor strike. Now, with the satellite's crash, a massive double-crater structure formed.

The satellite's internal ice apparently contained the European Algae, which thawed and was exposed to solar radiation.

Jupiter Moss bloomed with terrifying speed.

For a time, no one realized what was happening on Mars. Even those living in terraforming domes failed to notice the gradual environmental changes beyond their walls.

Dust storms still raged, and the crimson earth and sky remained unchanged to casual observation.

The transformation only became apparent when the moss spread through Mars's underground waterways, causing the annual average temperature to rise.

Within just a few years after that realization, half of Mars's deserts were submerged beneath oceanic waters.

The Argyre double crater filled with azure waters, becoming not just a lake, but a sea.

Oxygen levels surged dramatically. Atmospheric pressure equalized to match Earth's.

Since Jovian Moss originated from the Argyre double crater, once it became a sea, it was named Lanagreene Sea. Later, a massive artificial maritime nation was constructed there, giving birth to the Lanagreene Republic.

The elevator came to a halt at the lowest level.

Inside was a vast hangar and factory complex. As the doors slid open, they revealed what was unmistakably a gigantic humanoid frame—though only the skeletal structure was complete. Two of these incomplete machines stood before me.

"Are these Mars Suits?" I asked.

"No," Doktor T corrected me. "They're mobile suits."

The abbreviations were the same, so I didn't really see the difference.

During the para-terraforming period, giant bipedal manipulators called MTF (Mars Terraformers) were used for construction.

President Milliardo, the man I'd assassinated, had converted those MTFs into weapons, dubbing them "Mars Suits." He reasoned that to quell the conflicts happening around the planet, the Federation needed overwhelming firepower. Also, in Mars's environment, where magnetic dust storms were common—manned mecha made sense tactically.

But so long as these MS exist, real peace will never come.

"Mobile suits?"

I repeated the name, unfamiliar on my tongue.

"That's what these weapons were called in the old days..." Doktor T said.

"That was Earth's terminology," I guessed.

He nodded, and for a moment, regret flickered in his eyes.

Mobile Suit stands for "Manipulative Order Build and Industrial Labors Extended Suit," apparently an acronym derived from the initial letters. Essentially a "construction and industrial-use armpack extension of a spacesuit." On Mars, "MS" might seem more straightforwardly "Mars Suit."

Doktor T released a long sigh before naming the two machines.

"That one is Prometheus, and the other is Scheherazade."

Prometheus: a titan who gave fire to humanity and, in so doing, incurred the wrath of the gods. Scheherazade: the clever princess who spun tales each night to placate a tyrant king and avert mass slaughter.

Greek myth and Arabian Nights.

They hardly match each other in origin. Quaterine had been playing "Scheherazade" on her violin, perhaps her way of claiming that machine for herself?

Either way, I found the names a bit bizarre.

"Those codenames suit your taste, Doc?"

"They were labeled that in the blueprints. Not my preference, but machines need names, too, if we're to talk about them."

A pointed comment, perhaps, about my own lack of a name.

"So which one's mine?"

"I haven't decided."

"That girl wants Scheherazade, doesn't she?"

"Possibly. But Professor W would never allow that."

"Are they really siblings? That pair?"

"From here on, if you want answers, figure them out yourself. You're not as ignorant as you think."

"..."

The only plausible scenario that crossed my mind was that the father's DNA had been preserved somewhere, and the sister was grown decades later via test tube. Or maybe they were just messing with me for fun.

Either way, I failed to see any benefit in doing something like that, and in the end, it didn't matter.

It was a pointless question. a waste of time.

Suddenly, a woman's voice called down from above.

"So this is the young protégé you've chosen?"

I tilted my head and saw, perched high atop the Prometheus frame, a strikingly beautiful woman in a circus-style leotard. She smiled with a graceful, feline ease.

Her long, wavy hair flicked as she dove off the frame in a sudden leap, grabbing a metal bar near the ceiling, swinging through a dizzying series of flips and twists, then soared through open space to land lightly on a single dangling cable just above our heads.

Her balance and acrobatic prowess were extraordinary.

"Nice to meet you, boy," she greeted me sweetly.

Her flawless physique, honed muscles, stunning features, and elegant grace were spellbinding. I was so dazzled that for a second, no words came.

"..."

Then, without warning, my cheek exploded in pain. She'd dropped down to floor level and slugged me.

"Mind your manners when someone greets you!"

I didn't even register what had happened until I found myself on the ground, cheek swelling.

"Easy there, sis," Doktor T said.

"Youngsters and animals need strict training from a tender age," she retorted, "otherwise they turn out as hopeless as you."

"Nameless," Doktor T said calmly, "this is your instructor: Catherine Bloom."

"Miss' Catherine, if you please," she corrected him with a razor-edged smile.

He'd called her his older sister, but she certainly didn't look that old, maybe mid-thirties at most. And evidently, her punches were precise; as harsh as that blow felt, I hadn't bitten the inside of my mouth. The force was intense, though, I struggled to stand, still reeling.

She was taller than me, too.

"Right. Pleased to meet you, Missus Catherine," I joked.

She immediately cracked me again across the face.

"It's MISS Catherine! Or Big Sis Catherine if you must! Call me anything that makes me sound married or matronly again and I won't be so gentle next time!"

I was already done for. She wasn't holding back.

I'd been punched plenty of times since I was a child, but never once by a woman.

Drifting into unconsciousness, I heard Catherine and Doktor T's voices from somewhere far away.

"What level?" Catherine asked.

"Sleeping Beauty," he answered.

"And how long?"

"Seven hundred and fifty days until the mobile suits are complete... finish it by then."

"That short for S-Class Triple-A training? He's sure to die."

"He won't die."

"Fine, then. Let's get started."

Obviously, they wouldn't be training me here.

"We've got a shuttle in the upper hangar... should take six months to reach Earth's orbit."

Leaving Mars entirely was the last thing I'd expected.

"Hardly worth training with Mars's meager gravity," Catherine reasoned.

So, for the first time in my life, I left Mars.

Not that I felt particularly sentimental about it.

I came to, only to find Catherine already drilling me on board the shuttle.

They put me through the wringer: extravehicular activity in zero gravity, endurance training under extreme G-forces, piloting the shuttle itself, docking procedures with a relay station.

What shocked me most was having to compute the Earth-bound trajectory by hand—no computer assistance allowed.

If it was only about heavier gravity, we might not have needed to go all the way back to Earth, but the Federation has surveillance satellites near Mars. Being wanted criminals, we needed somewhere we could hide for a while, obviously, Doktor T and the others were also fugitives of some kind.

Our small interplanetary vessel bound for Earth's sphere was named "Phobos." Probably another "pick a random name" job by Doktor T, continuing the running joke about me being "Nameless."

For one hundred and eighty days, I endured "pilot training" in name only, which was basically just a circus act. I was fully expecting to be made into a clown or trapeze artist.

When we finally reached Earth's orbit, we docked at a small abandoned colony due for demolition. That was where the real training began.

I mastered juggling, balancing on balls, walking tightropes, all of it under Earth-level gravity, which is three times that of Mars. But trapeze training in triple gravity was downright brutal.

I messed up countless times, crashing to the hard ground. Each time, they hauled me off for treatment in a medical capsule.

"Could you at least set up a safety net?" I complained.

"Then it'd take forever," Catherine replied. "You need to learn with your body."

"I understand."

I broke so many bones that I lost count around fifty.

A few days later, Catherine brought in clones of lions, tigers, and even a bear.

"They're on loan," she said, "so please handle them delicately."

They may have been clones, but they sure didn't act any tamer.

"Delicate handling" wasn't exactly on the table.

I stopped counting claw and bite injuries right away.

Far worse on my psyche was the knife-throwing practice.

Catherine volunteered to stand as a target, meaning if I ever hesitated or miscalculated, she'd be hurt, or worse. I had enough skill to be sure I wouldn't kill her, but there was always a risk, especially in an environment with gravity fluctuations that could throw off my aim.

When I hesitated too long, Catherine marched up, snatched the knife out of my grip, and hissed, "Stand over there. Don't move."

Then, from across the way, she hurled eight knives in a single motion.

I was still in the middle, yet each blade traced a perfect arc around me and embedded itself dead-center in the giant spider-shaped target board behind me.

"Before we head home, you're going to do that at triple the distance and three times the number of knives," she said. "All bull's-eyes."

"..."

"Oh, and the gravity will be twice as heavy," she added.

So that was six times Martian gravity.

Day in and day out, I tackled ridiculous demands.

I seriously thought I might die.

But Catherine always looked me straight in the eye and encouraged me, unwavering.

"If you give it everything, it's not impossible," she'd say. "You've got a gift, lightning reflexes, and a body that can keep growing stronger. Put it all together, and you'll nail it."

Somehow, her conviction made me believe I could.

"And if you can do it by two hundred days, I'll give you a reward."

I managed it in one hundred and fifty days.

"Well done, No Name..."

She handed me a banana.



I was, after all, just a terrorist, not some docile pet. Hearing "a reward" and receiving a banana left me feeling a tad underwhelmed.

"Not satisfied?" she asked.

I decided that telling her the truth might get me punched again, so I kept quiet.

"Then let's begin a new regimen."

And so an even harder course began.

She sent the menagerie back. Not because our loan ended, she had another plan.

Catherine manipulated the colony's life-support systems to simulate the conditions of an 8,000-meter elevation: thin air, low pressure, biting cold, a threshold where human life barely clings on.

In that environment, I was made to do trapeze acts and walk tightropes.

Another fifty days, and I mastered those, too.

"You've come a long way, No Name..." she said at last, giving me an apple.

"Catherine...", I began, "I'm only doing this to keep myself alive, so—" I'd been about to say I didn't need any more bribes.

"Got it," she cut me off, misinterpreting me. "I'll be sure to make your training even stricter."

As if what we'd done so far wasn't strict enough in her eyes.

"Next time, three times heavier gravity," she declared.

Nine times Mars's standard, and she still smiled exactly as before.

I got through that in fifty days as well. Then came zero-G practice, followed by training on the Moon.

By then, I could feel my body adapting, able to handle a wide range of gravity, altitude, oxygen levels, and pressures.

MC-0022 NEXT SPRING

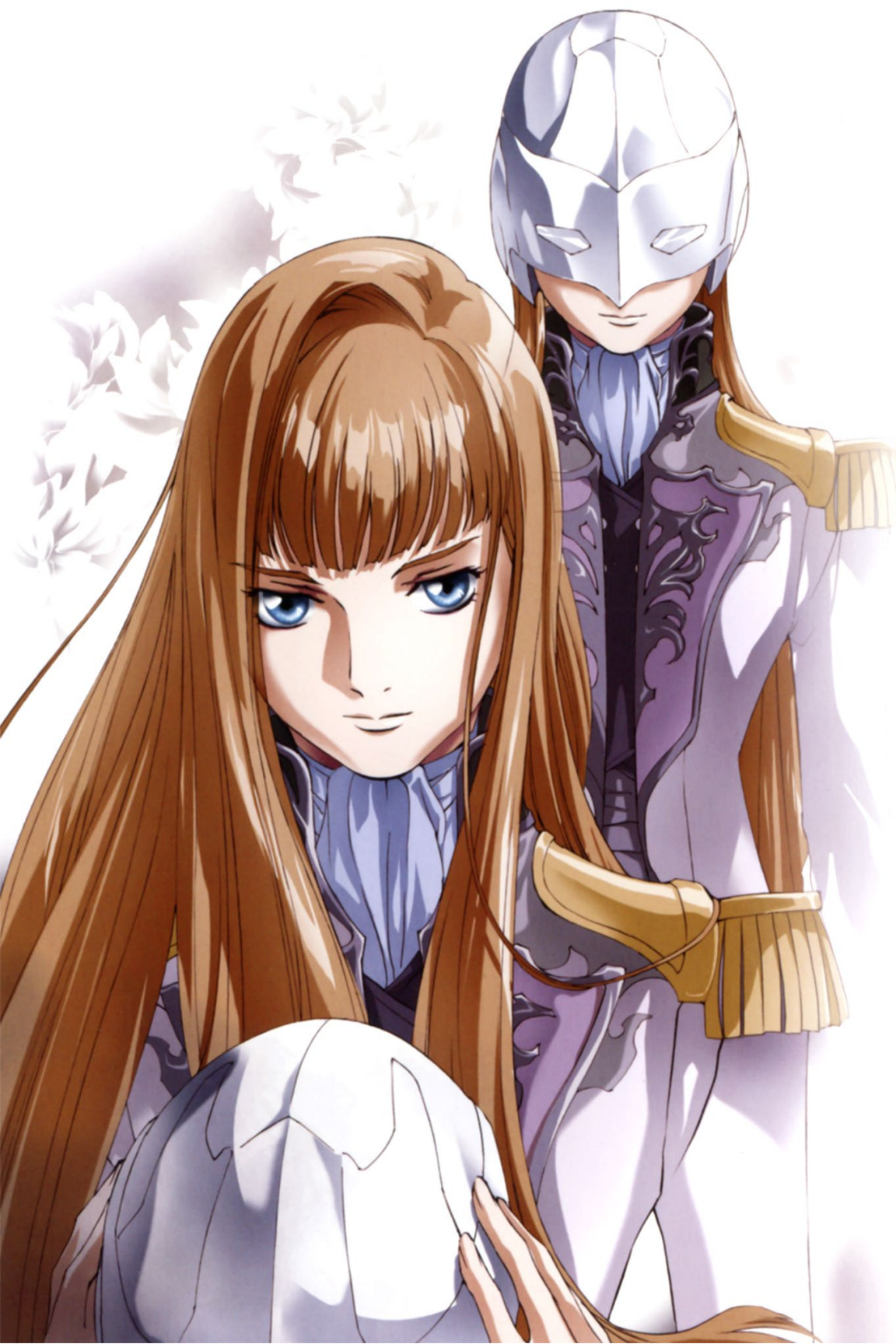
One day, out of the blue, Doktor T sent a command for us to come back.

"Sis, things have changed again... and I'd like No Name's final adjustments done here instead."

Given the distance, it was only a one-way transmission. Real-time conversation wasn't possible.

Still, thinking back on it, Doktor T always did speak in one-sided messages anyway.

"A new President has been elected to the Martian Federation," he continued, his voice tight. "Our red planet's finally living up to its namesake, truly becoming the god of war's domain."



The feed cut to the inauguration speech, and I found myself staring at a woman who commanded attention. She stood there in ceremonial white that wouldn't have looked out of place in Europe's grandest courts, her eyes hidden behind an elaborate helmet-mask.

"I am Relena, your newly appointed second president of the Mars Federation government, and sister to our first president, Milliardo Peacecraft."

A bad joke, I thought at first. Wasn't Relena Darlian supposed to be sealed away forever in that cryogenic capsule?

Perhaps this masked figure was merely an eccentric taking advantage of her name.

"I stand before you honoring my brother's final wishes," she continued. "As promised, I seek peace with the Lanagreene Republic. I extend an open hand to Major General Zechs Merquis for negotiations."

As she spoke, her fingers found the edges of her mask.

"And as also promised, I shall hide nothing from my people."

The face beneath the mask struck me silent. She was young, impossibly young, and beautiful.

"Relena..."

Catherine murmured at my side.

"It's definitely her, Relena Darlian."

"My name is Relena Peacecraft," the woman declared. "From this day forward, the Mars Federation government pledges itself to total pacifism, total disarmament and the complete rejection of violence."

Peacecraft?

So apparently, she's not using the name Darlian.

Total pacifism?

Does she seriously believe that sort of sugarcoated dream will make her enemies stand down?

"Still as young as ever," Catherine mused.

"You're not exactly ancient yourself," I offered.

She responded by grinding her knuckles into my ratty knit cap.

"I've learned to tune out sweet talk."

I hadn't meant it as flattery, but before I could protest, Catherine sighed.

Her smile never wavered as she whispered, "Time to head back to our warrior god's playground."

In haste, we left the Earth Sphere, the place where I'd spent nearly three hundred days in training, and set a course for Martian orbit aboard our interplanetary spaceship, the Phobos.

The training had transformed me. My body had grown stronger, faster, more capable—but the real change ran deeper. The circus work had rewired my brain, teaching me to see the world as an endless series of possibilities to be calculated, predicted, controlled. It meant I could remain calm no matter what came next.

I had Catherine to thank for that.

Most people crumble when life throws them a curveball. But that's just lazy thinking—a failure to imagine enough scenarios. The old me had been just as bad, blindly following orders without questioning consequences. Even during Milliardo's assassination, I'd mapped every escape route but never considered betrayal. Pure luck had saved me, and I'd looked pathetic scrambling to survive.

Now, before taking any action, I calmly analyze my own abilities, draft out as many possible futures as I can imagine, then simulate how to deal with them. Only then do I act.

If something still catches me off guard? That's on me—just proof I need to imagine harder next time. Even death would just be another scenario I'd considered and accepted.

Gone were the days of panic and hesitation.

Ironic, really, considering our ship's name meant exactly that.

MC-0022 FIRST WINTER

Space is humanity's deadliest dance partner. One wrong move and you're finished. It's like walking a cosmic tightrope, crisis after crisis is inevitable when you're sailing through the void. All you can do is keep your head clear and your balance true.

This time was no different.

Seven days out from Mars orbit, it happened. An X-10 class solar flare—the kind that only erupts every few years—forced us to scramble for the radiation-shielded sleep capsules aboard our small ship, the Phobos. Take a direct hit from an X-10 burst, and you're dead. No maybes about it.

We shouldn't have been out here at all. Long-range forecasts had predicted the flare. The smart play would have been either waiting it out or taking a larger vessel with proper radiation shielding.

"Solar flare impact in 3,600 seconds," the computer announced.

One hour until the killing radiation hit us. That's when the distress call came in.

"This is the interplanetary transport Kubrick."

They were ahead of us on the Earth-to-Mars route. The flare's electromagnetic precursors were already playing havoc with communications—their video feed was pure static, leaving us with just audio. A woman's voice.

According to her, their ship had run into a meteor shower en route, suffering crippling damage.

"Our radiation shielding is out of commission. Please, we beg you, rescue us!"

By normal human standards, of course we'd want to help. But under spacefaring law, ignoring it wouldn't be illegal. When there's a high chance of mutual ruin, you aren't obligated to risk your life.

Catherine keyed her mic.

"Interplanetary vessel Phobos here. How many are onboard?"

"Four of us remain... including me."

Even if we brought them all aboard, we only had two capsules and one spare: room for a single extra person, at best.

"Most of our crew died in the meteor strike... Those of us left are just passengers. None of us have EVA experience."

I looked over at Catherine.

She decided in an instant.

"We'll have to go to them."

"Understood. We'll come aboard and attempt to fix your shield. Send over your circuit diagrams."

They transmitted the schematics immediately.

We found three severed circuits.

What's more, the ship's exterior cameras showed two dozen chunks of ferrous meteor debris scattered around the damaged section, likely part of what was keeping the shielding system from powering back up.

We'd have to remove the debris and replace those three circuit boards entirely.

"Do you have spare circuit modules on hand?"

"We tried that already. The remote maintenance pods aren't precise enough for the job."

"So the spares are still outside?"

"Yes, they're still attached to the pod's manipulator arms."

Fine detail work in open space would require a person in an astro-suit.

"We've got less than fifty minutes left. Is this even possible?"

"No guarantees, but we're out of options."

"It's too dangerous! We can't let strangers risk their lives like this."

"Don't worry... I'm pretty good on the tightrope."

We had just over 3,000 seconds before the flare hit.

It would take about 2,700 seconds for the Phobos to accelerate enough to match velocity and rendezvous with the Kubrick.

"We'll have only 300 seconds at matching speed. Ten seconds to board, 180 seconds for repairs, and ten more to return."

"Syncing both ships' velocities for a stable approach leaves us 300 seconds total. Boarding alone needs at least thirty."

"That still leaves forty spare seconds. If I go solo, that's more than enough."

"You plan to do this alone?"

"Catherine, I need you to handle the Phobos's speed control."

"No name... aren't you afraid of dying?"

"If I give it my all, it won't be impossible. You were the one who taught me that, Catherine."

"..."

"And regardless of success or failure, I want you inside the radiation-shield capsule two hundred seconds before the flare hits."

"All right."

Two thousand six hundred seconds flew by.

Our ship fired its reverse thrusters, slowing as it neared the Kubrick.

Clad in my astro-suit, I slipped outside the Phobos and clambered across its exterior hull, from the port side up to what you might call the "roof," though in space there is no real up or down.

Far off in front of us glimmered Mars, that old familiar sight.

I could spot the hulking form of the interplanetary transport Kubrick drawing steadily closer.

"Arriving at rendezvous point. Sixty seconds until mission start,"

Catherine's tense voice crackled over my comm.

"We have three hundred thirty seconds until the solar radiation arrives..."

"Don't worry. Compared to your training, this job's simple enough."

"Roger that. Once you succeed—no, I know you'll succeed—there'll be a reward waiting for you."

Probably a tin of pineapple or maybe oranges, I thought.

"Begin the countdown."

The Kubrick now loomed above me, like a massive hull turned sideways. From below, I could see the ship's innards through a gaping tear, along with a spherical repair pod.

It seemed so close, but it had to be five hundred meters away.

"Five... four... three..."

I poised my hand on the ignition for the small thruster pack on my back.

"Two... one... zero!"

Suddenly, the relative speeds synced perfectly. We were in a momentary stasis.

"All right, I'm off."

I gave a gentle leap.

It felt easier than a trapeze act, if anything.

With a small spin, I landed upon the Kubrick. Exactly as planned, it took ten seconds.

Following Catherine's coaching, I turned toward one of the exterior cameras, the "audience," and bowed with a practiced flourish.

Naturally, there was no applause in the vacuum of space.

"This is No Name. I've made contact with the Kubrick."

"Roger that... 280 seconds left until the flare..."

I located the positions of the twenty-four debris fragments. Each chunk was at least a meter across. Perfect targets.

"All that knife-throwing practice might come in handy..."

"Make it quick, we've got 250 seconds!"

Standing at the center, I took the twenty-four specially made darts, each tipped with a miniature drill, each tethered to me by cables for controlled flight.

Emulating the knife-throwing technique Catherine had drilled into me, I hurled them in one fluid motion.

Every miniature drill found its mark, burrowing deep into the meteorite fragments.

I cracked my wrist as though snapping a lion tamer's whip, reeling in all twenty-four with the attached wires and prying them free from the Kubrick's hull.

A press of a switch, and rocket boosters in the dart shafts fired, sending the fragments spiraling into the void.

"Bravo!"

Catherine's excited voice came over the comm.

"That was brilliant, No Name! Consider that a spectacular stage debut!"

Inside my helmet, the timer read.

"Catherine, we're under 200 seconds. Get to the capsule, now."

"No! Who's going to open the hatch for you when you get back?"

"I'll do it manually from the outside."

"That'd take too long. You'd need at least thirty seconds' leeway."

"If I'm left with fewer than thirty seconds, I'll have to take shelter here on the Kubrick."

"But—"

"Please, Catherine, do as I say."

I pleaded as I hurried to the repair pod.

"Fine... since when did you start talking back like this?"

She abruptly cut comms.

Three circuit boards waited on the pod's manipulator arm. I grabbed them and headed for the damaged section, easily slipping through the hull breach.

Once inside, though, the structure was a maze.

My countdown was already below 150 seconds.

By the time I reached the target section, found the damaged board, and swapped it for a spare, a full ninety seconds had ticked away.

I'd burned most of my margin for error.

"Kubrick, circuit boards replaced. Run a check!"

"Understood... checking now."

I waited.

Ten seconds... twenty... thirty... this was unexpected. It felt like an eternity.

"Confirmed... shield system is operational. All systems green."

My shoulders sagged in relief.

"Thank you... your bravery saved us. We owe you our lives."

I glanced at my visor's timer: 30 seconds until the flare.

"Kubrick, I don't have enough time to get back to my ship. May I take shelter aboard yours?"

I waited.

Five seconds passed.

No reply.

Maybe they intended to tack on a quick "Your sacrifice won't be forgotten" or "We'll pray for your soul." Or maybe they were just cutting me loose.

By law, they wouldn't face charges for leaving me to die; there was still a chance of mutual disaster, after all.

I felt that old familiar taste in my mouth, betrayal. It's standard fare in my line of work.

A petty part of me wanted to sabotage the Kubrick's newly functioning shield, dragging them to hell with me.

But I was a rag, a disposable tool, after all. If anyone should die alone, it might as well be me.

Besides, this was my own failure of imagination. I'd accept the consequences.

No regrets.

My tear ducts were still frozen, as ever.

The final twenty seconds ticked away. I crawled back outside.

Far overhead, I saw our Phobos drifting away, its velocity no longer synchronized.

I silently hoped Catherine had made it into a shield capsule.

If I died here, all her training would go to waste. I couldn't even imagine how to apologize for that.

At the very end, I thought I'd at least look upon Mars once more.

Of course, I couldn't see Phobos from this angle—though ironically, I wasn't panicking at all.

"So... guess the third path never turned up after all."

In my mind, I saw Doktor T's face, then Catherine's. I thought I could hear the distant strains of "Scheherazade." Perhaps just a serene hallucination.

Ten seconds left.

Time flowed coldly through the infinite darkness.

I knew this universe wasn't worth living in. I'd accepted that long ago.

That's why I never needed a past.

Nor did I need a name.

I turned, facing the blazing star of our solar system, ready to meet the flare and the fate it carried.

"?!"

But there was no sun in my eyes.

Right in front of me loomed a repair pod, a line tethered back to the Phobos, and an extra shield capsule, sent to me via that wire.

Five seconds left.

The capsule hatch hung open, with a handwritten note from Catherine taped inside:

"You idiot! Hurry up and get in!!"

Three seconds.

I dove in, sealed the hatch.

Zero.

The timer read negative now.

The capsule was painfully cramped with my astrosuit on, but I was hardly in a position to complain.

Catherine must have maneuvered the maintenance pod using the control wires to bring the shield capsule here. Her technique was incredible—far beyond my capabilities. The number of scenarios she'd simulated must have dwarfed mine. I felt hopelessly outclassed.

X-10 class radiation pummeled space for two straight days.

I didn't have to worry about breathing in that time. The astro-suit's air supply was good for one day, and thanks to Catherine's training, I could survive on half-oxygen for an extended period.

I had no clue how I'd ever begin to repay her.

The capsule hatch finally cracked open two days later.

I was back aboard the Phobos.

Catherine had retrieved both the pod and me.

I nearly fell into her arms.

"No Name!"

She pulled off my helmet, flooding my lungs with fresh air.

"S... sorry... th...thank... you..."

My head reeled, vision swaying when her fist suddenly connected with my face. The surprise hit harder than the pain.

"You idiot!"

She grabbed my collar before I could collapse, bringing her radiant features close to mine.

"Don't you ever think about dying again! Life isn't something to throw away so carelessly!"

A trace of her sweaty scent wrapped around my senses, dizzying in its own way.

"You're not just some rag! You're not some disposable tool! Stop spouting nonsense! You can at least think a little more highly of yourself!!"

Tears welled in her crystal-clear eyes. I was stunned that anyone would cry for someone like me.

"I... I get it..."

It felt like I'd finally found what Doktor T once called "a place to come home to."

"And another thing!"

She brushed up the hair hanging over my forehead.

"This is your reward!!"

Leaning in, Catherine kissed me gently on the brow.

It was the greatest reward I'd ever received.

In the distance behind us, the interplanetary transport Kubrick sailed on, back on course.

A communication came through, this time, in crystal-clear video. A refined-looking middle-aged woman appeared onscreen.

"We truly are sorry... as soon as the radiation shielding came online, we lost all our communications. We never meant to abandon you."

So it wasn't on purpose, apparently.

Catherine and I decided to believe her words.

It allowed us to hold a flicker of hope for the human species.

When the Phobos finally returned to Martian orbit, Quaterine Oud Winner, Quaterine, got in touch again.

"Long time no see, Mr. Nameless."

She was smiling as always.

"I'll be heading over to the relay station to pick you up, so stay put till I arrive, okay?"

But something was different. The boyish energy was gone, replaced by a melancholic young woman whose eyes, behind those glasses, seemed perpetually downcast.

"How are Prometheus and Scheherazade coming along?"

"They're not making much progress... these days, I'm more intrigued by my brother's completed suits, Snow White and Warlock."

Her tone was oddly subdued.

Something about her seemed off.

"Quaterine... is something bothering you?"

"Bothering me? Oh, don't be silly."

She tried to sound cheerful, but it was obvious a shadow loomed behind that façade.

"But if I really do look that way to you, maybe I've fallen in love or something, ha ha ha..."

Love? I'd never understood that emotion well.

Yet I could see how hard she was suppressing something deep in her heart.

An inexplicable sense of foreboding crept over me.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Quaterine parted ways with us around three months later. Ever since that day, I'd barely caught a glimpse of that fleeting shadow in her eyes—though to be fair, I hardly saw her at all.

In truth, none of us had much direct contact with her: Prometheus and Scheherazade were still incomplete, and so was I. Meanwhile, Professor W's secret projects, the mobile suits Snow White and

Warlock, had supposedly reached completion. Nobody was allowed near them; they were hidden away somewhere classified.

That left me to do pilot training with a Mars Suit instead. My sparring partner was always Doktor T, and Catherine never once stepped into a mobile suit cockpit.

Likewise, Quaterine never needed training, either she was already a flawless pilot, or she simply had no interest. She never touched the simulator or joined a practice match.

Then one day, I noticed Quaterine's violin case lying neglected in a dusty corner of the corridor. For someone who once treated Mars's perpetual grime like a personal affront, the neglect of her cherished instrument spoke volumes.

"..."

The thought that her Scheherazade might never echo through these halls again left an unexpected hollow. I brushed the dust from the case with my cap—what was one more stain on a worn rag? When I removed it, I noticed my bangs had grown long enough to shadow my face. Such trivial observations, in the grand scheme.

Elsewhere, Doktor T, Professor W, and Catherine Bloom were in conversation, unaware I was out of earshot.

"Doktor, how is our nameless friend doing?"

"He's not bad at all... I'd wager he's already surpassed my old level."

"That's... reassuring."

"Is something wrong? You're not your usual self."

"....."

"Is this about Quaterine?"

"Yes... Something's off with her lately."

"Maybe she's just eager to pilot Snow White? You know how girls are when they see a brand-new dress."

"I'd like to believe that, but..."

"No, I doubt Quaterine will ever pilot Snow White."

"Why not?"

"There's a transmission from Father. They're about to activate Operation Mythos."

"Then... Sleeping Beauty?"

"Yes. At last, that one's making its move."

"I've never liked that pilot."

"Captain-Major Kathy's already headed to the polar base. The Voyage will handle transport of Snow White and Warlock from here on out."

Later that night, under cover of darkness, Quaterine stole the unfinished Prometheus from the underground hangar and fled to Relena City.

That night, when they told me of her betrayal, I couldn't process it at first.

"She betrayed us?"

"All evidence points that way," Doktor T said, his face etched with grief.

"No Name, go after her if you would."

I answered without hesitation.

"Understood."

Catherine stepped in between us.

"Absolutely not! He's only trained in Mars Suits!"

"I'll be fine, Catherine. Thanks to your drills, I can handle any situation now."

"But you're still nameless! Do you really understand the value of a human life?"

"If it's a name you're worried about, I've already decided on one..."

I still wasn't interested in "the past," but I did want to move on from being a disposable rag.

"Doktor... so your 'T' stands for Triton?"

"That's right."

I handed my tattered knit cap to Catherine Bloom.

"Then I'll be Trowa. Trowa... Phobos."

I claimed that third choice, that so-called third path.

My long bangs fell over half my face.

"You can call me Trowa Phobos."

Let it be a reminder of panic and hesitation, I thought, claiming the name of fear itself as my penance.

"Very well... Trowa Phobos,"

The Doktor met my gaze just as he had when we first met.

"Launch when ready."

"Understood."

Meanwhile, Quaterine commandeered an amphibious long-range hovercraft called the Zagrape and tore across the Chryse Sea, then inland toward the western continent. Her destination was the distant Olympus Mons.

Olympus is the tallest mountain in the solar system—towering 27,000 meters above Mars's red plains. With magnetic anomalies so common on Mars, compasses and navigation systems frequently fail, but no one could miss the hulking outline of Olympus Mons. Even in a whirling sandstorm, you could guide yourself by that colossal summit.

I followed her in a similar hovercraft, the Odehärman, the distance between us steadily shrinking. The vast red desert stretched endlessly all around, with Olympus looming in the distance, sunrise just cresting its summit. Dawn bathed the sky in a deep, crimson glow. Against that fierce light, the satellite that shared my new name—Phobos—looked as though it was swallowed by the sun.

In the middle of that wasteland, I spotted the Zagrape sitting still. Had Quaterine decided to give up? No, that notion vanished as soon as I thought it. Then I received a transmission from her.

She wore the same tinted goggles as when we first met.

"So, did you see Phobos, Mr. Nameless?"

"You've got the wrong guy. I'm not Nameless."

Strictly speaking, I no longer was.

"I'm Trowa Phobos now."

"Trowa?!"

She burst out laughing, practically doubling over.

"Let me guess, you stuck 'Phobos' in there too?"

She clutched her sides, still laughing.

"..."

"You really are something else, you know that?"

It was hard to believe this woman, bright and buoyant as ever, had just betrayed us and fled with a stolen mobile suit.

"And what about that cap? You already ditched it, huh? It really suited you..."

But beneath those goggles, her eyes blazed with murderous intent.

"I quite liked that hat of yours, actually."

The instant she said this, the desert sand around me surged up in fountains, and several massive shapes rose into view—dozens of them.

"Really... really liked it."

Mars Suits?

No...these were different.

"They aren't Mars Suits, nor are they conventional mobile suits," she said calmly.

I was completely surrounded.

"They're called mobile dolls."

"Mobile dolls?"

"Personally, I like to call them 'family.'"

A quick count revealed forty Maganac Mobile Dolls.

"You'll let me go, won't you?"

"I can't say that's an option..."

"I see..."

All at once, the Maganacs sprang into motion.

Then, in that same instant, my radar picked up two more incoming signatures.

"Two new suits incoming?!"

Quaterine must have seen them too.

"No way!"

Suddenly, a whirling sandstorm rolled in, laced with magnetized particles so fierce that every monitor went black.

Sensors went black. I tore myself out of the cockpit and climbed on top of the hovercraft hull, and Quaterine did the same. In that fury of wind and stinging particles, no machine could possibly move. Her Maganacs had come to a halt.

But across the swirling haze, I saw two silhouettes writhing like phantoms.

Both wore sweeping cloaks, an unmistakable sign they weren't Mars Suits.

Through gaps in the cloth, I spied twin glowing eyes on each, no mobile dolls, these.

Despite the howling winds, they advanced with inexorable certainty.

Quaterine raised her voice, her body rattled by the gale.

"Snow White!"

The white-cloaked suit drew a beam saber.

"Warlock!"

The black-cloaked suit brandished a massive beam scythe.

Why could they move freely in this magnetic storm? It baffled me.

"I've been..." Quaterine tore off her goggles, crying out, "I've been waiting for you all this time!"

A voice emanated from the black-swathed suit.

"So you're the young lady of the Winner family?"

Another voice came from the white.

"I'll confirm it for myself..."

The sandstorm only grew stronger.

"Do you truly intend to go to Relena Peacecraft?"

"Of course I am! I'm going to turn all of Mars into one great Sanc Kingdom!!!"

"Then, Quaterine..." the white suit said, its cloak billowing as it lunged forward, "I have no choice but to kill you."

Inside the cockpit of Snow White, the boy's cold eyes regarded her with an eerie calm. He spoke in a quiet, level voice—and sealed her fate.

Requiem for a Perpetual Chain

Mars File 2

Long, long ago, there was a rooster on some farm called the Voice of Dawn.

One day, as Voice of Dawn was taking his morning stroll, he caught sight of a fox approaching and swiftly flew up onto a high wall.

The fox looked up and asked with feigned innocence, "Why do you flee from me?"

Voice of Dawn maintained a studied air of indifference, offering no response.

"Haven't you heard?" the fox went on, voice gentle as could be. "Just recently, the Lion, King of Beasts, and the Eagle, King of Birds, held council. They've decreed that all animals shall live in harmony, with no more killing between us."

The fox's voice dripped with honey as he added, "So you see, I mean you no harm. Won't you come down from that wall?"

Voice of Dawn gazed into the distance, as if noticing something far away.

"Look over there—I see a pack of hunting dogs racing this way!"

At these words, the fox's composure shattered, and he turned tail in panic.

From the top of the wall, the Voice of Dawn called after it, "Why are you running? Didn't you say we animals aren't supposed to kill each other anymore?"

But the fox was already gone, never to return...

The Dawn of World Peace
—From The Arabian Nights, as told by Scheherazade

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Quaterine Oud Winner.

That's my name.

My father was Zayeed Tabla Winner.

He died decades ago.

My middle name "Oud" is the name of a musical instrument, as are my brother Quatre's "Rabara" and my father's "Tabla." It's one of the Winner family's more peculiar traditions, or so Iria once told me.

I know that Quatre killed our father and mother.

Our mother, also named Quaterine, died giving birth to Quatre. Back in those days, pregnancy in space was said to be tantamount to a death sentence.

That's presumably not the only reason, but in any case, I had no mother. I was born from a test tube via twentieth-century in vitro fertilization technology.

It's as though, from the moment I came into this world, I was burdened with a destiny that forced me to think about the meaning of life.

There isn't a single life in this universe that deserves to be cast aside. The heaviest thing in all existence is a single life.

Is that really true?

Take my mother, for example—the first Quaterine, whose name I share. She traded her life to bring Quatre into this world. But was that really the right decision?

I asked Quatre point-blank:

"Have you ever once been glad you were born?"

"That's a difficult question," he replied. "I suspect I'll only know the answer when I'm about to die."

"How many people died because you were born?"

"I couldn't say... Father and Mother both died because of me, no doubt, and I've killed plenty more on the battlefield."

"But haven't you also saved far more lives than you ever took?"

"Certainly. Anyone who survives a war ends up clinging to that thought, or else they wouldn't be able to go on."

"I've never seen you shed a single tear, Brother."

"I used to cry all the time. But now, perhaps my tears have frozen."

"..."

"If I wept in apology, maybe someone would forgive me. But I can't forgive myself... so I decided not to cry anymore."

Which would you call happier, a peaceful world under strict control, or a free world where conflict never ends?

No question, perfect freedom and perfect peace would be ideal, but such a place doesn't exist.

In reality, you find some middle ground, lament whatever inconveniences remain, and do your best to find satisfaction in the compromise. That's the shape of the human world.

If sacrificing a few could bring happiness to the many, some might say it isn't morally wrong.

But those few have to give their consent.

If they refuse, coercion ensues. And that's when the "greatest happiness of the majority" degenerates into the immoral "arrogance of the strong," forcing absurd burdens on the weak.

My father, Zayeed, stood with the minority.

He opposed the militarization of the space colonies.

He was wealthy enough that colonists begged him to fund their arms, but he flatly turned them away.

"Human beings are barely surviving in space. War is reckless, wasteful."

I think he was right.

But Quatre wouldn't follow that logic.

"War is tragic. But if nobody takes up arms, the fighting will never end."

He climbed into a mobile suit called Gundam Sandrock and set foot on the battlefield himself.

No matter how saintly a person may be, so long as that person remains alive, countless others pay the price.

Environmental issues in space often come up, and if we truly care about saving the planet, or the cosmos, perhaps humanity wiping itself out would be the surest solution. It's a grim yet strangely logical conclusion.

If being alive feels like a sin, the simplest choice would be to end one's life on the spot, or find and enact some way to atone for that "sin."

It's almost laughable, but in practice, most living people don't feel the slightest guilt for existing.

We take being alive for granted and loathe the idea of death.

But for me, it's a little different.

Being "granted life" was the result of deliberate medical procedures. My very existence came with a built-in mission of sorts from the moment I was conceived.

I'm supposed to lift the burdens of suffering from everyone in this world.

I must serve the greater happiness of the many.

That's the life I've been given.

My own life can be cast aside if need be.

My life is among the lightest in this universe.

In fact, having no personal pride is my pride.

That's why I decided to wear glasses.

It's not because my eyesight's failing, I simply feel it's presumptuous for someone like me to gaze directly upon such a vibrantly beautiful universe.

When you peer through a microscope or a telescope, doesn't everything become easier to handle calmly?

It's a bit like that. Looking at the world through glass is the only way I can keep my composure. Seeing it all with my naked eyes feels too shameful.

Right now, the panorama before me is probably the most breathtaking sight on Mars.

A sunrise glowing red in the sky.

Phobos, the first Martian moon, sinking into that fiery sun, a solar eclipse found only on this planet, like a dagger striking the dawn.

In the distance, the black monolith of Olympus Mons looms, the highest mountain in the solar system, its base swathed in a raging dust storm sweeping across crimson desert.

And there, two vast humanoid war machines: mobile suits.

The one in a white cloak is Snow White.

The one in a black cloak is Warlock.

I'm thrilled.

Those two suits, one white and one black, are the most stunning machines I've ever seen.

Riding my surge of exhilaration, I call out their names.

But the person I admire most—the pilot—responds with a frosty declaration.

"Quaterine... I'm going to kill you."

This Heero Yuy is nothing like the figure Relena described.

"Heero is someone who gives us hope,"

Relena had told me, lowering her gaze with a shy flush.

"I even asked President Dorothy. We need him if we're ever to bring peace to Mars."

And yet—

From somewhere behind me, Trowa Phobos shouts.

"Think it over, Quaterine! Relena Peacecraft's ideal can't be realized yet!"

I'm not unaware of that.

We may well be doomed to fail.

But if no one fights for that vision, how is this sad, wretched state of affairs ever going to change?

I've made my choice.

I intend to see Relena's doctrine of total pacifism become a reality—no matter what.

MC-0015~0019

When I was very young, I was raised by Doctor Iria. She was the one who understood me more deeply than anyone else—so much so that I saw her as a kind, nurturing mother. In fact, I believe she was the one who first brought me into this world. Later, I learned that she was also my older sister, born from the same test tube. My birthday happened to fall on the exact day of Mars's Independence celebration. They say conflicts flared up across Mars around that time, but I was too little to pay such troubles any mind.

Iria ran a modest clinic called Winner Hospital deep within a remote outpost of a Martian terraforming dome, far from any major city. The building itself was a small, wooden house, no bigger than a songbird's nest. Despite its size, it was fully equipped with state-of-the-art medical technology, and I remember her practice thriving quite well.

Beyond the house lay a transparent dome that shielded us from the Martian wilderness. Inside, there was always a shimmering forest and a pristine lake, alive with small creatures like birds and squirrels darting among the trees. In the garden, the flowers of every season burst into color, where elegant butterflies would dance gracefully through the air. I was convinced there must be fairies and tiny folk hidden there, too. Back then, that little "birdhouse" was my entire world. I honestly believed I would never leave it, that I would spend my days with gentle Iria forever. I was a mischievous child, often spoiled and prone to whining.

Almost every evening, when just the two of us sat down for dinner, Iria would play the violin for me. It was an old instrument, conjuring up melodies from a distant past. At times, I wondered if she, too, bore a middle name linked to some musical instrument, but she told me she did not.

"Only the direct heirs of the Winner family carry middle names," Iria once explained.

"I'd like you to succeed Quatre in his place."

That was the first time I ever heard the name Quatre, apparently, my older brother.

"Does Brother Quatre have no children?" I asked.

"No... he doesn't. He never married, nor has he ever been in love."

"...?"

I just blinked, too young to grasp what she meant.

"He's a peculiar boy," she sighed. "This violin used to be his once upon a time."

"Will you marry someday, Iria?"

"I'm far too old for that now," she said with a gentle smile.

She never struck me as old in the slightest.

"Besides, I have my work as a doctor... I'm sure Father would scold me for saying such things."

Iria was committed to studying a disease unique to Mars. For a time, I believed I existed only to serve as a test subject for her research.

"Quaterine, please," she begged, clasping me tight with tears in her eyes. "Don't say such heartbreaking things..."

At the time, I honestly didn't mind, even if that were my purpose, yet she continued to pour love into me without hesitation.

Once, while Iria was out on a house call, I tried playing her violin. A horrific screech was the only grating noise I managed to produce, which quickly convinced me I had no talent for it. But I did manage a little success on the piano. Replaying the melody Iria had performed, I relied on my memory to recreate those notes.

"That's wonderful, Quaterine," she said. "I knew you had a gift..."

I believe I was only about two years old then, though, mind you, that's two in Martian years.

Iria often let me sleep in her bed. Whenever I struggled with insomnia, she would read me old folktales. Stories of seafaring adventurers, hidden caverns, magic carpets, and genies from lamps, each one sparking my youthful imagination. Much later, I learned those came from the tales an ancient princess named Scheherazade once told, known collectively as One Thousand and One Nights. Maybe because of that, I fell in love with reading. Iria owned a vast collection of books, and whenever something baffled me, there was a computer at my disposal, ready to fetch new information. My curiosity was boundless, and I devoured knowledge from every field. People often call that "gifted education," but for me, it was more like a beloved hobby. I never cared for the word "education," really.

There was also a game called Image Trace, which synchronized with one's brainwaves to temporarily reenact a chosen individual's data. I often played at being boy-heroes, and somewhere along the way, I naturally fell into using more masculine speech patterns. I even modified the software on my own, downloading Iria's violin performance program, for instance, so that, though limited, I could reproduce her piece Scheherazade after enough effort. The digital conversion had its limits, however, so it still took months of real practice before I could play it properly.

When I finally performed it before Iria, she heaved a wistful sigh.

"You certainly have Quatre's talent. But don't rely on shortcuts, all right? Humans only find true value in what they earn through struggle..."

That was the one time Iria ever scolded me. She even accepted with a smile when I began speaking in a more boyish way, despite being a girl.

Twice or thrice a year, a massive man with a fine white beard, Uncle Rashid, would visit, hauling supplies, medicine, and all sorts of the latest medical devices.

"Thank you so much," Iria would say, bowing in gratitude.

"No need for thanks, Miss Iria," he'd reply. "We're family after all!"

I adored him. His broad grin exuded such warmth.

"Young miss, you're growing ever more clever, looking more and more like Master Quatre by the day! I can't wait to see what the future holds!"

Uncle Rashid worked in interplanetary transport for the Winner family. Whenever he was passing near Mars's orbit, he would drop by. At some point, I noticed Iria would always wear a hint of makeup whenever he came, even though she usually went barefaced. From what I'd gathered in books, it seemed Iria might harbor feelings for him.

Once, I took it upon myself to ask him directly, while he was tending our garden:

"What do you think of Iria?"

"She's a very important person to me," he answered at once.

"Then why not marry her?"

"Ha! A fine joke, Miss. We come from very different worlds."

Uncle Rashid's cheeks flared crimson as he turned around. I didn't understand.

"Is it because she was born from a test tube?" I pressed.

"..."

He set aside the gardening tools and strode over to glare at me, his large eyes fierce.

"Miss Quaterine! Please, never speak of her like that again."

The intensity of his gaze took my breath away.

"For the record, I, too, was born from a test tube!"

So much for differences in status, I thought.

"Iria cares for you," I murmured.

"But I have a wife already. She complains about everything, isn't much to look at, and lacks grace or wit," he admitted.

Surely, Iria would be far more appealing than a woman like that.

"But she suits me," he concluded.

Nearby, the white magnolias were in bloom, their sweet fragrance drifting on the air.

"Men and women seldom get to live precisely as they wish," he said.

"It's complicated, huh?"

"But, Quaterine, someday you should love exactly how your heart desires. Never lie to yourself! Test tube origins or not, it makes no difference!"

"O-okay..."

I nodded, though I could hardly imagine falling in love at all. The magnolia's flower language is said to symbolize love for nature. I didn't quite understand what it meant to be in love with a person, but I did cherish all of nature in this vast universe—the vibrant life force in every living thing. Every flower or creature was determined to shine by its own volition, and I respected that.

"She's inherited Master Quatre's oddities as well..."

I heard Uncle Rashid mutter something under his breath, but the words eluded me.

In Winner Hospital, we had two long-term patients. One was a sweet old lady named Marlene Darlian. She'd always call me "Relena," and fuss over me kindly, even though I kept telling her my name was Quaterine.

"I once served as a maid to Lady Quaterine...your real mother, Relena."

"But my name isn't Quaterine, it's Quaterine...and I'm not Relena either."

Still, she insisted I should be more ladylike.

"Would you like milk in your tea, Mrs. Darlian?" I asked.

"Yes, please. But remember, Relena, a proper young lady would say, 'Might I offer you some milk?'"

Eventually, I pieced together that Relena must be the daughter Mrs. Darlian raised.

"Wear a skirt sometimes, dear. Relena would look lovely in one."

I obeyed because I loved to see her smile. As tomboyish as I was, the moment I stepped into Mrs. Darlian's room, I tried my best to be on my best behavior. I even stopped asserting myself in front of her, speaking with perfect feminine propriety, however awkward it felt.

The other patient was a girl one year older than me, named Stella. She was almost always confined to bed, suffering from congenital issues with her lungs and heart. Though Stella would smile whenever I was near, there were two occasions when I saw her in agony. She whimpered and gasped in misery.

"It hurts... it hurts so much..."

She cried out, coughing up blood, struggling in anguish.

"Don't look at me... Go away..."

Iria administered painkillers, which calmed her episode a bit, but after that day, Stella seemed ashamed I had witnessed her at her worst. She built a wall between us, refusing to smile again. That hurt me, but I couldn't blame her. She hadn't chosen to be ill. Though we were both blessed with life, her existence was one of constant suffering, while mine was carefree and spoiled. It seemed so unfair, and I couldn't understand why I, made the way I was, experienced no hardship, while Stella couldn't catch her breath.

She developed insomnia, terrified by the small pains that plagued her the moment she closed her eyes. I tried to soothe her like Iria once did for me, reading aloud by her bedside. It seemed to distract her from the pain. Bit by bit, Stella's smile returned, and she could finally sleep peacefully. We continued this nightly routine, and over time, we mended our friendship.

"Thank you," she said, her voice soft, albeit hoarse. "Quaterine, would you be my friend?"

"Even if it's someone like me?"

"Of course..."

We gazed into each other's eyes, tears gathering until they spilled. It made me so happy. After that, we chatted about everything; the flowers blooming in the yard, the fish leaping in the lake, the families we'd never met.

"I've heard I have twenty-nine older sisters and one older brother," I told her, "but aside from Iria, I've never actually met them."

"I have a father, mother, and an older sister with the same name as me," Stella said. "But... I've never seen her."

A sister with the same name? I didn't really get it, but I felt slightly relieved to know Stella wasn't so alone. I did wonder why she'd never met that sister.

Stella's illness seemed to improve gradually, perhaps thanks to her medication. Then, half a year later, her condition deteriorated again. She cried out in excruciating pain, so intense that even painkillers failed her. Iria promptly ushered me out and began an emergency operation that lasted until morning. I spent the whole night reading aloud, alone in my bedroom, tears falling as I read each word. I felt so powerless. While my friend suffered so terribly, all I could do was curl up in bed and read stories.

By morning, my hopes may not have been the deciding factor, but Iria's surgery proved successful. She had performed what they call

regenerative medicine, transplanting new lungs and a new heart, grown from Stella's own cells. Yet, because her ailments were congenital, no one could predict if or when the disease might come back.

"So please, Quaterine... keep watching over Stella," Iria pleaded.

"I will," I promised.

Day by day, Stella's strength returned. It was such a relief. Before long, she was even able to attend the same junior school as me. That was in MC-0019, when she was five and I was four.

Outside the dome, the swirling dust was fierce, stinging my eyes until tears came unbidden. I was more frightened of the outside world than I realized. Just then, Uncle Rashid arrived again, gifting me a pair of goggles.

"These are the same goggles the leader of the Maganac Corps wears," he said.

The moment I slipped them on, I felt the stirrings of courage rise within me—almost as if nothing could ever hold me back.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

Snow White was drawing near, its beam saber lifted high. Then, with a dazzling burst of light, it drove the blade straight into the hover-skiff I had been riding. The cockpit was demolished in an instant. Fortunately, I had leapt off into the crimson desert moments before, tumbling down the slope of a towering dune. Once I'd caught my breath, I looked back to confirm the damage. The destroyed hover-skiff lay smoldering behind me, but the storage bay was miraculously untouched.

"Thank goodness," I murmured. "So they really do want to recover Prometheus in pristine condition..."

A sandstorm was raging, whipping at my clothes and stinging my cheeks, but I pushed through it, making my way toward the Maganac leader unit. The goggles I wore shielded both my vulnerable eyes and my wavering heart. I called the leader unit "Rashid," and from its cockpit, I could switch to manual piloting and even remotely operate the rest of the Maganac squad.

At last, the worst of the sandstorm began to pass.

"Sorry, but I'm not going down without a fight!"

Climbing into Rashid's cockpit, I keyed in the manual override.

"The password is MAGANAC-8×5, Miss Quaterine."

Uncle Rashid's voice reverberated inside my mind. I typed in that keyword on the sub-panel, and the main monitor flickered to life. Rashid awakened with a low hum. Somehow, the comms circuit had regained partial functionality; through harsh static and intermittent noise, I

managed to eavesdrop on the pilots of Snow White and the Warlock. They were talking to each other.

"Did you finish them off?"

"No. Seems they're planning to activate the mobile dolls."

They had guessed correctly. That was exactly my plan. No surprise, though, coming from the person I admired most. I tapped on the side console, pulling up a virtual keyboard shaped like a piano's keys.

"How do you feel about Sergei Prokofiev? I'm partial to his Peter and the Wolf, but Romeo and Juliet is wonderful too."

I dropped the name of a composer who had once studied under the same man who wrote Scheherazade—Rimsky-Korsakov.

Nevertheless, my personal preference leaned toward one of his notoriously challenging piano sonatas, sometimes known by another name: the War Sonata.

"Then let's see how you handle his Piano Sonata No. 7."

With that, I began my "performance," my method of piloting. On cue, the Maganac squad sprang to life in time with the music.

"Hey, they're moving!"

"You take the left flank. I'll move in from the right, then cut straight through the center."

"Forty mobile dolls at once? You think we can handle that?"

"We'll split 'em half and half. Your old man could've done it in his sleep."

"Tch! Fine, bring it on!"

Their exchange made me chuckle. They still weren't working together seamlessly. If that was the case, I had my own methods.

"To Snow White: let's send in seven dwarfs!"

I kept up the brisk, driving tempo.

"And for the Warlock: the magic mirror!"

I remembered an old recording of a mobile suit called the Gundam Deathscythe Hell, waving a massive beam scythe in Brussels on Earth. With its eerie bat-wing silhouette, it was the embodiment of the Grim Reaper, the power of that beam scythe almost beyond imagination. Against a machine like that, one that slashes in wide arcs at close range, direct assault was risky. I needed to combine projectile barrages with a staggered, wave-like strategy when deploying the mobile dolls.

Prokofiev's Sonata No. 7 runs about eighteen and a half minutes. Holding out that long would be decisive for the Maganac mobile dolls. Seven elite units closed in around Snow White, while the remaining thirty-two, armed with a "mirror trace" program, converged on the Warlock for close combat. I had no illusions about outright victory, but I could at least hold my own. That was the conclusion of my calculations.



The Warlock brushed off the swarm of live ammunition, hundreds of rounds, without even trying to dodge them, whirling that beam scythe elegantly to obliterate every shell in a series of fiery flashes and blasts. Smoke and light flooded the area. Still, it pressed forward, drifting to the left in a steady, disquieting glide. Its black cloak rippled in the fierce wind, both sinister and graceful at once. True to its word, it was attacking from the left flank, but the thirty-two Maganac units circled ahead to the right, positioning the Warlock right in their sights.

"What the—? Where'd these guys learn that trick?!"

The Warlock's pilot, Duo Maxwell, seemed genuinely taken aback by the mobile dolls' unorthodox maneuvers. Thankfully, my Mirror Trace Program was working perfectly. Giving each mobile doll a shifting attack pattern is standard strategy: no matter how skilled the pilot, it takes time to decode such erratic tactics.

Meanwhile, Snow White's pilot, Heero Yuy, faced down the seven elite suits calm, cool composure.

"..."

Neither side moved so much as an inch, as though measuring each other's resolve. My seven Maganac units each specialized in a different role, close-range beam cannon, beam saber infantry, mid-range live-ammo artillery with auto-guided shells, high-speed assault craft for diversions, and heavily armored defensive types, all poised and ready. Their distance left no room for error; the moment someone twitched, all hell would break loose.

Sand particles lashed Snow White's white cloak, sizzling with blue-white sparks, an almost electric aura of quiet menace. In a heartbeat, Snow White seemed to vanish from where it stood. I thought it was launching a direct attack, but I was wrong. Heero Yuy's machine soared high into the air, spinning in mid-flight to throw off the seven mobile dolls, then retreated backward. Instinctively, the seven gave chase, but I shifted the "music" to a slower tempo, ordering them to hold position. After all, victory wasn't my true objective here.

"Quaterine, don't you actually want this mobile suit?"

Heero Yuy's provocation crackled across the comms.

"Why, of course," I replied.

All the while, I maintained our current distance.

"But you're not going to just hand it over, are you?"

Keeping Snow White occupied like this, I had set my sights on something else, my other target. On this battlefield, there was a far more troublesome presence. First, I had to eliminate him, the man who'd abandoned a wonderful "no name" to christen himself Trowa Phobos, a

name I found more ridiculous than anything else. Only after I took him down could I truly laugh in the face of this war.

MC-0020 NEXT AUTUMN

The junior school Stella and I attended was called St. Minerva Academy, housed in an aging building within another terraforming dome. They said the very first settlers on Mars had constructed it, so it must have stood for ages. Nearby, there was a modest Martian Federation military port, which sometimes caused a bit of noise, but otherwise, the academy atmosphere remained peaceful.

Stella and I were placed in the same class. Most of our classmates were older than we were, but I managed to keep pace with the lessons. It wasn't that I found studying particularly fun, it felt more like an obligation I was expected to fulfill. What I truly enjoyed was chatting with my classmates, who, for the most part, welcomed me warmly. I was the shortest in class, and they doted on me.

Stella, being naturally quiet, still managed to get along with everyone, and soon she had a small circle of good friends. As for me, I loved P.E. class most of all. However, I often felt bad whenever I glanced over and saw Stella sitting out, just watching us.

Then one day, out of the blue, Stella collapsed in the corner of the gym. Panicked, I immediately called Iria, who rushed over, though it wasn't just her. A large rescue craft arrived from the military port and whisked Stella off to a central hospital in the city. All Iria and I could do was stand by and watch her go.

"Two weeks ago," Iria explained, "Stella's sister with the same name got caught in a conflict and ended up brain-dead."

"Brain-dead?"

"It used to be called a 'vegetative state,' a long time ago."

Iria closed her eyes in sorrow.

"They're planning to give Stella an organ transplant using the body of that same-named sister."

"Then Stella will be fully healthy?"

"Most likely... It's ironic, isn't it? The sister was originally created as the 'spare,' yet now..."

She trailed off in a pained whisper, leaving me at a complete loss.

"Stella has suffered enough," Iria murmured. "This is for the best."

A few months later, Stella returned. Her color was good, her face brimming with life.

"Quaterine, I'm perfectly fine now!" she exclaimed. "I can taste how fresh the air is. I can even join P.E. again, the doctor said so!"

Never before had I seen her smile quite like that, she practically glowed.

"And my father and mother are so kind. I've never been happier!"

Wishes really do come true, I thought then, genuinely delighted for her. After that, Stella stopped staying at Winner Hospital, choosing instead to commute from her own home. Apparently, her family was extremely wealthy, complete with a driver to shuttle her around and dozens of live-in servants. Little by little, I sensed a widening distance between us. I tried talking to her often enough, but there was a formality to the way she spoke that made it hard to approach. The sense of an invisible wall around her felt thicker than before, and the resulting isolation stung even worse.

Before I realized it, I'd started spending most of my breaks alone. One day, while walking down the corridor, I overheard a few girls chatting inside the classroom.

"No wonder her grades are so good."

"She skipped two years, right?"

"I wonder if she's really the 'spare'?"

"No way! Are 'spares' even allowed in school?"

"She's filthy rich; she can do whatever she pleases."

I immediately assumed they were talking about Stella.

"Wait a second! If you say that—"

I stepped into the classroom to find Stella at the center of the group, smiling as they all carried on. The other girls averted their eyes from me, but Stella shot me a pointed glare.

"Good day, Quaterine."

"Who were you talking about just now?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

Ah. So they must have been talking about me. I was, after all, the youngest daughter of the Winner family, born from a test tube. From that moment on, I felt Stella and my classmates shunned me more than ever. Perhaps I had once been Stella's first friend, but now I was demoted to her thirtieth or fortieth. In a society where sacrificing a minority ensures the happiness of the majority, the simplest solution is for me, that minority, just to accept it.

The academy lost its luster for me. It became a place to study, nothing else. During breaks, I hid in the library, reading through every book I could get my hands on, including history tomes that dissected eras marked B.C., A.D., and A.C., trying to piece together humanity's sins and achievements. I started to understand how the world worked. That understanding felt arid and sterile.

The word "spare" referred to clones kept by wealthy families so they could harvest organs if ever they fell ill. Officially, these clones were called their "younger brothers" or "younger sisters" with the same name, but in Stella's case, her "older sister" had ended up brain-dead instead, so it was Stella who received the lung and heart transplant and gave up her own role as the "spare." Now she could finally live with her family, enjoy a healthy body, and attain real freedom. That was a wonderful thing, exactly what I'd wished for most. And in truth, my own status was not so different from a "spare," either.

So I decided to keep smiling.

Over the next few days, the harassment escalated. No one would speak to me, and I found graffiti scrawled inside my desk's computer interface, sometimes even the device destroyed, my gym clothes hidden away. Yet I maintained my cheerful front.

"Such a lovely smile," the teachers would say. "You're always so positive. What a good child you are, Miss Quaterine."

I came to see that reassuring them was vital to keeping everything running smoothly. The class's atmosphere remained calm, so long as I didn't complain or make waves. St. Minerva Academy stayed peaceful.

I tried my best not to make wishes. It wasn't that I wanted to deny the existence of any god; it was that my own wishes seemed to come true a little too easily, and that frightened me. Sometimes, I suspected the universe itself might harbor a collective "heart" that granted people's will. Maybe Stella's recovery had simply been chance, but it still made me wary of ever wishing for my own happiness again.

That afternoon, I was heading home as usual, only to discover my goggles were gone, hidden by some prank, I assumed. Stella and the others would deny any involvement. I had no friends willing to help me look, so I gave up and left without them. Once outside, dust battered my eyes until tears rolled down my cheeks. To be honest, at that moment, I hated every single person in that school. Part of me may even have wished they would disappear.

Out of the blue one day, a rebel force brandishing an "anti-Federation" banner launched an assault on the Martian Federation military port. They hit it with five Mars Suits and a hover-strike craft in a surprise attack. Taken off guard, the local Federation garrison fell almost instantly. No one had ever believed such a remote port would be targeted. Yet word spread fast, and soon, more Federation units converged from neighboring bases, scrambling to retaliate.

Students were confined to the campus, told to shelter in the academy's underground bunkers. I tried to re-enter the dome, but it had already gone into emergency lockdown. Stunned, I just stood there, gazing up at the towering mechs marching nearby. Reinforcements arrived in droves, yet the rebels fired live rounds at the dome. Explosions tore it apart as missiles screamed in, though I couldn't tell whether they came from the rebels or the Federation. The old school building was quickly engulfed in flames.

I was horrified. Had my reckless wish been granted again? I felt crushing regret. Even the underground shelter, set a short distance from the school, had been struck. I heard screams from within. Some of my classmates and teachers might already be dead.

The ultimate tragedy of war is that innocent bystanders, who have nothing to do with the conflict, can die without ever having a choice. I felt guilty just for still being alive. I needed to help—anything to save a single precious life. So I dashed toward the inferno, only to watch in horror as a massive chunk of the school building collapsed with a deafening crash. Once more, I was confronted with my own helplessness.

Glancing at the ground, I spotted my missing goggles. Someone had hidden them, and that petty cruelty had fueled my anger. I regretted thinking, even for a moment, that everyone here should just disappear. Clutching the goggles in my hand, I ran across the battlefield.

The five rebel Mars Suits were moving in, firing as they approached. One disabled Mars Suit lay abandoned in my path. Likely it had taken too much damage, and the pilot had bailed. Perhaps I could find a weapon inside—some way to protect everyone at the academy. With that singular thought in mind, I pried open the cockpit hatch. The external lock was simple enough to override.

Inside, I found a young Federation soldier, wide-eyed with terror.

"I... I can't do this! It's impossible!"

He was shaking uncontrollably, face pale, uniform soaked in panic. He'd wet himself.

A quick glance at the console told me the suit still had power and functional weapons.

"I just... can't!" he stammered. "There's no way I can fight!"

"Can I take over?" I asked.

"Huh?"

I had never piloted a Mars Suit before, but there were no other options.

"Don't be ridiculous... A girl like you—"

"I'll be fine," I insisted. "Let me try."



Climbing in, I glanced at the soldier, who was half-scooting out of the cockpit.

"Anyway," he began, "this machine is bio-locked to me. You can't possibly—"

I quickly cleared the recorded data from the system.

"Now I can pilot it," I said.

Next, I took a microchip from my pen case and downloaded an Image Trace program. From a menu of potential "profiles," I selected Quatre Raberba Winner, ancient combat data stored in the Winner Hospital archives, which I had copied. If it was his data, I suspected flying a Mars Suit would be child's play.

"I'm moving out! Please stand back!"

With my goggles in place, I powered up the Mars Suit, feeling a rush of courage.

"Here I go!!"

My only aim was to keep the rebels away from the school. And indeed, Quatre's fighting style specialized in close combat, his spacing confounded the enemy. They hesitated for a critical instant, and I charged, dodging live rounds before drawing a beam saber in one swift motion. I ripped through the foe's bazooka-wielding Mars Suit, which erupted in a fireball. The pilot likely perished, but they had come to this battlefield ready to die, unlike my classmates.

"People who have more precious lives than mine... why do this?!"

Shouting, I whirled around to slash another Mars Suit that lunged at me from behind.

"If only you'd never started this war in the first place!"

Before I knew it, I held a beam saber in each hand, taking down three more Mars Suits at once. I was on autopilot, hardly able to breathe. Finally, I severed the Image Trace feed, plucked out the microchip, and lowered my goggles around my neck. My tears came, unbidden.

My chest, my heart, throbbed with pain, the anguish of knowing I had extinguished five lives. In that moment, I realized there was no returning to a normal existence. I couldn't go back to the academy, either. Eventually, Federation reinforcements arrived. But before they could catch me, I clambered out of the cockpit, darting away through the rubble. From the Federation's perspective, I was a criminal who had stolen and operated their Mars Suit. From the rebels' standpoint, I was the enemy who'd killed five of their comrades.

I felt no regret for my actions, but I knew I had to flee. Contradictory as it sounded, I had this overwhelming sense that I needed to stay alive—at least for the sake of those who had died. My mind threatened to break over and over, but I forced myself to keep running. I wanted to

see Iria, to bury myself in her arms, but I dreaded the trouble that might bring her. Part of me wanted to vanish somewhere, never to be found. Yet in the end, I decided I needed just one last visit.

When I finally reached home, Iria was there, along with two men, a silver-haired, middle-aged gentleman and a scholarly figure with long bangs.

"Welcome back," Iria said, greeting me as always.

"Ah," the silver-haired man said lightly, "so you must be Quaterine."

His voice was bright, cool, instantly revealing his identity as my brother, Quatre. I realized that my survival, my ability to pilot that Mars Suit, had all been thanks to his fighting style. At the same time, it was also Quatre's data that had enabled me to take five souls in an instant.

"Yes," he nodded thoughtfully. "You do resemble Mother a bit."

"Imagine, taking out five Mars Suits on your first battle," the academic added with a scoff, "you're quite the young lady."

"She'd fit in nicely with our group..."

I couldn't tell if he was mocking or praising me, but I kept my composure.

"It makes no difference to me," I said. "All I did was run an Image Trace."

"Even so," he replied, "you'd better quit playing with that toy. The more you rely on it, the more you'll lose any sense of resolve or responsibility."

"Resolve and responsibility..."

I suddenly resented my own excuses. I had wanted to protect everyone at the academy. I had wanted to end the war. At least, that was what I believed at the time.

"Quaterine," Quatre said gently, "are you living in a way that's true to yourself?"

"What about you, Brother?"

"I may spend my life searching for that answer until it kills me. But as long as I'm alive, I believe I'll find it someday."

Maybe that's all it boils down to. We don't need every conclusion immediately; it's the process that matters.

"Brother, will you...take me in?"

I didn't care if my life was treated like a mere commodity.

"If you don't mind someone like us..."

Out here, my life was as light as a feather. All I could do was devote it to ensuring greater happiness for others.

"Then...please, take me with you," I said.

That was the life I had been given.

"Welcome aboard," Quatre said. "They call me Professor W these days."

"And I'm Doktor... Doktor T, if you will."

"Take flight from the nest," Iria said, pressing a violin into my hands. "You're the only Quaterine Oud Winner in this whole wide world..."

And having no lofty "dignity" was, in its own way, my form of pride.

"If it ever becomes too hard," Iria whispered, tears sparkling in her eyes, "come home whenever you need."

She gifted me that tender, gentle farewell—even to someone like me—before I left our little birdhouse behind.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

I kept on "performing," my fingers flying across the piano-like controls. Even as I pounded out the notes, I lined up my sights on Trowa's pursuing hovercraft, then fired a large live-ammunition missile. The hovercraft—Ode Herman—sank beneath the desert sands. Yet something felt off.

"He got away..."

Deep down, I knew it wouldn't be that easy to bring down someone like Trowa Phobos. If anything, my attack must have been entirely within his calculations. Still, at least he wouldn't be mounting an immediate counterattack. My bigger concern right now was Snow White and the Warlock. The Maganac mobile doll squad had suffered severe losses.

"Not even ten minutes have passed...?"

I'd only just begun the second movement of my War Sonata, but already half the squad was out of commission.

"My estimates were too optimistic..."

They were displaying overwhelming skill, moments of lightning-quick brilliance slicing through a mobile doll before I could even register the flash of the beam. But I tried to quell my frustration. There was another angle to consider.

"Actually, holding out for nearly ten minutes is an achievement in itself."

Heero Yuy and Duo Maxwell. As expected, they couldn't be underestimated. If those two ever decided to work in tandem, no doubt I'd lose all ability to defend myself. I'd reviewed their old combat records before, chilling documents that showcased a flawless blend of offense and defense. Each supported the other, conserving ammo and energy, all while setting multiple backup plans for the finishing blow. I'd gotten the

impression they could synchronize like two parts of a single mind honed by the battlefield.

I was fortunate that the "Duo" I saw now wasn't the exact same "God of Death" from the old data. Still, tactics demanded that, when you have many units against a few, your best move is an encirclement strategy. Under normal doctrine, forty-to-two odds call for surrounding and annihilating the pair. Yet I'd deliberately chosen to split the force, pitting thirty-two against one and seven against the other.

The reason was simple: if Snow White and the Warlock were left fighting on the same field for too long, it was inevitable they'd begin to read each other's nuances. Soon enough, they'd coordinate their attacks. Based on their reputations, I had to assume that possibility from the start. Splitting my troops, even at a disadvantage, was my best chance to avoid letting them fuse their strengths.

Indeed, seven Maganac elites felt too few for someone like Heero Yuy; but given the Warlock's destructive power, the distribution still seemed right. My Mirror Trace Program allowed the mobile dolls to instantly mimic the Warlock's moves, inverting them to mount unpredictable counterattacks. Faced with that, you had to gamble on trading blows just to close in. Better yet, Mirror Trace helped avoid friendly-fire incidents, the Achilles' heel of mobile doll forces. It could also adapt to Duo's capricious style of combat.

In the crackling static over my comms, I heard Duo's agitated shout. "Hey! HEY! What the hell, man?! This isn't what we agreed on!"

Meanwhile, Snow White darted with mesmerizing grace, leaving a cloud of glittering pale-blue particles in its wake. It slipped through swarms of heat-seeking missiles as though they were child's play.

"We're supposed to split these forty Dolls evenly!" Duo yelled. "But I've already trashed twenty-seven!!"

Heero Yuy answered coolly.

"It's only been twenty-four."

"Tch! If you've got time to count kills, you could at least help me out!"

"Shut up. I'm busy."

I had no intention of giving Heero a moment's respite. The seven elite Maganac suits kept up wave after wave of missile volleys, circling Snow White in a chaotic dance, slowly tightening their formation to pin him down. They moved like seven dwarfs in a frantic reel around their pale, regal target.

But I let myself get distracted. Heero's piloting was so superb, I found myself momentarily captivated. Had I analyzed the data further, I would've realized at once that Heero Yuy and Snow White wouldn't make extraneous moves. By the time I noticed, it was already too late.



I had just finished playing the second movement of my war sonata, about to transition into the final movement, when—

Rashid froze. The virtual keyboard vanished from my display.

"!"

Simultaneously, every Maganac mobile doll ground to a halt. I needed just three minutes and thirty seconds more to conclude everything, but I wouldn't get it. And then, from outside, someone forcibly pried open the cockpit hatch. The same method I once used to board a Mars Suit was now used against me. Even though I'd increased security a hundredfold since then, I supposed a former terrorist would know how to bypass it.

Standing there with a pistol was Phobos, his gaze as cold as ever. Behind the scenes, he and Heero Yuy had executed a brilliant bit of coordination: while Heero flashed his "Snow White" across the battlefield, Trowa slipped under the radar to disable my system.

He spoke in that sober tone, half-joking but wholly serious:

"Playtime's over."

He looked exactly as he had the first time we met, not a shred of warmth in his eyes. I glared back from beneath my goggles.

"Hold your applause..." I murmured. "There's still a third movement left to play."

MC-0022 FIRST SPRING

Around a year had passed since I found shelter in the circus tent at Chryse, when we took in a new companion, a boy called "No Name." His eyes held a certain sorrow, a coldness that suggested he'd given up on the world. Something about him reminded me of myself.

I let him hear my signature piece: Scheherazade. When Doktor T offered him a "home to return to," he chose what we called a "third way."

Then, "No Name" picked up my violin and played a piece titled Endless Waltz. For some reason, it soothed that deep loneliness I'd always carried.

His gypsy-style performance was funky yet brimming with a peculiar melancholy and nostalgia, it felt both exuberant and wistful at once. Being around him made me feel as though we shared the same cruel fate. In that sense, my loneliness faded.

But I doubted he felt anything similar toward me. It was all my own one-sided infatuation. If possible, I would have stayed with him forever. Yet before I knew it, he'd set off for the Earth Sphere alongside Catherine.

We'd only just met, and already he was gone.

It was as if a hole had opened in my heart, letting a chilly wind blow right through. In spite of the fact that I had improved at Scheherazade more than ever...

Some time later, I received a call from Iria, a dear, familiar voice from my past.

"Quaterine, I have a favor to ask..."

I was bored, having finished all my assigned tasks, so I asked permission from Professor W and Doktor T, then went straight to Winner Hospital. There, Iria told me she wanted me to help Ms. Marlene Darlian meet with her daughter "Relena."

"So... Relena Darlian!"

At last, I realized: that Relena Darlian, hero of Mars's terraforming efforts, was Mrs. Darlian's daughter. Perhaps I should've guessed sooner, but it never occurred to me that Relena's mother, who had once been in cryo-sleep, could still be alive. Nor had I imagined she might awaken again.

"Are you doing well, Relena?"

Mrs. Darlian still insisted on calling me by that name.

"I'm Quaterine, you know... Mrs. Darlian..."

"I'm afraid my legs and back have gotten terribly weak..."

She now relied on a wheelchair for mobility. Apart from that, she remained as elegant a lady as ever. Iria said Mrs. Darlian had little hope of ever walking again, her long hospitalization and Mars's gravity had left her muscles and bones too frail.

When a masked figure called "Relena" ran for President of the Martian Federation, everyone, not just me, was suspicious. But during her campaign, she made one promise: "If I win... I'll remove the mask." Hearing that, I began to suspect it might really be her. And sure enough, once she revealed her face, it was identical to the Relena I had seen in old records. Even so, there were still doubts: she could have undergone plastic surgery, or perhaps she was a clone.

Yet I figured Mrs. Darlian, of all people, would know the truth. Even if Mrs. Darlian, like she had with me, saw only what she wanted, a true imposter would betray herself with some hint of unease.

So I brought Mrs. Darlian to Relena City, the capital of the Martian Federation. That day, celebrations for the new president's inauguration filled the streets. Mrs. Darlian and I took up a spot along the parade

route, calmly watching the presidential limousine pass. Then, several meters ahead of us, the limo came to an abrupt halt.

"Mother!"

Breaking free from her security detail, President Relena, girlish face and all, rushed toward us at a run.

"Mother! It's me, Relena!"

In that instant, a miracle unfolded before my eyes.

"Relena!"

Mrs. Darlian stood up from her wheelchair. Mother and daughter, separated for decades, embraced each other in tears.

"I'm sorry, Relena... I know you've suffered on my account."

"No, Mother... I'm just so grateful we can be together again."

All I could do was watch in a daze. Yet the pure emotion and tears they shared told me this was undeniably the real Marlene Darlian and Relena Darlian. At that moment, I felt something awaken in me—an old memory of Iria hugging me in just that same way. A memory of what it felt like to be loved...to love someone else. I had almost forgotten. Just witnessing the two Dorians reminded me how precious that was, and I silently thanked them for it.

That night, I was invited to the presidential residence. The leading figure of Mars treated me to a supper so homely and modest it was surprising for someone in such a high position.

"Thank you for bringing Mother here... I'm in your debt."

"I should be the one thanking you," I replied.

Around the table, alongside Mrs. Darlian, sat a pair of siblings slightly older than I was.

They were introduced as Relena's niece and nephew, fraternal twins, a young woman with gorgeous, flowing blonde hair named Naina Peacecraft, and her quiet, dark-haired brother named Mille Peacecraft.

Naina fixed me with a piercing look.

"Quaterine Oud Winner... Daughter of a prominent family, yet it seems you've been crossing some rather dangerous bridges."

It appeared they had researched me quite thoroughly.

"As far as I'm concerned," I said with a shrug, "all I've done is a bit of volunteer work..."

At that, Mille began to chuckle.

"And about these 'dangerous bridges'... If we're talking about risk, surely President Relena's total pacifism is far more daring, isn't it?"

Mille let out an involuntary snort, struggling not to laugh outright.

"Mille! This is no laughing matter," Naina admonished, scowling at her brother.

"That remark can't go unanswered," she continued, turning back to me. "To compare Relena's noble ideals to acts of terror..."

"Naina," President Relena interjected with a serene smile, "Quaterine's observations are valid, and I'd like to hear them."

So I voiced my opinion freely.

"If the Martian Federation truly aims for pacifism, then it needs the unwavering support of the Earth Sphere Unified Nation!"

"That is impossible," she said plainly. "Mars declared independence from the Earth Sphere, remember. We cannot forget that."

"But maintaining peace—"

"Means you think we need some secret group like the Preventers to put out every new fire, is that it?" Naina cut in. "But is that really a perfect peace?"

Relena sighed deeply, her eyes glistening.

"I suspect old friends of mine are still carrying on that kind of work even now. Years ago, they used to say things like, 'Our lives are cheap,' or 'We're the ones who belong in the gutter of war...'"

Her voice trembled.

"But what of their happiness? Doesn't living in such a shadowy world bring them constant pain? If we're talking about genuine, lasting peace, it can't truly exist as long as people like them must sacrifice everything from the darkness."

From a moral standpoint, sacrificing a few so that many can thrive isn't necessarily wrong—but those few must consent to it.

"I'm fine with it," I murmured. "If everyone else can be happy, it doesn't matter what becomes of me..."

Refusing to hold a lofty sense of "dignity," that was my pride.

"Come into the light, Quaterine," Relena said gently. "Is there really such a gulf between you and me? You don't have to endure this hardship anymore..."

"But I..."

Words caught in my throat. Just then, Mille drifted toward me, resting his hands lightly on my cheeks with an angelic smile.

"Eh?"

I was sure my face was burning red. Mille removed my glasses.

"See? I thought so..."

He gazed into my eyes.

"They're more beautiful than the Earth itself."



Then he placed my violin in my hands. He didn't say another word, naturally taciturn, perhaps. Flustered, but also buoyed by something I couldn't name, I started to play. I improvised a version of Ave Maria.

Mille, in turn, lifted a flute to his lips, matching my melody—tentative at first, but growing bolder by the bar. I looked at him, saw that gentle, unwavering smile. His gaze shone with warmth. Though he seldom spoke, Mille's flute was eloquent, brimming with color. It pressed forward, urging me to follow. I did my best to keep up, my heart pounding, every breath weighed with adrenaline.

Then, as the music dipped into a minor key, I felt something tender and enveloping, as if an invisible voice whispered, "Come along now. It's all right." At last, I caught up to him—so he deliberately slowed the pace, encouraging me to take the lead, as if to say, "Now you go first."

Mustering all my courage, I took up the main melody. It felt like dancing naked in front of an audience, but I could sense my own excitement surging, a newfound freedom in playing with everything I had. At some point, Mille lowered his flute and simply listened, smiling broadly as I carried on alone. I wove bits of Scheherazade and gypsy scales into my improvised line—no trace of embarrassment left. It was more like a musical self-introduction: This is me.

Then I handed the melody back to him with a nod and a glance that said, "Your turn." He responded with "Leave it to me," and dove into a fourteen-bar solo. Such a clear, resonant sound—especially in the upper register, luminous and pure, reflecting his kindhearted nature. As he built toward a crescendo, he looked at me, an unspoken invitation: "Here's the climax, join me!"

I slid into his melody with a minor harmony, and he winked impishly. Now it was his turn to carry the minor lines while I soared with the main tune. Our tempo shot up, doubling, tripling, but we never stumbled. Repeating that exchange again and again, we spiraled upward in a wild, floating swirl of sound until we both broke into a cresting peak.

At that instant, Mille deliberately slowed to a gentle pace, letting the theme of Ave Maria fade into the air. A wave of lightheaded fatigue washed over me, a mild dizziness after an intense surge of euphoria. Relena, Naina, and Mrs. Darlian applauded through tears. Mille joined in, clapping, too.

I blushed all over again. He extended his hand, and I shook it. His palm was so warm. Looking back, that duet was the greatest performance of my life.

A dreamy night, one I wished would never end.

MC-0022 NEXT WINTER

The time had nearly come for me to play the final movement of the War Sonata. Escaping the pistol Trowa Phobos had aimed at me would be nearly impossible, I knew that. So, I decided to resort to a slightly underhanded tactic. He would have prepared and simulated an endless array of future possibilities; unless I surpassed his predictions, I would never get through this crisis alive.

"Hey, Phobos... Doktor T once said that I'm not as gentle as I look."

"Don't move. And don't say another word."

I glanced down at the watch face inside my left wrist. I only had thirty seconds before it happened.

"Raise both hands," he barked.

I obeyed. Then came the next orders in rapid succession:

"Get out of the cockpit."

All the while, I was speeding up my heart rate of my own will. The watch on my arm was set to respond to my pulse. Twenty seconds passed. Suddenly, my watch emitted a brilliant flash of light. Sure enough, even Phobos shut his eyes against the dazzling glare.

"...?!"

I hit the self-destruct switch, then flung myself at Phobos and pushed him off the cockpit ledge.

"That hat really did look good on you!"

I whispered these words as I pressed my lips to his, a kiss. My very first, at that. Phobos's eyes went wide, completely stunned.

"!! ...? ...?!"

I could only guess I'd outrun every scenario in his head. No sooner had we landed in the desert sands below than Rashid detonated in a fiery blast above us.

"Sorry, Uncle Rashid..."

Taking advantage of the explosion, I jumped onto a half-ruined hovercraft nearby. Inside its storage bay lay the unfinished Prometheus. The moment of our rendezvous had arrived exactly on schedule. High overhead, a large high-speed transport craft swooped in, plucking me and the hovercraft, Prometheus and all, out of the desert.

Naina and Mille awaited me in its cockpit. Mille wore his usual gentle smile, while Naina's expression was colder than ever.

"I'd like an encore," she said.

"Understood," I replied.

A virtual keyboard, my piano keys, was already set up. I launched into the third movement of the War Sonata. That final three minutes and thirty seconds of conflict began. The remaining Maganac mobile dolls

turned once again on Snow White and the Warlock, buying us the time we needed to make our escape.

"Looks like they got away clean," I heard Duo's voice over the crackling comm.

"My planning was too naive..." Heero's terse reply.

I realized I had severed my ties with my family.

"Goodbye, everyone..."

Farewell, Quatre. Farewell, Iria.

"And I'm sorry..."

At the same time, I decided I ought to apologize to Mille.

"Forgive me, Mille."

He cocked his head, puzzled.

"...?"

"Why apologize to Mille?" Naina asked.

I couldn't answer that here, not about how my first kiss hadn't been with him.

"Oh, did I mix things up?" I said, trying to laugh it off.

Still, I had made a vow: I would help perfect Relena's ideal of total pacifism, no matter what it took.

To be continued in Volume.04!

After Colony Timeline

AC-0001

After Colony calendar established. Colony construction begins.

AC-102

Humanity's first space colonies, the L-1 Colony cluster, completed.

※During the AC-100s, DNA manipulation enables space births, giving rise to the first generation of colony-born humans.

AC-133

United Earth Sphere Alliance formed to resolve Earth-Colony conflicts.
Alliance military established.

AC-139

A self-governing colonial body is established.

AC-145

Earth diplomatic delegation attacked by unknown forces in L-1 Colony sector.

AC-147

Terrorist activities emerge among some colony residents. Alliance dispatches military to colonies.

AC-149

Second Immigration Era begins. Mass influx of workers to colonies.

AC-150

Birth of Treize's father, Ein Yuy, nephew of colony leader Heero Yuy.

AC-152

Birth of Treize's mother, Angelina Khushrenada.

AC-165

Colony leader Heero Yuy emerges. Inter-colony solidarity strengthens.

AC-170

※Ein and Angelina fall in love. In the AC 170s, Zayed Winner fathers 29 daughters through test-tube births. These girls, modified through DNA manipulation for space reproduction, become the first generation of their kind in the Winner family.

AC-171 AUTUMN

Birth of Treize Khushrenada.

AC-172

Death of Treize's grandfather, Duke Cinquant Khushrenada, Romefeller Foundation representative. Dermail Catalonia becomes acting representative.

AC-173

Colony leader Heero Yuy declares colonial independence through non-violence and disarmament. Implementation set for 2 years later. Known as the "Declaration of the Heart of Space."

Birth of Treize's brother, Vingt Khushrenada.

Romefeller Foundation begins mobile suit development.

AC-174

Alliance Space Forces begin construction of fortress Barge. All costs forced upon colony residents, further fueling resentment.

AC-175.04.07

Colony leader Heero Yuy assassinated by Alliance Special Operations sniper Odin Lowe, member of OZ's predecessor organization. Ein Yuy, Treize's father, dies in simultaneous terrorist bombing.

Five scientists developing the mobile suit Tallgeese escape. Tallgeese development suspended.

AC-176

Following leader Heero Yuy's death, armed uprisings proliferate across colonies. Alliance re-deploys military to colonies.

AC-176.08

Early ground combat mobile suit Leo rolls out. Development of Tragos mobile suit for mid-range support and indirect attacks begins.

Birth of Milliardo Peacecraft.

AC-177

Aerial combat mobile suit Aries rolls out.

AC-180

Sanc Kingdom's King Peacecraft advocates "total pacifism."

Birth of Quatre Raberba Winner. His mother Quaterine dies immediately after childbirth.

Birth of Relena Peacecraft.

Birth of Dorothy Catalonia.

AC-182

Sanc Kingdom falls to attack led by Alliance General Daigo Onegell. Milliardo and Relena's whereabouts unknown.

AC-183

Treize, age 11, enters Alliance Military Academy.

AC-185 AUTUMN

Treize becomes first instructor at OZ Officer Training School at Lake Victoria Base in central Africa.

AC-186

Rebellion erupts in Mogadishu, Africa. OZ mobile suit units under Treize see first combat deployment. Five officer candidates selected for combat, including Zechs and Noin.

Treize's brother Vingt becomes Vice Director of Romefeller Foundation, becoming its de facto leader.

First Lunar War, also known as Ocean of Storms Wars, sees major mobile suit battle.

80 anti-Alliance mobile suits versus 45 OZ mobile suits. OZ achieves victory through advanced Leo IV (Greif) units.

Two days after battle ends, transport carrying 25 Greif units disappears with candidates Zechs Merquise and Elve Onegell during transport to fortress Barge.

AC-186.10.26

Space fortress Barge completed. Anti-Alliance forces attack with 25 stolen Leo IV (Schwarz Greif) units. Treize's OZ Specials successfully repel rebellion.

AC-187

Treize's brother and Romefeller Foundation's de facto leader Vingt Khushrenada dies in bombing. Mother Angelina Yuy also dies.

Orphaned Duo (age 7) placed at Maxwell Church in L-2 Colony cluster V08744.

AC-188

Anti-Alliance coup occurs in Colony V08744. Coup forces occupy Maxwell Church. Over 240 casualties. Later known as the Maxwell Church Massacre.

Boy called Odin Lowe Jr. meets Doctor J in Colony X18999. Later given codename "Heero Yuy."

AC-189

Birth of Treize's daughter, Mariemaia.

Death of Treize's wife and Mariemaia's mother, Leia Barton.

AC-191

Relena, age 11, meets young Zechs (Milliardo) as Vice Foreign Minister Darlian's daughter.

AC-192

Peacemillion-class space battleship completed.

Duo Maxwell begins working with Professor G and Sweeper Group.

AC-193

Treize Khushrenada becomes OZ Supreme Commander.

Quatre flees from father, meets Rashid and Maganac Corps during escape.

AC-194

Boy called Odin Lowe Jr. bombs Alliance military training facility in L-1 Colony cluster. Destroyed Leo damages civilian facilities.

AC-195.04.07

Operation Meteor initiated by colony residents.

First battle between Heero and Zechs. Wing Gundam plunges into ocean.

Heero meets Relena.

Five Gundams confirmed.

AC-195.04.08

Duo recovers submerged Wing Gundam.

Vice Foreign Minister Darlian assassinated by OZ's Lady Une.

Through Treize's strategy, Alliance military peace faction leaders including General Noventa eliminated by Wing Gundam at New Edwards Base.

AC-195.05.20

Operation Daybreak launched.

OZ begins dismantling United Earth Sphere Alliance. Romefeller Foundation takes control of Earth.

Wing Gundam self-destructs with colonies held hostage.

Zechs Merquise and Heero Yuy clash in Antarctica.

Zechs Merquise scheduled for public execution for military violations, goes missing.

Lady Une begins diplomatic mission to win over colonies.

Operation Nova implemented.

Mass deployment of lunar-produced mobile dolls to Earth. Combat intensifies between OZ Treize faction and Foundation faction.

Gundam Sandrock self-destructs at Singapore base.

Four Gundams launch into space.

Civil unrest at Winner family resource satellite. Winner family head Zayeed dies.

Quatre constructs Wing Gundam Zero, prototype for all Gundams. Begins colony attacks.

Treize opposes mobile doll deployment in warfare, loses power.

Internal conflict escalates between reborn OZ centered on Duke Dermail and Treize faction.

Relena revives Sanc Kingdom.

Heero receives Gundam Epyon from imprisoned Treize.

OZ mobile doll forces operation to subjugate Sanc Kingdom.

Sanc Kingdom falls.

Relena becomes Romefeller Foundation representative. Declares formation of unified World Nation.

Appearance of Queen Relena.

Artemis Revolution implemented.

White Fang rises. Milliardo Peacecraft (Zechs Merquise) assumes leadership of White Fang.

Battleship Libra captured by White Fang.

Milliardo declares war on Earth.

AC-195.11

Remaining Romefeller Foundation officials barricade themselves in space fortress Barge.

White Fang commander Milliardo Peacecraft captures it with single Gundam Epyon.

Treize stages coup, returns as OZ Supreme Commander.

Relena removed as Romefeller Foundation representative.

AC-195.12.24

All-out clash between Treize's World Nation Forces and Milliardo's colonial revolutionary army White Fang. Later named EVE WARS.

Treize dies in duel with Wufei. Age 24.

Libra battleship debris threatens Earth, prevented by Heero's actions.

Ceasefire agreement signed between Lady Une (replacing Treize) and White Fang. EVE WARS end.

Earth Sphere Unified Nation established.

AC-196

VIP terrorist incidents by former White Fang faction. Parallel Gundam theft operations conducted.

Vulkanus Incident occurs over automated mobile doll production satellite Vulkanus.

Preventer agent Sally Po discovers synthetic metal neo-titanium drifting in space.

Quatre sends Wing Gundam Zero, Gundam Deathscythe Hell, Gundam Heavyarms Custom, and Gundam Sandrock Custom toward the sun aboard a resource satellite for disposal.

AC-196.12.24

Vice Foreign Minister Relena Darlian kidnapped at L-3 Colony cluster X18999.

Quatre, learning of the Mariemaia Army movements, heads to recover the four Gundams.

AC-196.12.25

Mariemaia Khushrenada declares L-3 Colony cluster X18999's independence from Earth Sphere Unified Nation. Simultaneously declares war.

Mariemaia Army's Dekim Barton implements plan to drop L-3 Colony cluster X18999 on Earth, the true goal of Operation Meteor. Prevented by actions of Heero, Duo, and Trowa.

Mariemaia Army deploys 470 Serpent mobile suits to Earth.

AC-196.12.26

Presidential mansion in Brussels, Europe captured.

Heero's Wing Gundam and Wufei's Altron Gundam clash in geosynchronous orbit.

Preventers and Duo, Trowa, Quatre begin resistance against Mariemaia Army.

Successfully suppressed.

Mariemaia Army mastermind Dekim Barton dies. War ends.

MC-0022

Heero Yuy awakens from cryogenic hibernation.

Afterword

There's a scene where Catherine encounters Trowa Barton for the first time and whispers, "mysterious kid..."

(Episode 2, beginning of the B-part in New Mobile Report Gundam W)

At the recording session for that scene, Saori Suzuki (now known as Saori Sugimoto, who, I'm told, is active in various fields these days) struggled mightily with this single line of dialogue as she voiced Catherine. It took multiple retakes, well into double digits, if my memory serves. The footage they were dubbing from wasn't complete yet (it was a "rough cut," basically storyboards on film), so Trowa and the circus ringmaster are having a conversation in the distance, while Catherine looks on and murmurs to herself. But she couldn't grasp why Catherine was saying that. Consequently, her performance ended up sounding "acted," instead of truly felt.

Of course, that wasn't the actor's fault. There was simply no strong reason for Catherine to say such a thing, so playing that line convincingly was, by nature, extraordinarily hard. It's much the same for lines like "The heart of the cosmos tells us" or "Then... does that mean Heero is the Little Prince?" Without clear backstory or fully established character motivations, these performers were asked to deliver dialogue that people "living in that world" might say, but with minimal clues to guide them. It's not in the natural flow that follows a line like, "Beasts only bare their fangs at enemies. They're true to their feelings."

If we imagine this as a typical anime scene, minus the image of Trowa in our minds, Catherine would likely think something more direct, like "He's so reckless," or "How can he be so calm?" That kind of immediate surprise or curiosity. But in our show, Gundam W, we don't do the "typical" thing. Cue the sighing of, "Oh dear..."

Catherine just stands there, quietly watching. Instead of responding with the ringmaster's sort of ordinary reaction, she picks up on Trowa's curious aura at an entirely different angle. Hence, "mysterious kid."

Analyzing the scene from a more objective standpoint, if I can set aside my involvement, it's an interesting piece of storytelling. Three people are present, each holding a unique perspective, which brings out color and depth in the characters. Catherine's first impression of Trowa becomes more striking, carrying a kind of mysterious attraction.

In practice, though, it wasn't just "mysterious" but downright "incomprehensible." I could feel this frustration from Director Ikeda as he tried, unsuccessfully, to give a clear directive.

By the way, when the script was drafted, Catherine wasn't even in it yet, she finally appears in Episode 6. Meaning that line in Episode 2 was lifted from what was originally in Episode 6. Naturally, then, the motivation behind the line becomes weaker, creating that "mystery." It's no wonder it didn't line up.

Meanwhile, Murase (Shukou Murase) had already finalized Catherine's design, and Director Ikeda gave it immediate approval. It's bright without being bubbly, young yet somehow nurturing, a calmness, but not quite enlightened, and bursting with vitality tinged by some lingering sorrow. In short, that vibe was there in the design, and now the director wanted to find the unspoken "something" behind her words.

I did my best, brainstorming possible hints, like "It's more that she thinks he's... unusual," but that's about all I could offer. In the beginning, Suzuki tried delivering that sentiment in her performance, but Director Ikeda and Sound Director Uragami kept saying no.

It's true that if you hit a wall in someone's performance, if you just give up, that's a kind of creative dead end. The character stalls out right there. The directors refused to compromise; they wanted that next step, the extra layer.

Eventually, at some point, Uragami gave this instruction: "Try sounding more like a big sister."

Voice actors' imaginations can sometimes soar beyond anything we anticipate. In the end, Suzuki arrived at a unique reading: a line that said, in effect, "I already know him... somehow... but why?"

All at once, Catherine's presence just lit up. It was like a miraculous leap. "Mysterious kid" wasn't because Trowa could magically tame wild animals.

No, Catherine's "mysterious" meant, "I've known someone who could do that sort of thing, maybe a long time ago. Trowa reminds me of that person... He's... such a mysterious kid..."

The directors seized on that interpretation. It's the version we see in the finished broadcast, which we can now revisit on DVD.

At the script stage, Catherine Bloom was probably meant just as a minor element (she didn't even exist in the proposal stage), but with that subtle (yet colossal) line, she transformed into a pivotal character in Gundam W.

We might even say Catherine's hidden possibilities (how far she might go in the story) were there from the moment she debuted in Episode 2.

"Catherine, Quaterine, Kathryn, Cathy, they're all the same name, actually," an editor from Kadokawa pointed out to me. I said, "No worries," flashing a grin. The same person asked, "If you introduce a mobile suit now, won't that conflict with Endless Waltz?" and I said, "Oh, I think we'll manage somehow."

Some of you readers, based on the survey postcards we received, also seem concerned about such issues. I understand, you're worried.

I can't reveal everything here, so please bear with me. But let me ask you to imagine how we got from that one line, brought to life by Suzuki's leap of inspiration, through to Episode 13's "Catherine's Tears," and on to the present.

For Trowa Phobos to grow, we needed that beautiful Catherine who appears in Volume 3.

Perhaps it wasn't simply that Quatre's much-younger sister inherited their mother Quaterine's name.

One reader sent me a letter with massive lettering that said, "Sumizawa... I believe in you." It was so giant, it evoked that final shooting scene from Endless Waltz, reminiscent of Relena's unwavering plea to Wing Zero with its buster rifle: "Don't hesitate!"

Seeing that someone out there trusts a hopeless drunk like me so wholeheartedly, I'm determined to give this story everything I've got.

I'm a far cry from the brilliance of Director Ikeda or Murase. I'm well aware of my limitations as a writer. But Asagi Sakura's illustrations masterfully capture the spirit of Murase's designs, and Hajime Katoki's new Gundam designs fit right into the world of Wing.

The Frozen Teardrop staff is top-notch, the absolute best.

If there's a weak link, it's probably just me (cries). My writing is clumsy, I'm sorry. Volumes 1 and 2 must have been challenging to get through, so I'm grateful you stuck with it. Maybe, thanks to that, both the content and wording here in Volume 3 have improved, or so I hope (it's not really my place to say, though).

Still, with such supportive fans and an incredible staff, even if we know we're "bound to lose," we must push onward! I'm steeling myself in that spirit.

I've been floored by how huge and positive the reactions from readers have been. I'm overjoyed, so much that I don't have the right words to express my gratitude. I wanted to respond personally to everyone, but then I wouldn't finish Frozen Teardrop on time, so please accept my thanks here:

Sincere thanks to you all.

I hope you'll keep following the series. And if you'll indulge me again in Volume 4, I'd be most grateful.

Mobile Suit Gundam Wing: Frozen Teardrop

Vol.03 Requiem for a Perpetual Chain (Part.01)

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]
Misaki Morie [Sunrise]
Tetsuko Takahashi [Sunrise]

Advertising Support: Bandai Hobby Division

Supervisor: Hideyuki Tomioka

Cover Design: Hajime Katoki

Text Design: Atsushi Doi [Tendo noPolicy]

Battlefield Map: Hirofumi Yagi [Asahi Production]

Editing: Kadokawa Shoten
Tsuyoshi Ishiwaki
Tomohiro Zaizen
Shunsuke Omori
Yasue Nagashima
Miwa Matsumoto