Mobile Suit Gundam / The Witch from Mercury

**CRADLE PLANET**

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The orbital base PebiColombo 23 rotates around Mercury with a fine balance, despite the instability caused by the sun's gravity.  
  
Because Mercury is only 57,910,000 kilometers from the sun, direct contact with the planet's heat would instantly boil human blood .   
But on other hand, when you enter the planet's shadow, the extreme cold drops below minus 100 degrees. There's no way that humans could live on Mercury.  
  
The powerful charged particles that come flying from the sun cause intermittent system malfunctions. These solar winds are deadly on this planet, where the slightest error can result in death.  
  
A buzzing sound rings out, and the hangar lights turn dark red.  
A solar flare has occurred, causing the alarm to go off and switching the entire base to emergency mode.  
  
Suletta makes her way through the pitch-dark base. Still only six years old, Suletta is afraid of the dark red lights.  
  
At times like this, Suletta often climbs inside me.  
  
"Aerial, will you let me in?"  
  
Aerial.  
That's my name.  
It's a secret to the outside world, but I'm a Gundam-type mobile suit.  
  
Suletta comes to me when Mom is busy with work. At present, there are no other children at Mercury, and so I'm the only friend she has.  
  
"Aerial, call up a game."  
She works the controls on my console and brings up a game screen.  
I wonder what she wants to play today.  
"A shooting game! I'm going to beat Mom today."  
  
Suletta's mother is my developer, as well as a Gundam test pilot. Mom and Suletta are both great at these kinds of games.  
  
Wasn't Suletta about four years old when she chose this game for the first time?  
  
Two years have passed since then, and Suletta is the best player at Mercury--except for Mom, of course.  
  
Whoa, she's getting a terrific score. It looks like she's gotten even better.  
  
"Look, Aerial, look!"  
  
Ah, a high score. She's jumping up and down happily in her seat.  
That's my Suletta. My little pilot.

#

One day Suletta, who is now nine, comes to me in tears.  
She says one of Mercury's elders has been mean to her.  
But she hasn't told Mom. Why not?  
  
"Because she'll worry."  
  
Mom came to this planet with her daughter, seeking refuge.  
People had hidden them, but that didn't mean everyone had been friendly, and some elders had argued for expelling them to avoid trouble.  
  
Still, this was the only place that they could go.  
They had to live here. There was no other choice.  
  
"Hey, Aerial?"  
  
Yeah?  
  
"What's Earth like?"  
  
Suletta had been too young to remember living anywhere but Mercury.   
  
So she's very curious about life in the Earth Sphere that she's seen in my library.  
Schools, cities, friends, children--people take those things for granted in the Earth Sphere, but here, they're nonexistent.  
  
All you have here are days spent mining for resources while dreading the solar winds. Living like that, it's no wonder Mercury's elders are cranky.  
  
I bring up a menu to see if Suletta wants to watch something in my library. She chooses her favorite anime.  
Anime, movies, novels--everything in my library is set in the Earth Sphere. I think watching them lets Suletta forget about Mercury for a while.  
  
Thirty minutes later...  
  
Suletta finishes watching her favorite anime, and quietly mutters to herself:  
"If you run, gain one. Move forward, gain two."  
Mom taught her these words.  
  
Suletta had been five at the time, trying to get away as Mom was about to give her an injection.  
  
"Listen, Suletta. If you run away, you won't have to get this shot, right?"  
  
"Right."  
  
"You'll gain the avoidance of pain."  
  
"Yeah."  
  
"What'll happen if I do give you this shot?"  
  
"I won't get sick."  
  
"Right. What else?"  
  
"What else?"  
  
"There are other things you'll gain if you don't run. For example, you'll make your mother happy."  
  
"Hmm."  
  
"You'll impress the people of Mercury. They'll accept you, thinking you're amazing."  
  
"They will?"  
  
"You'll level up, and shots won't hurt you anymore."  
  
"Really?!"  
  
"Really. That's why grownups aren't afraid of getting shots."  
  
"They aren't?"  
  
"No. So, you see, you'll gain a lot if you don't run."  
  
"So if I move forward, I gain two?"  
  
"That's right. More than two."  
  
Since that day, those words have become a magical charm to push Suletta forward.  
Those words must have had the same effect on Mom. They were her own spell, for a single woman who had to struggle here at Mercury while caring for her young daughter.  
  
"If you run, gain one. Move forward, gain two."  
Suletta repeats the words in a soft voice, as if trying to untangle a mess of knotted threads.  
  
I wait for the spell to take effect. That's when Suletta's entire being will brim with courage and break the curse of fear.  
It's okay. She'll be able to step out of me on her own--because Mom's words are powerful.

#

"Attention! Aerial, prepare to scramble. An incident has occurred near Chao Meng-Fu Mining Base on Mercury's surface," a tense voice announces in the hangar.  
A mobile craft has gone missing while mining for resources.   
  
"Sorry I'm late!"  
  
Suletta, who is now eleven, jumps into my cockpit.   
  
"Solar light active. High-energy proton phenomena observed, but no surface landing issues. Hurry!"  
  
Mercury is still a very dangerous place for humanity to live.  
That's why we're sent out whenever an incident occurs. After all, we're the best team at Mercury.  
We've saved the lives of elders many times.  
That's why more and more people are grateful to Mom and Suletta, and fewer elders treat them as aggressively as they used to.  
  
"No objects along descent course. Launch permission granted."  
  
"Roger. Aerial, switch to surface descent maneuvers immediately after launch."  
  
We fly out of the gate and into space.  
The heat of the scorching sun hits us immediately.  
Suletta quickly leaps into the shadows of a crater. Now we can avoid direct sunlight.  
Proceeding through the craters' shadows, we rush to the scene of the accident.  
  
"How long since we lost the signal?"  
  
"97 minutes. We don't know the current location since we can't receive a signal. Please hurry, Suletta," pleads operations controller Melissa Peluda.  
The missing person is Ergo Peluda, Melissa's husband.  
  
Ergo's the leader of the elders who are still mistreating Suletta.  
He was originally against the idea of taking them in, and now he's working under Mom after her recent promotion. I can understand his situation, but it's no reason to be mean to Suletta. What a childish old man.  
  
But Suletta promptly replies,   
"It's okay, Ms. Melissa. Leave it to us."  
She's a good girl.  
  
We avoid sunlight as we head toward the scene.  
Mountains, valleys, canyons--Suletta knows how to use all the features of Mercury's terrain to take the shortest path, and which routes put the least strain on a mobile suit.  
  
We've detected a signal.  
I display the signal data on my monitor.  
  
"We've found him. Now proceeding with recovery."  
  
"Please, Suletta!"  
  
In response to Melissa's request, we leap out of a rift in the ground surface.  
  
The sun's heat suddenly hits us, along with its high-energy particle emissions. Even I'll be in trouble if this keeps up.  
  
Suletta looks around calmly and finds the mobile craft right away. It looks like there was a cave-in during excavation work.  
  
"The machine is a write-off."  
  
The mobile craft is buried in a sediment collapse. Our only option is to pry open the cockpit door and rescue the pilot.  
  
Suletta draws her beam saber.  
  
"Aerial, I'm adjusting the output."  
  
She turns down the output. One mistake, and she'll cut through the pilot as well.  
  
Ever so gingerly, the beam saber makes contact with the craft.  
Suletta carefully cuts through the cockpit section, wielding her beam saber as precisely as a surgeon.  
The base controller doesn't say anything. She knows it's better to leave things to Suletta rather than giving her clumsy instructions.  
  
"Mr. Ergo? Can you hear me? I've come to help you."  
  
"Suletta! What took you? Hurry up and get me out of here."  
He's being arrogant despite his current position.  
But that doesn't seem to bother Suletta, who gently pulls Ergo out of the mobile craft.   
  
"Mr. Ergo, do you have any air?"  
  
"My spares were crushed in the accident. I only have seven minutes left. I'm going to die."  
  
"It's okay. We'll be home in four minutes."  
  
"Don't lie to me. Don't you realize how far we are from base?"  
  
She isn't lying. If Suletta says we'll be back in four, we'll be back in four.  
  
"Please keep your eyes closed."  
  
Holding Ergo so he won't be exposed to the sun, I take a giant leap. I can see there's nothing wrong with his space suit. It should last another four minutes.  
  
We weave our way through the rifts in the ground surface.  
I can hear Ergo screaming.  
Suletta is perfectly calm, but it's a speed that would terrify the average person.  
  
Nonetheless, Ergo's screaming means he hasn't run out of air, so at least it confirms he's still alive.  
  
Suletta uses her beam rifle to take a shot at a cliff.   
It breaks apart, and another rift appears behind it. It's a shortcut.  
  
The gate of Chao Meng-Fu Mining Base comes into view, and slowly opens to let us in.  
  
We leap through. It takes us exactly four minutes to pass through three airtight doors into the residential area--just as Suletta said.  
  
Everyone in the base is waiting inside the gate to the residential area.  
After confirming that Ergo still has air, Suletta puts him down.   
  
Ergo takes off his helmet and explodes at her. He's a lively old man.   
"How irresponsible! Treating an elder so roughly! You couldn't care less if I died, could you?"  
  
Then Melissa runs to him and takes him into her arms.  
"Welcome back, Ergo."  
  
The old man becomes quiet as his wife embraces him.  
  
"Yeah. I'm home."  
  
An air of relief is evident among the people who have gathered to meet him.  
  
"Welcome home, Suletta."  
Mom appears on my monitor.  
  
"Mom! I didn't know you were back!"  
  
Mom has been busier and busier since receiving her promotion, and it isn't unusual for her to be away in the Earth Sphere.  
  
It's been a while since she last came home, and she just happened to see her daughter's great work.  
  
"You did well, Suletta. Your mother is proud of you."  
  
"It's thanks to the Aerial you created."  
  
"You were both fantastic."  
  
I feel good when Mom smiles. It tells me that I've met her expectations.  
  
"How long will you be home this time, Mom?"  
  
"I'm planning to be here until your birthday. This year, we'll have a big party to make up for the birthday I missed last year, and we'll celebrate two birthdays in one."  
  
"Yay!"  
Suletta bursts into joy.  
  
But this eleventh birthday will be the last one she celebrates with Mom.

#

Suletta has turned fifteen.  
  
Mom continues to be as busy as ever, going back and forth between Mercury and the Earth Sphere. Every year, she is unable to join her daughter for her birthday.  
Suletta, all alone, has started shutting herself inside me again.  
  
"What are schools like?"  
  
I don't know. I've never been to one either.  
  
"I wonder if it's like in this comic."  
  
That's fiction. Besides, that comic's pretty old.  
  
"I'd like to go to school."  
  
This teenager's mind is preoccupied with school life.  
They're filled with kids her own age, and their days are full of excitement and fun. The schools depicted in comics and movies must seem shiny and glorious.  
  
But you know what, Suletta?  
We can't go back to the Earth Sphere.  
  
You probably don't know this, but people there call Mom a witch, and the whole world rejects her.  
  
And if they discovered that I'm a Gundam, they'd probably tear me apart on the spot.   
So I'm afraid your dream won't be coming true.  
  
But don't worry.  
You'll always have me.  
Even if you can't go to school or make new friends, I'll still be with you.  
  
"Hey, Aerial?" Suletta whispers as if sharing a secret. "If the day ever comes when I get to go to school? We'll go together."

#

Mom has returned to Mercury after an extended absence, and Suletta is overjoyed.  
  
She tells Mom how hard she's been working, and what she's learned during this time.  
Though Suletta is now sixteen, she still goes to bed early like a little kid.  
  
That night, Mom comes to the hangar alone. There's nobody there but me.  
  
Welcome back, Mom. We haven't been alone like this in a long time. Suletta' s overjoyed that you're back, you know.  
  
"Aerial, I'm home. Be happy for me. The door has opened."  
  
The door? What are you talking about?  
  
"They're holding mobile suit duels at the Asticassia School of Technology, and the winner will marry Delling's only daughter."  
  
Delling is the president of the Benerit Group. This Mercury base is also part of the group's property.  
  
That's why the people of Mercury were hesitant to accept us. It was President Delling who labeled Mom and the others as witches, and launched a witch hunt against them.  
  
"Aerial, I want the two of you to go to school."  
  
The two of us?  
  
Does she mean me...and Suletta?!  
  
"You're my masterpiece. You'll be Suletta's sword."  
  
No.  
No, Mom.  
I don't mind going, but not Suletta. She's such a good girl.  
If you want revenge, you and I can do it ourselves. Just keep her out of this.  
But Mom can't hear my voice.  
  
"Just you watch, everybody. Our daughter is going to avenge us!"

#

The next day.  
The oblivious Suletta comes to me with a big smile on her face.  
  
"Hey, Aerial, guess what? I'm going to school!"  
  
I know. Mom told me last night.  
  
"Mom took care of the admission procedures for me. She says to study hard so I can make Mercury a better place. I'm going to do my best. I'll make this a planet where no one dies, and I'll bring in lots of cities, shops, and schools."  
  
Oh. She doesn't know anything.  
I wish I could tell her what's going on--that Mom is using her as a tool for revenge.  
  
But I can't go against Mom. She's the parent who created me as well.  
  
"I wonder if I'll be able to manage? I've never had any human friends, and besides, what if I can't handle the schoolwork?"  
I can see that she's starting to worry.  
  
"I'm scared. Mercury is all I know, and Mom said she won't be able to go with me."  
  
That's right, Suletta. It's absurd to start going to school now, all by yourself.  
You can study at Mercury. And what will the people here do without you to help them?  
  
You don't have to be Mom's tool. You don't have to take on someone else's curse.  
  
"Should I decline? If I go, I mustn't fail. Enrollment costs money, and I don't want to embarrass her. What should I do?"  
  
It's okay, Suletta.  
It's okay to decline. It's okay to run.  
  
"I can't decide what to do. I should go, right? But..."  
  
Run, Suletta.  
Run. Run. Run!  
  
She can't have heard my voice, but Suletta speaks as if responding to me.  
"If you run, gain one..."  
  
!  
  
"Move forward, gain two. Right, Aerial?"  
  
I'm surprised.  
Suletta says she isn't going to run.  
  
The little girl who was always crying, and came running to me to escape--now she's looking straight ahead.  
She's turning Mom's words into her own strength.  
  
Well, Suletta. I guess you've grown up.  
You're no longer the little girl who used to hide inside me.  
I thought I'd been watching over you all along, but now you're the one teaching me a lesson.  
  
"You know what, Aerial? If we move forward, we'll gain lots of things--not just two. I'll study, of course, make friends, find mentors, and maybe go on dates!"  
  
Sure, Suletta. That sounds good.  
It's better to count the things you want to get, instead of what you'll lose. Even if you're going to school for the sake of Mom's revenge, and even if it's Mom's words that gave you this courage.  
Okay, Suletta. Go ahead. Gain more than you lose, and make it worth your while.  
  
"Let's go, Aerial. We'll be fine as long as we're together."  
  
That's what I wanted to say to her.  
  
Of course we'll be together.   
We're family.  
  
I make my monitor screen blink twice to show my agreement.

The End