Two Halves

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Summary

The two kingdoms of Sanq and Lin were at war for years; a conflagration involving magic, armies and political murder. The conflict left both nations devastated and strewn with refugees. The king of Sanq finds his infant son, lost at birth, among the death and the ruin, a miracle he barely dared to hope for.

But there isn't just one boy, there are two, clinging together like two halves of a whole that cannot be separated.

Decades later, the truth behind that second child’s existence will put a hole in the world, or possibly save it.

Notes

This is the very first fic I wrote which ended up posted, and possibly the first I posted as well (this is well over a decade ago, my memory is fuzzy.) As such, the construction, syntax and prose are...um, not quite my usual style ^^; Let's call it...an homage to '70 and '80s fantasy books such as Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser (my apologies to Fritz Leiber for even suggesting this.) But I'm pretty happy with the plot, pacing and characters in this fic even now, so hopefully readers can get past the overuse of adverbs and adjectives, and appreciate the story.
behind it. I did fix the punctuation and trimmed a few overused words out, but nothing else has changed. Please enjoy ^__^

WARNING FOR SORT-OF INCEST - contains some spoilers so don't read the following if this doesn't bug you at all (it's in the tags but I'm doubling down because, oddly enough, this is something that easily squicks me):
The first few chapters of the story has our heroes as very young children - that's not the warning but maybe it should be for people allergic to kidfics. The boys are first cousins, and spend the first half of the fic raised together as brothers, though they know this is not the case. They do get separated and spend years apart, but eventually get reunited and end up together romantically, more so in the sequel. Being royalty, this is in no way considered odd in context. The boys themselves see themselves as very close childhood friends and cousins rather than brothers, so they don't consider this wrong either. But if the thought of people raised as siblings for a dozen years eventually hooking up bothers you...I don't blame ya. You may wish to avoid reading in that case.
A fire still burned in the north quarter of the ravaged capital of the kingdom of Sanq. It had been burning for three days now, and no one, not the worn-out soldiers, the ragged and beaten citizens, the exhausted mages or the decimated guards cared to do anything about it. The only people who might have cared, who had lived in that pleasant neighborhood in the sheltered arm of the river, had all been killed by the magical blast that had turned the block into an inferno. Any survivors had fled the capital in despair.

That despair was gnawing at the guts of the man staring out the palace window at the blaze he was unable to stop.

So many dead. So many fires.

The man had been crowned Milliardo Peacecraft, King of Sanq at the age of twelve. He had tried to reign in peace with his neighbors, including the small kingdom to the north, in mountainous and magical terrain, full of secrets and powerful sorcerers. The kingdom of Lin was ruled by a house that was brother to the house of Sanq. Several marriages had been arranged in the past to try to strengthen those bonds. They had only opened the door to claims to the throne of Sanq by their new leader, Treize.

Treize had come down on the peaceful neighboring kingdom like an avalanche, capturing half of it in a fell swoop and chasing the young king before him. The next decade was one of war. Lin had little manpower but strong sorcerers, the best among them being Treize himself. They conjured fiends of hell as their guards, and used powerful mage blasts to level fortifications. The kingdom of Sanq had always frowned on black magic. White magic defended the Sanq troops but helped only a little against the violent forces arrayed against them.

Many had died.

The man known as Milliardo had rallied. He'd drowned his peaceful nature in the blood of battlefields. He'd taken a new name to lead his soldiers. Milliardo was the name of a kind king who'd lost his throne, his capital, most of his country. Zechs Marquise was the name of the war leader who'd fought back.

He'd won back his country. Three days ago, Treize and his cronies, driven back to their own mountainous frontiers, caught between troops and a deep gorge, had unleashed one last burst of magic that had finally consumed them, and Zechs was now the victor by default, and once more ruler of his land. Alone.

Odin Lowe, the stoic war-master who'd led his troops to final victory, stood slightly back from his king, leaving him in peace for one of his rare moments of depression. He knew that in a few moments Zechs would once more be a king, a commander, an assured leader. But right now, in this palace that Treize had occupied for years, in which he'd held and murdered Zech's queen, Odin allowed his friend a moment of solitude to mourn.

A moment that was brutally interrupted by the door slamming back. Both men turned in surprise to see the usually calm and genial Father Maxwell panting in the threshold. Maxwell was a priest but also the strongest white mage of the kingdom of Sanq, Zechs' old teacher, and his only other friend beside Odin.

"Zechs... " the older man caught his breath, and looked with growing wonder at his king.
"Milliardo... we've found him!"

The convent was intact, a few hours distance from the walls of the city. Its courtyard had been used as an infirmary by both sides of the conflict and left unharmed by tacit agreement. It was still full of wounded soldiers, those that were too weak to move to the city. Broken bodies lay on pallets and beds, sisters, brothers and a few priests attended them. Only one place had been left untouched by the press of war; a small elegant house in the middle of a tree-shrouded garden in the center of the grounds. The home of the resident noble and head of the convent, known simply as her Ladyship.

Zechs strode through the courtyard as quickly as he could, cloaked and cowled. Normally he would mingle with the men and women who had fought and been wounded for him, but not today. Today, only today, he would allow himself to be selfish. His heart was hammering so loudly he could barely hear the groans and sighs of those around him. His vision blurred over the courtyard, the wards, the garden, the house, the dark room, the stern face of her Ladyship waiting for him in a carved high-back chair in her study. His heart gave a jarring thump as he saw her face, her expression.

This wouldn't be easy.

"Where is my son?!"

It came out in a rush. He stared at the woman who had raised his beloved Lucrezia as if she were her own daughter, and had accompanied her charge as chaperone from their distant land across the sea. The woman had seen Lucrezia murdered because of his war, his and Treize's. She'd lost two 'daughters' to their conflict, he remembered as he faced the searing desolation in those eyes. Treize's consort, Lucrezia's half-sister, Une, had died as well. Lucrezia had been captive at the time, and had only survived because of Une's intervention on Treize. Lucrezia had not survived Une by more than a day. She had been executed -murdered- a few hours after giving birth to Zechs', son.

Rumors of his son's survival had haunted him for all these years. He'd never truly believed i. How likely was Treize to allow the survival of a rival to the throne? But Zechs had let himself fall for the rumor again and again to avoid going mad at the thought of having lost everything he ever held dear. When the tide of war had turned against the sorcerer-king and he'd taken control of town after town, Zechs had started to search for the child. A boy, he'd been told, with blue eyes and his mother's dark hair. His heart had ached for that small evanescent hope, that little life. And now, unbelievably, it might be within his reach. He just had to face down the woman who had saved the child and kept him hidden for five years, the woman who'd lost everything to his conflict.

He'd meant to be a bit more diplomatic about it...

"I apologize, your ladyship." He breathed, trying to calm down. He could feel Odin behind him scowl, but Father Maxwell had taken a step nearer, his steady presence soothing. "You understand-" of course she did, who wouldn't. "Please, tell me. Is my son- is he really here?"

The stern-faced woman stared at him as she slowly stood. She had the coloring of her distant nation, dark eyes and hair now streaked with gray, curled under a veil. Her simple black dress hung from her wiry frame. The stiff skirts were trembling ever so slightly, amplifying the tension that seemed to emanate from her in visible waves.

"Yes, your son is here. I've already called the nurse. They should be here shortly."
Zechs said nothing. Because it was obvious from the way her eyes were gleaming that there was an
almighty catch here somewhere.

He knew the woman hated him. Right or wrong was beside the point. Because of him, Lucrezia was
dead. She'd been sent from her distant land with her half-sister in attendance to see if she and Zechs
were compatible for a marriage alliance, and they'd fallen in love despite of the war raging all around
them. Une...had chosen a different path, one that led to the one who appeared to be the stronger
ruler, to Treize. Lucrezia had been hurt at the absence of her half-sister and companion, but he had
promised that he would always be with her, that she would never be alone.

Then she was gone, captured during a raid. He would have killed the world for her, but he had failed
her and she had died. Nothing would ever change that. And the old woman staring at him so
hatefully knew that.

But he couldn't see what she was planning. He knew his son was alive and in these walls. Even if
she decided at this last minute to try to hide him, he would tear the place apart -he would rip open the
world!- to find him. So why was she waiting with bated breath, staring at him almost in hunger? Why
was she handing him the only thing he still desired as if she expected it to cause him the worst
of pain?

A small door opened (Zechs heard Odin's hand shift to his sword hilt instinctively) and a round
plump nun came in, hands out and dragging-

"What- who is- which-?"

"Why are there two of them?" Father Maxwell asked calmly and quietly, to give his king time to
compose himself and stop stuttering.

Her ladyship turned slowly, casting her eyes over the nun, smiling and bobbing -she was obviously
simple. Then she looked down at the two small boys clutching at the nun's skirts. She looked at them
with a blank expression, no love or tenderness, nothing beyond a slight pain.

"One of them is your son," she murmured. She made a sharp gesture with her bony hand. The small
boys stumbled forward, obviously used to obeying those hard hands.

Zechs and his men stared in complete bewilderment. The presence of two boys was confusing
enough. But seeing them stand side by side... they were identical. Both had light brown hair, blue
eyes -deeper than Zech's icy color, they were Lucrezia's beautiful speck of night sky. Round childish
faces, the same nose, the same chin...

Zechs had personally spoken to the woman who had helped his wife through childbirth in her
chamber/prison in the palace, who had bathed his infant son, handed him to a kind but unknown nun
in a desperate attempt to save his life. The midwife had stayed with Lucrezia until the men from
Treize had come to drag her away to her final resting place, cutting her throat near the grave they had
dug next to the one made ready for their Lord's consort. The woman had miraculously survived, and
had been able to tell him about his wife's end, his son's beginning, and his disappearance. She would
have told him if Lucrezia had had twins. So who...

"Which is my son?"

"And who is the other one?" asked Odin sharply.

"The other one is the son of Une."

The words fell like a gravestone into the shocked silence, then-
"What?" Odin's hand tensed on his sword as he glowered at the boys. "Une? That means Treize's son? Which one is he?!

"Which one is his highness?" Father Maxwell gasped.

Her ladyship paused, staring at Zechs, her nostrils flaring as if scenting blood, and something like a smile passed her lips as she whispered:

"I don't know."
Revenge

The old woman's voice was a cold rasp as she relived the past she had never escaped. Her eyes stayed fixed on Zechs, who stood staring at the two small boys. One of whom was his son. The other...

"Une died first. She died screaming in blood and birth fluids, Treize's child ripping her apart. Not that he really cared. He was far away at the time, planning his next strike against you." Years of pain were deadening her tone of voice, but the venom was still there. "She died in my arms, pleading for my forgiveness, because her death would mean that I would not only lose her but also Lucrezia. She knew that her death made her sister's execution inevitable. Lucrezia's labor had started. The child would be born before Treize came back and carried through the execution that only Une's constant begging had put off. I knew I couldn't save my precious Lucrezia any more than Une. But I could save their children. I could save Lucrezia's son from Treize by acting quickly. And, since I knew you were likely to win this conflict in the end, I could save Une's son by acting daringly. Save him from you!"

Zechs, who'd faced conjured fiends of the thirteen hells without flinching, staggered back before the hate and spite searing the eyes of a frail old woman. "I-I-"

"Don't say it, Marquise, since that is the name you wear now. Don't demean yourself by pretending you would have left Treize's offspring live."

Zechs was unable to answer. He wasn't a baby killer, whatever this bitter old hag thought, but remembering the hate that had drove him temporarily insane when he'd heard about his wife's death... He stood silent, dropping a look of agony over the two boys. Because now, remembering his hate for his rival, he could finally sense the revenge the woman had plotted all this time.

"Treize loved Une, I believe, but he would have killed both children if he'd had any doubt, so I had to hide them." She spoke coldly now, eying the two boys as if they were unable to hear or understand her. "The sisters of my order were taking care of both women, it was easy to get them to take both children away, to this place. I personally poisoned that ass of a physician who'd let Une die. I convinced Treize on his return that the man had failed, had been possibly bribed by another one of his other concubines to let his favorite and her child die. He was angry at me, but only because I'd killed the man before he could extract more details of the 'plot'. Otherwise he believed me when I told him the child had died stillborn, and had been buried with Une before his return. I told him Lucrezia's child had died as well. I blame whatever little grief that stone cold madman felt for distracting him enough to buy that. I was lucky. He never inquired about the boy, never doubted me, and he didn't stop me from being with Lucrezia when he oversaw her murder with his own eyes."

Zechs could feel his whole body trembling. He was unable to tear his eyes away from the blue eyes of the two boys - blue like Zech's eyes. Blue like Treize's. Une and Lucrezia had been similar in form and feature, only Une's lighter hair and rounder face distinguishing the two. Behind him he could feel Father Maxwell lay a trembling hand on Odin's sword arm, as the tall warrior gripped it and glaring at the madwoman before them.

"As per my instructions both boys were delivered to Boyce here-" the nun bobbed and smiled "-and since then she and I have been the only ones to see them. To protect them from Treize, to avoid even a rumor of their presence to leak from this house. Of course by the time I'd arrived, Boyce had already washed and wrapped them in swaddling clothes, and even I didn't know which was which by then. I will thank you for not torturing Boyce for more information about this matter, she can barely speak. She calls them both 'Baby', when she talks to them at all instead of cooing." The
woman's voice was acid.

"And what do you call them?" Father Maxwell asked, as he walked forward, laying a comforting hand on Zechs quivering shoulders.

Her ladyship gave a withering snort though her eyes did not leave the king. "I call them 'Boy'," she answered in a dead tone of voice.

"Yes, you would." Father Maxwell's voice was so gentle and sad that both the king and her ladyship found themselves glancing at him, startled. Father Maxwell slowly shook his head. "Well, we will see," he said enigmatically. His eyes on her were sad but stern. And then he turned that same look toward Zechs.

"Milliardo?" He murmured.

Zechs stared at him, then at the two boys, then at the woman who had done this to him. He'd been stunned till then, but a sudden wave of conflicting emotion almost made his knees buckle. At the same time the instincts that had been honed by almost a decade of war made his hand snap to his sword hilt. He knew what Father Maxwell wanted though, what he wanted Zechs to show him. He was leaving the choice to the king -always on me, always my burden, and now this!- Maxwell would support whatever decision Zechs made, but he hoped the young man he'd raised, the king, the leader, would be better. Better than the sorcerer who had torn their land apart for his ambitions. Better than the warrior-king who had lived for battle after battle, wading through blood to take his kingdom back, despite having lost already everything that might have made him smile again. Better...

Better than that old bitter woman who would do this to him but also to two innocent children -no not innocent, Treize, it's Treize's blood- under her protection...

No. Forget the old woman, forget even Father Maxwell, and Treize... Zechs had lost many illusions about himself in the years of war. He didn't know if he would ever be able to use the name Peacecraft again, or become the gentle ruler his ravaged land needed. But one thing he knew for sure, he was no hypocrite. The decision he would take now, this instant, had to be the right one for the right reasons. It was his choice, his burden to bear, his consequences to assume.

His hand still on his sword, he walked up to the old woman. She eyed him with pleasure, almost with anticipation. She had nothing left to live for now. If he killed her this instant, she would probably consider it a good ending, dying at the height of her elaborate revenge.

He drew up to her and said quietly: "Thank you, your ladyship, for being with Une and Lucrezia when they died."

He turned from her stunned face and knelt near the boys, staring at him with those blue eyes.

"Hello."

The boys started at his voice and fell into each other, clutching in a gesture of mutual protection that they'd probably used many times before. They looked at him with their big eyes, stared at his hesitant, pained smile.

"What's your name?" he asked gently, then caught himself. 'Boy' was all they knew.

"Children," he said slowly, his eyes resting on each of them in turn, "don't be afraid. I am your father. And I'm taking you home."

The boys hesitantly reached out for the hands he held out to them. He leaned forward and gently
scooped them up, seating one each on his strong forearms. Little hands grabbed his brocaded jerkin for balance. He turned from the woman whose jaws were working in anger and surprise. He would let her live here, she was necessary for the running of the convent which had helped the wounded and consoled the dying from both camps. There was little more she could do to hurt him now. Without a backwards glance he strode out of the dark house, the cold hallways, the dreaded rooms, followed by an angry, puzzled Odin and Maxwell, quiet and contemplative in sadness and pride.
"But Sir, what are we going to do?"

Odin's voice sounded almost panicky. He'd faced horrendous magic and death numerous times, but this was entirely beyond him. It was maybe beyond Zechs, too.

The old woman had certainly had her revenge. There hadn't been a moment in the last four months when Zechs' mind hadn't rung with the agony of what he was going to do. Raise Treize's son as his own? And further along down the road, maybe even put Treize's son on the throne? The man who had murdered his wife, who had killed tens of thousands, who'd let demons rip apart the quiet of his kingdom, and who had put his people to the torch and sword? Let Treize's blood, cursed with power and madness, become the new bloodline of his kingdom?

For every angry impulse that beat through his mind, his own stand against that revenge stood fast. As he put his...his sons to bed that first night, in his own bed as no nursery existed in the cold, war-torn castle for ages now- he couldn't question his decision. He'd tucked them in, two sleepy pairs of blue eyes catching his.

"Are you tired?" he whispered (he had no experience when it came to children, but he figured they probably weren't as tough as soldiers, and took it from there).

Two little heads nodded, but the eyes didn't leave his. They seemed - well, of course, they were scared, they'd been torn away from all they'd ever known by a stranger claiming to be their father. He'd not had the courage to take their nurse Boyce with them. He'd hesitated to do so, while wondering how to get on a horse with two small children latched onto his front, and hearing the woman start to wail as she realized he was taking her 'babies' away. She gave him the creeps, he wasn't sure why, she was obviously as kind and gentle as she was simple, and someone had to take care of the children... But Father Maxwell has said “No” sharply, his face creased in worry. Yes, Father Maxwell had already sensed a serious problem, and was taking steps to limit the damage though he didn't know how to fix it...

The boys were scared, but not only because of the change of homes. If that hateful place had been a home to start with. They were looking at him as if they were afraid of him, he realized. Not terrified, no. They couldn't understand what her ladyship had said, the history behind them all, the reason why one of them was his enemy. But they seemed nervous of him as if he were about to punish them for something. Anything.

Something in Zechs' war-hardened heart loosened a bit. Up until then he'd been running on shock, anger, and a sense of right and wrong that was ingrained in him. But these children, these very young boys -one of them being his son- needed something more.

He smiled, a small genuine smile that would have warmed his closest friends all the way through because they hadn't seen it much in the last five years. Sensing them relax a bit he raised his hands gently and touched their faces, cupping the tiny chins in his calloused sword-worn palms. They blinked, as if surprised at a gentle touch from someone who wasn't their simple nurse. Zechs' smile widened as he raised his hands to ruffle long bangs from the small faces. "A couple of young men are going to get a haircut tomorrow," he murmured.

Their faces relaxed even more, and they glanced at each other quickly before catching his eyes again. He could see their bodies pressed against each other under the blanket, hands entwined, tightening as they gathered their courage.
"Are you really-
"-our father?"

Zechs blinked. The question had come out so smoothly that it could have come from one mouth alone. There had been no hesitation or glance between them. Something trembled within him, echoing Maxwell's earlier worried glance at the two boys, but he couldn't put a finger on it. No matter, the soldier king thought, dismissing the notion until he had some hard facts to face.

That left him with the hard task of answering the question. One day, in a few years time, the full answer would have to be given to them. But for now...

"Yes, I am," he said firmly. "And you are my sons. I love you very much." He'd been unable to say 'both', 'I love you both very much. He hoped that, in a few years time when he told the boys the entire truth, he would have faced and conquered his demons by then as well.

The look on the boys' faces almost made him ashamed of his own inner doubts. Hesitant to start with, a look of wonder slowly touched their eyes, tentative trust and happiness. Zechs felt his mouth go dry as his hands idly brushed away the bangs again.

The old woman be damned, let them all go to hell! Whatever else happened, whatever would occur in the future, right now both of these two wounded children were his sons, and he would kill anybody who would dare to take that look from their eyes again. He started to rise from the bed, his soldier's instincts kicking him to go check the guard on the door, the patrol on the walls, make this place safe. Make it impregnable!

Two little hands that had been lying over the coverlet jerked in unison.

"Where-
"-you going?"

They both reddened and sank back into the pillows, horrified at their outburst and cringing in anticipation. Zechs almost fell over himself to try to take that fear out of their eyes. "Don't worry, don't worry!" He let small hesitant hands clasp his own, then felt them tighten in a surprisingly strong hold as he smiled again. "It's ok. Don't worry, go to sleep. It's all going to be alright now."

"... can you-
"-stay... please?"

They'd both whispered that last word in unison, their clasped hands under the coverlet tightening again in mutual reassurance. Their other hands held his in dawning trust.

"Sure," he murmured awkwardly. He watched as sleepy blue eyes closed. He stayed there, sitting on the bed, small hands loosening around his own, watching them. He knew that the next day wouldn't be easy, the rest of his life wouldn't be easy. But for a short time the weary king felt a little bit of the peace that he had fought so hard and lost so much for.

And right on schedule, the next day arrived with all the complications and emotional turmoil he had expected.
Problems

The problems facing Zechs and his newly found family were numerous. The first and most urgent; what to call the boys? His son would have been called Milliardo - and hopefully this time the name would stick, Zechs had thought darkly. Treize's choice for his son's name was anybody's guess, but even if someone had dared to make a suggestion to their king's face, that left the second immediate problem looming ever larger. Which one would be called which?

In the cold light of the new day, Odin, who was taking on the role of devil's advocate here with the same hard-headedness he brought to all unpleasant tasks, had carefully scrutinized each boy as they were bathed and clothed by a servant. They were unfortunately bereft of convenient birthmarks or other easy distinctions. Not only could Odin not guess which was which - and he had known both their fathers and mothers - he couldn't even distinguish between the two children before him. They weren't twins, they weren't even fully first cousins, but they were identical. It was as if the five years they'd spent under the cruel bony thumb of her Ladyship, with no love, no identity and no distinction, had merged them together. Zechs thought the older warrior would chew his lower lip off in sheer frustration.

Washed and dressed, the boys were ready to leave the king's room, which led to the next hurdle. What to tell everybody? Four people knew the truth - they discounted Boyce and the other nuns, they would say nothing as long as her Ladyship forbade it and they didn't think the old woman would ever stir again from her little corner of bitterness in the convent. If she did, Zechs would deal with her then.

In the meantime, he made no announcement and let it be known the boys were children that Father Maxwell had taken in. This hurt him, but until he and his advisors could come up with a plan - or at the very least names for the boys - he wanted to keep his doubts and confusion private. He knew rumors would run wild, and so he talked things over with one more person, the head of his intelligence division. The man let slip a word here, a small nod there...rumors started to percolate through the kingdom: the princes had been found. Yes, princes, apparently previous rumors had been inexact, and the queen had actually given birth to two boys.

A few trusty servants were charged with helping the king with the boys. Helping him, because the children had apparently decided to fasten on him like limpets. Zechs was busy, he had a kingdom to rebuild, an army to reorganize, pay and disband, a harvest to manage, a future to build for his people. But he found himself unable to sacrifice this last little inch of personal happiness that had been miraculously dropped in his lap. With Father Maxwell's help - and his presence explaining the boys' - Zechs took the children with him in his duties.

They were very well behaved, almost chillingly so. Zechs didn't have any experience with children but from the little Odin and Maxwell were saying, these two were way too quiet and polite for comfort, considering they were five year old boys. All three, yes, even hardened Odin, felt a burning anger towards the bitter old woman who had visibly raised the boys to be little more than shadows. Zechs often found himself giving them reassuring smiles just to be certain they knew they would no longer be punished for shouting, talking, breathing. He was often rewarded, when the courtiers and generals left, by finding two little hands grabbing his own for a few minutes, until someone else showed up to occupy his time and the boys would retreat to Father Maxwell once more.

The days were long and occupied but the boys never complained, falling asleep in Maxwell's and Odin's lap - much to everyone's amusement except for his own - until they were carried by the exhausted king back to his quarters to lay together in the small cot he'd had set up in his room.
Together, always together. And that was when the next big problem had pointed its ugly head, and this was the one that Zechs felt completely hopeless against.

The names Craft and Darlian had been tentatively touched upon, the names of the original founders of the kingdom. Craft had given rise to the Peacecraft lineage, while Darlian had strengthened the kingdom and given it its peaceful philosophy. They were good names, and avoided any mention of who was whose son, since both Zechs and Treize's bloodlines descended from those two men.

The royal tailor dropped off the order of a dozen set of pants and shirts of the right size in two sets of colors, brown and blue, matching hair and eyes (and different from the green and black of Zechs' and Treize's battle colors respectively). Zechs and Nancy, one of the few servants that the very shy boys had taken to, picked a boy and a color each and started to dress them, throwing out the simple beige robes the boys had been wearing previously.

Darlian would be the one in blue and Craft in brown, Zechs decided on the fly, feeling both stupid and scandalized that he had to take such a crucial decision as his sons' names so lightly. But what choice did he have? There wasn't anything else to go on, and they needed to establish names and identities for the boys as quickly as possible.

The boys had taken one look at themselves dressed in different colors - and started screaming like wounded animals.

It was the first loud noise he'd ever heard them make, and it wasn't a five-year-old's temper tantrum! It was the agonized wail of someone who'd lost all his bearings in the world. Odin, hanging around in the doorway, had his sword drawn and his eyes darting about for attackers before he could catch himself, and Maxwell came thundering down the hall from the study in panic. After thirty minutes the children were still wailing and screaming, and a horrible look of strain and shock was twisting their young features. Nothing could calm them down, Zechs could barely hold them, even gently pushing them into each other's arms, normally a sure-fire tactic to reassure them, failed to work.

Finally Father Maxwell, tears in his eyes, snapped: "For the love of god, Milliardo, it's no use, give them the same clothes!"

Once Craft had been dressed in blue as well, the boys started to calm down, clutching one another tightly, their sniffles and sobs echoing in the silence. The three men were alone, Nancy had finally broken down and run to cry in the kitchen. They looked at each other with heavy foreboding. It looked like the old woman might have done more damage than they'd thought, knowingly or not.
It didn't get much better, though the hysterics of the fist day never reoccurred. The boys weren't able to explain their panic, and Zechs found that he couldn't reason them out of it. They were a bit young for that, Father Maxwell reminded him gently. The adults decided to let time give them a little help, and use more subtle methods.

Maxwell took personal charge of many aspects of their lives at that point, helping Zechs who all but dismissed the curious servants from the boys' lives. This wasn't a bad thing in itself. It kept rumors to a minimum and besides, the boys were still nervous and shy around most people they met. Until this problem was sorted, Zechs decided that he, his two friends and mentors and Nancy were the only ones who would come into contact with the boys. This let him and Maxwell manage them closely. Although they didn't talk about it much, they were getting more and more worried about the damage to the boys' minds.

The boys were never dressed in different colors again, but their clothes were always just a bit different; a vest contrasting with a shirt, or pants instead of jerkins, or a coat and a cloak for outdoors. For awhile this seemed to meet with success. Father Maxwell and Zechs started memorizing outfits to go with one or the other name for the boys. They hoped that by getting the boys used to having their own names, their own identities, they could slowly dissolve the steel bond between them.

They made it as subtle as they could to avoid upsetting the children. That and the fact that both of them were also busy rebuilding a kingdom explained why a whole two months went by before they realized it just wasn't working. Despite their efforts the boys would not respond to their names. They would both look up each time either name was used.

It was Odin who told his friends why. The burly warrior, always affecting quiet control and distant emotions even to those closest to him, had been holding himself apart from all this domestic confusion. He would have ignored it entirely if the heir to the kingdom wasn't implicated (it would have taken red hot irons to get him to admit that the pain and confusion of his king, a man he had trained and now respected and loved like a brother, had more to do with it then feudal obligation). His cold analytical gaze saw the flaw in their plan.

"You guys can spare yourself the effort," he snapped, walking in on Zechs and Maxwell dressing the twins (as they were beginning to call them, to keep up with the rumors and their future cover stories). Zechs had been dressing Craft - who they distinguished by sleeping clothes with folded and buttoned down collar- while Father Maxwell had been struggling to get a squirming Darlian - sleeping clothes with a v-neck - away from his breakfast and out of his bedtime attire. Both men had been respecting their clothing conventions; the boys would be in brown today, but Craft would be wearing a vest and Darlian a long shirt, as previously agreed. Both men looked up at a scowling Odin in surprise; he normally didn't interfere.

"What did you say, my friend?" Maxwell sighed as he wiped honey off of Darlian's hands, face, hair, elbows and a few other spots.

"You can stop dressing them up in your carefully arranged codes," Odin grunted, ignoring Zechs' warning glance. "I'm surprised you haven't caught on."

"Caught on to what?"

"They're swapping."
Both men stared at him in shock.

Odin sighed. "I noticed it when I pick them up for their afternoon walk." It had gone without question that any physical training the boys would have would be given by Odin, as it went without saying that their studies would be supervised by Father Maxwell. "They both run off and out of sight regularly. As long as I can hear them I don't mind. But I kept wondering why they're always coming back with shirts and pants half undone. They've been switching, several times a day I'd say. They're too young to do up laces and buttons or I might not have noticed."

Maxwell suddenly swore, something he rarely did even in the heat of a magical battle. He was remembering a few instances where he'd left the boys to study alone for a few minutes while he went into the library. He'd wondered if they fought when no one was looking because their clothes were always out of array when he returned.

"I bet they're swapping nightgowns on you as well," Odin continued dourly. "Those buttons of Craft's are often undone in the morning. Not always, but often."

Zechs turned Craft - was it Craft? A sudden flash of near panic made him flex his fingers into the boy's shoulder and the child looked up at him in surprise. We should have known, he thought wildly. A month now, and I was berating myself that I still couldn't tell my sons apart. Parents are supposed to know, to be able to recognize twins. But I've only known them for a little while, and half the time they've been borrowing the other's identity...

"Craft," he said gently. The child he was holding was already looking at him, the other boy, licking honey off of a finger Maxwell had neglected, glanced up with the same light of recognition at the name. Zechs felt his heart squeeze.

"Craft, are you and your brother exchanging clothes?"

Both boys looked at him in blank incomprehension. Zechs tried to formulate it in a way that the boys could understand, get them to explain, but he gave up even before he saw Father Maxwell shake his head sadly.

Now that they were looking more critically, the bond between the two boys was appearing in all its hideous complexity. Zechs knew that twins often started and finished each other's sentences, but the boys did it all the time and without the slightest trace of hesitation, it was unnerving. They couldn't be separated. That had been apparent on the second night, at the time that two cots had been placed in the king's quarters. Both boys had ended up in the same one, that had not been too surprising but after that, reactions to separation varied. Sometimes the boys would kick up a fuss when they were apart, nothing as dramatic as the hysterics they'd had when first dressed differently, but still distressing. But that was almost the better reaction. More worrying was the way they would just shut down sometimes; become unresponsive, silent, unsmiling, blank, almost motionless. Until the other reappeared, and they would be normal five year olds again.

Their fear of others was not diminishing either. They accepted Zechs unconditionally and called him Father now, much to his pleasure. They called Maxwell 'Father Maxell' (occasionally even getting the 'w' in there) and Odin they called 'Sir', but with shy smiles. Nancy was Nancy. And they wouldn't talk to anyone else, just curl up into little shy balls, drop their eyes and wait for them to go away.

And despite the fact that they seemed happy and well-fed, despite smiles and laughter, there was still very little that resembled normal five-year old behavior. No fighting amongst themselves, no naughty tricks, no tempers, no roughhousing or tickle fights. The old woman had dealt them one last blow, Zechs thought. The damage was not only because of the disciplinarian way she'd raised them. With
that single term 'boy' for them, the lack of identity had marked them. It was as if they couldn't quite function now without the other present. They'd become joined, not at the hip but at the mind. They didn't misbehave because when one of them got that naughty little sparkle in his eye, the other would automatically calm him down, hold him back. Zechs had seen this many times. He'd been puzzled that it had not always been the same one looking for trouble and the same one holding back, but of course if they'd been switching names on him... but maybe they could switch personalities as well. The thought chilled him to the bone.

In a few years the problem would be sorted. There were minute differences already in the children's faces and bodies. Not enough to tell them apart yet, not when they went out of their way to apparently confuse the situation by swapping places all the time. But eventually their faces would firm into the first planes of what would be their adult faces, and they probably would grow to be different. But Zechs didn't think they could afford to wait that long for the separation to take place. No, that would not be wise at all...
A few more desperate solutions were tried to separate the boys and give them their own identity. Zechs had often said he'd cut his son's hair, but had never gone through with it. Nancy wouldn't hear of getting rid of those long pretty locks and bangs, and Zechs hadn't particularly wanted to see his sons in a military cut, which was the only one he knew how to do. Anyway, with his own long blond hair flopping all over the place, who was he to say? Now though...

It was only a slight trim to Darlian - he guessed it was Darlian. Bangs and back, just half an inch. Just enough to be able to distinguish them.

An hour later, a panicked Odin came to find him. He'd taken the boys to their daily fencing training. They could be separated from Zechs now, to his relief and a little regret, as long as they were with one of the three other people they knew. The war master had only been away for a few minutes to talk to one of his other older students. The boys had been very subdued but had not given him any other reason to be worried. When he returned they were gone, their wooden practice swords on the floor.

He'd found them in his quarters adjoining the training room. Darlian had just finished sawing off Craft's extra length of hair with one of Odin's daggers. Seeing that length of razor-sharp steel waving around a pale white throat would give the old soldier nightmares for many nights to come. Zechs gave them both a stern talk about handling sharp objects, keeping his pounding heart from making his voice tremble with an effort.

The lengths they would go to to keep their shared identity became apparent again a couple of days later. Zechs and Odin had taken them out for a walk before supper, while they discussed strategies to fortify the pass to Lin to the north. The Oligarchy of Lin had also paid a terrible price for the war. But many soldiers and sorcerers had managed to retreat into its vast mountains and defensible passes while Treize held the enemy troops back with the final conflagration that had consumed him. There was little chance the war-weary Sanq could do much to threaten them. Both kingdoms would lick their wounds, but then... This time Zechs intended to be ready if a rematch was required.

The boys were in one of their rare boisterous moods where they would both feel the urge to run around like crazy. Zechs smiled, pleased at seeing them behave like children a little. He was trying to forget the dagger episode. One of them - the adults had temporarily given up on names - stumbled and banged his arm hard on a rock in the ornamental garden. A minor ouch, a bit of a sniffle from both boys - one in pain, the other in sympathy. Nothing more.

Nancy came to him that night, worry etched on her face, saying she'd found something 'odd' while getting them ready for bed.

One boy had a nice bruise forming on his upper arm. The other - Zechs felt like ice cold water was cascading down his spine. The other child had a reddening welt forming at the same spot.

"Cra- Dar-... what happened, where did you get this?"

The boy looked at him in surprise. "I fell."

"What, just now?" From the corner of his eyes he could see Nancy shaking her head vigorously. She'd been with them all during dinner and after and would have heard a fall.

"No, before." The boy kicked his legs unconcerned. His brother - technically they were cousins but
Zechs was trying to think of them as twins, as well as just paying lip service to the rumor - nodded as well.

"When?" Zechs pressed. Both boys blinked.

"In the garden." They said together.

With numb fingers Zechs gently examined the mark. Tomorrow it would be a bruise quite similar to the other one, but at the moment he could distinguish, with practiced soldier's eyes, the marks of fingers around the edges of the welt. The force applied must have been considerable. Both boys were right handed and the bruises were on their left arm, so he couldn't tell if it had been self-inflicted or not. The fact he had to even ask himself the question made him howl with anguish inside.

The boys had been with him for four months. Things were not getting better. They were just a bit more adept at hiding it from him, when they even bothered to. It wasn't even conscious most of the time, he thought. But slowly it was becoming so. They were starting to ignore the names he'd given them. They could sense this was another wedge in their shared identity and they were having none of it, they were apparently taking a certain dislike to the names even. Zechs felt terrified this dislike could spread to him.

And meanwhile the time had come and gone for them to announce that his sons had been found. Most people in the palace had guessed by now, a lot of people in the capital were discussing it. People couldn't understand why he wouldn't announce the presence of a crown heir. New rumors were starting to spread; the boys were ill, there was something wrong with them... Something had to be done and soon, he told Maxwell and Odin, locked into his study while Nancy watched the boys.

"But Sir, what are we going to do?" Odin's anxiety hit Zechs hard. The incident with the dagger had disturbed the older warrior considerably. Zechs hated to hear the tough man, as steady and reliable as a rock, so unsure.

They both became aware that Maxwell had not said anything since the meeting began. The man was looking older than his forty years, worried and... a bit guilty?

"What is it, Father," Zechs asked, dropping his usual 'Maxwell' for something that sounded more formal but wasn't. It was what he had called him during his youth, when 'Father' had been the one to educate him and raise him when his own father had died.

"Milliardo, I... think I know how to help the boys." He said it so hesitantly that Zechs and Odin felt no rush of hope.

"I had an idea, and talked it over with someone who... knows them. Someone who helped me develop the idea, who... will take responsibility. I think it's the only way. I'd do it myself" he added almost to himself "but they cannot have their trust in someone they know shattered at this point, that must not happen, they will need all the help-"

"Maxwell, what are you planning?" Odin sounded worried.

"I'm afraid you are not going to like this. You will not like the fact I even spoke to her." Sadness and pain flooded Maxwell's face as he looked at his friend and king. "But I had to do it. I love those boys, Milliardo. And we both know this cannot continue, this link between them must be severed. I know this will help. And I also think that she... may want a measure of forgiveness. Of redemption."

"What makes you think I will ever let her near my sons again?" Zechs said in an unrecognizable voice. He knew who was being discussed. Maxwell didn't flinch from his gaze, he knew that what
he would say was inevitable. He started to explain.
The Cut

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The boys ran ahead of the three men they now firmly considered their family. They were having fun in the last shreds of autumn, throwing dead leaves at each other, finding pinecones and mushrooms in the leaf mould. The boys had been exited at riding in a carriage for the first time, and after their initial nervousness at being in unfamiliar territory, had started to relax. They didn't notice the air of gloom hovering over the adults leading them on through the king's hunting woods.

The boys trotted ahead of them when they came into the clearing. An old hunting lodge, open on three sides, stood at its center. The bleeding boards, the hooks, the racks for meat and mead were all empty and weather beaten. A brazero had been lit at the center of the lodge, providing warmth if little light. A dark figure sat next to it in a high-backed carved wooden chair which was obviously not part of the furnishings of the run-down lodge.

Both boys were clustered against Zechs' side in an instant, silent and wide-eyed like young frightened animals. The figure examined them, then the king standing over them, hands on their shoulders in love and comfort.

"Don't worry, sons. She won't hurt you. She's not here to take you back. You are staying with me. Always. She just wants you to do something, and then you will never see her again."

This last was thrown as a gauntlet. Her Ladyship didn't blink, her eyes still on the tableau before her. She noticed the boys relax -not much, a few months of love couldn't undo years of icy isolation- but still... her eyes speared Zechs with anger, a grudging admission of failure. She knew that he was tormented and always would be by what she had done, but not as much as she hoped. And not as much as she was.

"Boys. Approach." The voice sliced the cold autumn air.

The boys shrank against Zechs but he nudged them forwards. The grip he had on their shoulders strengthened though. He was obviously not going to let them go forward alone. The boys hesitated, grabbed each others hand, and approached, their father protecting them.

In front of the seated figure was a low table of the same wood as the chair and bearing the same carvings. On it lay three ebony rods, smaller than the children's little fingers, covered in runes and carving. They were fortune telling rods, old as time, the art of tossing and reading them long forgotten.

"Those there." The voice was cold and commanding. The boys followed her finger to look at the rods on the table before them. "Pick them up. All of them."

The boys stared but didn't hesitate to reach forward, used to obeying that voice unconditionally. They each picked up a rod. Then, glancing at that still menacingly pointing finger, they both reached for the last rod hesitantly.

One of the boys reached it first, picking it up and grasping both rods to his chest apprehensively, while the other's hand fell back.

The old woman slowly stood up, ignoring the flinch from her 'grandsons'. She advanced slowly. The boys backed up nervously, pressing into Zech’s legs, something they would never have dared to do
before. The old woman sank to her knees before them, her dark cloak billowing out and settling around her like smoke.

"You. Give me that." She pointed to the child on her left, who'd picked one of the rods. The child hesitated and handed her the rod slowly, Zechs tightening his grip on his shoulder reassuringly and taking half a step forwards to keep their bodies close. Emboldened, he thrust the rod at her. But she grabbed his wrist instead of the rod. Both boys gasped, but didn't dare to flinch.

Her eyes fixed on the startling blue eyes of the boy, she slowly dragged him closer. A withered hand reached up and loosened the strings on his collar, jerking it open to reveal a smooth white shoulder. Then her hand turned and dipped, her knuckles brushing his back near the shoulder. For a few seconds the young boy just looked scared, then he flinched and lifted his free hand to his back as if in a little pain. He whimpered, and his other half immediately did the same.

The old woman looked at him. "Your name is Heero," she said in a voice that was finality itself.

She then released him and turned towards the other child. She held out her hand silently. He hesitated but she knew she didn't have to say anything. He would come towards her because the other one had already done so. He handed her his rods in silence, his eyes a bit wilder than the other one. She smiled like a reptile. Already it was starting. Once more she grabbed the wrist instead of the rods, loosened the collar. Once more her hand turned, in a different movement this time. The ring on her knuckles, treated with silver nitrate and another secret compound she knew from long intimacies with poisons, jabbed twice at the soft skin of the back.

"Your name is Duo," she said quietly.

It was the last she would ever speak to them, she knew. She turned without looking and sat back in her chair, her eyes closed. Whatever regret she might have felt as she heard the people in the lodge leave didn't reach as far as her heart, which had died long ago. She wouldn't allow herself to feel. She didn't deserve it.

They were all silent in the carriage on the way back. Zechs had not let go of his sons one instant, and held them close now. Heero was looking ahead, brow slightly furrowed, eyes blank. Duo was looking at his two divining rods with curiosity, eyes trailing the carvings and runes. Maxwell was sitting opposite him in the carriage, and slowly leaned forwards to retrieve the rods as the child lost interest in them and let them fall to his lap. The man looked at them curiously, then, following a hunch, tied them together with a handkerchief. He took Heero's from the child's unresisting fingers and put the single stick and the two others in different pockets to keep them separate.

Both boys were starting to rub their shoulders uncomfortably. Odin, opposite Heero - gods, it was suddenly so easy to give them those names- leaned forward to take a quick look down the collar. Nasty, bit of a burn, he'd have to get some ointment from his quarters on his return. No need for a doctor, those quacks did more harm than good. A bit of old horse ointment would keep infection at bay.

Zechs followed the soldier's glance. He looked at the burn on Heero's back, near the shoulder, in as unobtrusive a spot as the old witch could manage, he granted her that. Not that aesthetics were her concern, or Zechs'. His eyes flickered, from Heero's mark - a straight upright slash, like a raised dagger - to Duo's - two slanted lines. Maxwell hadn't needed to tell him that the less the boys saw these marks on each other, the better it would be. They would hopefully come to accept the names given to them by the person who had previously robbed them of identity. Maybe. And maybe the damage already done could be reversed. Maybe. But those marks would upset them to start with, however well things went afterwards. Zechs had obeyed instructions and dressed the boys in loose collared shirts that day; he intended them to spend the rest of the winter in high-collared tight vests to
hide the marks from each other. They would be bathed separately, too.

Hopefully they wouldn't notice too often that they were now no longer identical. The adults would have to make do with only a few rare glances at the marks to help them give each boy the right name, the less fuss they made over that the better. The names were new and neutral, hopefully they would be accepted, hopefully, hopefully... his arms tightened around his sons, who were falling asleep to the carriage's swaying rhythm, despite the stress of the day.

Hopefully he would now have two healthy and whole sons. His mind, weary of the worry of the past few months, managed not to dwell on the uncomfortable plural of the word, not think of who the other father was. That might come back to haunt him later. And when it did... the marks on their backs were permanent, he knew, the inking compound being tattooed into their bodies by the burning nitrate. Even when they were grown men, finding their own way in the world - even when he had to decide which one would inherit the throne- a glance at those marks would remind him he should be thankful to have two whole and healthy sons...instead of none at all.

Chapter End Notes

Finally our heroes show up! Well they've been here all along of course, but they finally have names we recognize.

There will be a timeskip chapter after this, as we leap forward to the next bump in our heroes' lives.
Seven years passed since the link between them was severed. The boys were known as the two princes of Sanq. Or sometimes 'those two' after one of the minor disasters that punctuated the lives of any growing boy.

When the link between them was snapped, they'd flown so far apart that most people seemed to have forgotten they'd once been considered identical twins. No one was suspicious of their origins anymore, the royal spy reported. The princes were accepted as one of the treasures of the newly flourishing kingdom, and watched with pride by its citizens.

Zechs watched his sons with pride as well.

He wished he could also forget their origins.

Heero was fencing with Odin. Zechs watched them from the shadows of the small back entrance. It was a fine day, spring quickening the air, and Odin had just started taking his practices outside on the thin strip of sandy ground between the castle and the closest wall. In the city street beyond, a market was in full swing, sounds echoing; merchants hawking their wares, animals braying, women laughing and shouting, kids playing. In the practice ground there was only silence punctuated by the crash of wooden sword on sword, and the grunts of the duelers.

Heero suddenly froze, a startled Odin nearly catching his head with his swing. The prince had turned towards the outer wall. Zechs and Odin both looked at him in surprise, then noticed a change in the noises in the street beyond. Laughter was spreading up the street like ripples in a pond, people shouting encouraging noises, and further back, someone was hollering.

"Come back here, you- you brat! You can't cover for those- hey!"

The shouting and laughter were level with the three in the palace grounds, and people were gasping and shouting, cries of "Watch out!", "No, come down!", and "Nah, he's alright!" rang out. Odin lowered his practice weapon and Heero sighed testily.

Scrabbling almost covered by the crowd's noise below heralded two grimy hands thrown over the top of the wall. One heave and a thin young teen was pulling himself up. He immediately jumped to his feet and turned like a dancer -Zechs felt his heart go to his mouth and tremble there- his long hair flying out like a banner as he bent in a bow.

"Better luck next time, Sergeant!" The gleeful shout rang out and the unseen crowd below laughed in appreciation, knowing that the city sergeant wouldn't dare enter the palace grounds to hunt further for this truant. The child spun around once more without seeming to look and dropped off the wall like a rock -Zechs felt his heart drop from his mouth to his boots with similar speed - landing like a cat on the roof of the hut in which outdoor practice equipment was kept. He rolled and dropped from there to the ground in a practiced movement and straightened up with a casual flip of his long hair.

To see Odin and Heero glowering at him.

"Oops!" he chuckled, only slightly abashed.

"Duo." Heero's calm voice held a tinge of disapproval, but that only made his cousin's grin wider.

"Out hanging with that gang of ne'er-do-wells, your highness?" Odin stressed the last word a bit, not that he needed to; he didn't normally use the boys' titles except when he thought it necessary to
remind them of their position.

Duo grinned. Punishment, in the form of grueling physical workouts with Odin, was now a certainty but this didn't dent his humor. "Oh well, you know, the guys are kinda fun. Not like Mr Perfect here."

"Duo," Heero snapped, glowering.

"Heero," Duo mimicked. "Oh come on, admit it, buddy, the day you actually have any fun you'd probably curl up and die in sho- ack!"

He tried to dodge but his other half was too fast for him this time. And once those steel arms held him, he wasn't going anywhere. The boys fell in a flurry of arms and legs, in one of their usual bloodless tussles, Heero silent and Duo laughing helplessly, as always. Most of the times Duo was quicker and managed to dodge that first lunge by a hair. Then they would tear through the palace like twin hurricanes, leaving a trail of disruption behind them. So different from the two quiet shadows who spoke with one voice and shrank from strangers. Life had certainly returned to the palace in the last few years, and had become very interesting for its staff.

Zechs watched his sons as Heero managed to pin a squirming Duo in an arm lock. Odin, deciding to make the best of the situation, was calmly giving both of them pointers in the art of infighting.

Heero was slightly taller than Duo, his hair - which he insisted on keeping soldier-short - had darkened dramatically in the past few years, though his eyes had remained a startling dark blue. His face was handsome and regular, and he was as beautiful as a god when he smiled, not that that happened very often.

Duo was slighter than Heero, his hair had gotten much longer and lighter, burned by the sun that always saw him running around outside. His eyes had changed as well as he grew, becoming the most fascinating shade of blue, almost violet. His face was rounder than Heero's and always ready to split into that wide cheesy grin that was fast becoming his trademark.

"And they're both princes, too. In a year or two I'll have to start beating the girls off of them with a stick." Zechs smiled, but as usual something else lingered in his thoughts.

Which one. Which one.

They knew they were not brothers, though this was not a subject anyone had ever discussed with them. They never doubted that they were both his sons, though, which showed the unquestioning faith of children in the face of logic and other small details.

One day they certainly would question the facts, he knew, and he would have to tell them. Oh gods, he wasn't looking forward to that conversation. For now they knew they were cousins and that they were friends that were as close as brothers if not closer, despite their constant bickering and very different characters. He'd managed to impress upon them that their real relation was a secret; no-one but their father and tutors knew that they were not twins. The boys had been careful and had never blurted it out, never corrected people who called them brothers to their face, but they knew.

Which one.

The question might have driven another man insane, but Zechs had a strong mind. The fact that he had chosen both of them with his eyes open and accepting the consequences shored his resolve. He behaved as their father, treated them strictly but with love, watched over them and planned for their futures.
And only occasionally allowed the question of ‘Which one’ to haunt him.

Heero? Even though he was only twelve, people seemed nervous around Heero when they met him for the first time. He was a serious and unsmiling young man, seeming older than his years, and Odin assured him he was unbelievably strong. A lot of people -soldiers, men scarred by the war, nobles- were hoping Zechs would designate Heero as successor, because his skill with the sword was already considerable for one so young, and they appreciated his strength and serious attitude. He would make a good general, lead the armies when needed to, and keep the kingdom safe.

Duo? The teen had unlimited charm and a quick wit that made him Father Maxwell's favorite. He was light and fast on his feet, and almost as quick with his tongue. He annoyed a lot of people, but once he turned on that charm they would eat out of his hand. He had limitless acceptance for those around him. He liked to chat with the servants and the people in the city. He even hung out with a band of street urchins that the capital's sergeant at arms was always trying to run down and stop. The people loved Duo, considering the minor thefts and pranks he and his gang pulled to be a show of spirits, and loving his derisive sense of humor. They would like Zechs to designate Duo as his heir, hoping that his kind nature and charm would insure the continuing peace and prosperity of the kingdom with its neighbors through diplomacy.

Which one.

Heero? Would the child of Zechs and Lucrezia have such dark coloring, such a strong build? Heero had Zechs' handiness with a sword, people were always commenting on it. Sometimes though, that serious intensity bordered on something frightening and even the king watched him carefully.

Duo? No one in Zechs' family had such strange eye color. His easy relaxed attitude was completely unlike the intense ambitious sorcerer king of Lin, Treize. But Duo was developing an almost uncanny ability for magic - white magic of course, the only kind taught in Sanq. His aptitude was truly astounding for someone his age.

Heero? Duo? Which one?

If it had only been the matter of one of them being the son of his enemy, Zechs would have probably given the matter less thought. He had raised them into fine young men, they would both do him proud. But education might not be enough. There was madness and ugly powerful magic in the blood running through one of their veins. The leaders of Lin were all powerful sorcerers, but insanity was a curse that had haunted them for many generations. Treize was the one who had managed to turn that burning power and madness into cunning ambition and become a true threat, but Sanq had always kept a careful eye on its neighbor to the North.

Which one of his sons might be carrying that threat once more?

Despite the bright sunlight, Zechs felt a chill, reminding him of an autumn evening three years ago...

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"Father? What was Treize like?"

Zechs' glass landed on his armrest with a clunk. He'd been nodding off over a book on ancient war tactics (the only kind of book that could hold his interest, it seemed he would be a soldier-king to the end of his days.) The fire crackled as it took up the fight against the autumn's chill and the evening's fading light. His hunting dog and his nine-year old sons were at his feet. Heero was propped up against the chimney's mantel, reading a scroll on defensive white magic; Father Maxwell had given him extra work, as he lacked the interest to fully apply his mind to it unless pushed. Heero always
preferred more practical studies and fencing to magical matters. In fact he avoided magic with that
fierce intensity he applied to most things. It was one of the rare areas in which he was disobedient to
his tutor and his father. Zechs disliked magic as well but insisted it was important to know the
enemy's tactics as well as your own.

Duo had long finished the work Father Maxwell had assigned him and was lounging on the throw
rug near the fire, trying to tease the old greyhound at his father's feet. The hunter barely flicked its
eyelids at the boy, ignoring him from long habit. Growing tired of the lack of reaction and the
silence, Duo had dropped the innocent question on his father, who took it like a magical bolt to the
chest.

Zechs glanced from one son to the other. Duo didn't seem to be hanging on his words, he was still
pulling the dog's ears, but Heero had looked up from his scroll and was watching his father with
intense eyes.

"Why do you ask?" Zechs was trying to gain time, get his thoughts and feelings in order.

"Just curious. Did he really sacrifice people to perform his magic?" Duo had a cheerful blood-thirsty
grin on his face. He was at an age where a story of human sacrifice for the powers of hell was really
exciting stuff.

"Don't be stupid," Heero sniffed. He was still looking at his father. "Odin told me he was a brilliant
general. He could get his troops to do incredible things, even though he didn't have many. He went
right over our northern defenses in a week." His voice was calm and collected - damn, the kid spent
way too much time with Odin, Zechs thought - but his eyes were challenging.

"Yeah, and Father Max said he was a very strong sorcerer, he could level city walls with a single
blast. White magic shields didn't much slow him down. He was the Heir of Lin when he was barely
sixteen." Duo sat up, looking serious all of a sudden.

"Well, you know most of it already then." Zechs sipped his wine dismissively.

"Yeah, we've always heard a lot about him, right?" Duo glanced at his cousin.

"He torched the town of Maseng to the ground just to stop your advance across the river." Heero's
voice was unemotional, but his eyes looked sad. That town no longer existed.

"He managed to trick some of his enemies in Lin into murdering his other enemies, just to be able to
get rid of them all together." Duo sounded awed.

"Odin told me he was always there to lead every armed effort against you, Father, and his men
would fight to the death for him." Heero had a faint tinge of approval in his voice.

"They were probably afraid of him," Duo said, nodding thoughtfully. "I didn't believe the guys in the
gang when they said he did human sacrifices and all that. But I heard he was so angry at the thought
of someone being as strong as he was that he killed his wife and baby son to avoid-"

"That is a lie!" Zechs' book slammed shut in his hand. Duo's head shot up and his eyes widened.

The silence in the library was stirred by a log breaking in the fireplace and falling through the
gridiron with a crackle.

"You shouldn't listen to old wives' tales," Zechs continued more calmly. "It's easy to demonize the
man now, especially after what he's done to our land. But neither of you should say-" say things like
that about your father "-you should always prefer facts to legend, especially when it concerns an
enemy. Listen to Odin and Maxwell, they knew the man, fought against him, and will not tell you fairy tales and ghost stories." He opened his book again, avoiding his sons' eyes.

"We did." Zechs glanced up at Heero in surprise. Duo looked a bit cowed but his cousin's eyes had not left the king's face.

"We wanted to know about him. We don't remember the war, but there are still traces of it in the city. I saw how the south wall was half-melted, until you fixed it last year. And there's that area near the river where things won't grow and people don't build anything anymore. And when we talk about him, people look very scared, even though he's dead." The nine-year old's eyes were demanding. "I asked Odin and he told me about his armies and the way he attacked us-

"- and Father Maxwell told us about his sorcery and the demons he had that obeyed him." Duo's voice was soft, but he was also watching his father's face. "But we want to know what he was like-

"- and Father Maxwell said to ask you-

"-since you actually knew him."

The boys rarely did that anymore, complete each other's sentences. Zechs realized he'd made them nervous. He sighed.

"Treize was a great man."

Both boys stared at him, not expecting that at all.

"You know that Lin isn't actually a kingdom," Zechs said softly, staring into the fire.

"Yes, it's an-" Duo hesitated an instant "an oli-garchy."

"That's right, son. That means that several people control it, and though they do choose one man to lead them, that leader's son does not automatically inherit the throne," Zechs explained, as Heero looked puzzled.

"You should listen to Father Max more instead of sharpening your dagger in class," Duo whispered at his cousin with a grin. Heero scowled at him.

"Lin has several noble families that have very strong magical powers. A leader rules for twenty five years with the help of a council formed from those families. Five years before the end of his reign the children of the houses of Lin are tested against each other and the most powerful leader and mage is designated as the next king. This makes their kings powerful leaders. Unfortunately, those families have--" he glanced at his sons, they might be a bit young for the concept of inbreeding "-they produce very strong sorcerers but they tend to be, um, unstable. It's the price they're willing to pay for power.

"Treize and I met when I was your age. Our families..." he sighed, they were probably too young for the concept of political expediency and alliance marriages as well. "Our families are quite close, we were second cousins I think, I forget. A lot of records and heraldry were lost when the palace was taken." Zechs hadn't particularly mourned for the paperwork.

"He was five years older than I was. We met several times as we both grew up, the last time was at my sixteenth birthday, when I was crowned king of Sanq. He was..."

Firelight danced against the warm wooden walls, the hound snoozed at his feet. Zechs cast his mind back to two young men who were as different as, well, as his sons appeared to be. He could barely
remember what he was like then. Probably a lot like Duo. That young man, Milliardo, heir Peacecraft, had died. As had that other young man he'd known back then...

"He was intense, burning with passion, though he was good at hiding it behind a cool, urbane exterior. He was amazingly charismatic. I've never wondered why his men would die for him without a second thought. I liked him, when he was younger. I actually admired him very much. He did take over the leadership of his kingdom at a young age. He was intelligent, powerful and very ambitious. He was heir designate when we met last. He became king of Lin the next year, murdered any who would oppose him, schemed with other kingdoms to isolate us -they feared him, and with good reason- and then he fell upon us and tore us apart."

"Because he was an evil bastard," Duo muttered, creeping up against the chimney to lean against Heero, something else they rarely did these days. Zechs hesitated.

"Was he evil?" Heero's eyes were pools of darkness, shadowed by the light from the fire behind him. Zechs shook his head.

"No. I don't think so. He was desperate. He knew that his kingdom was dying, you see. It's a small landlocked mountainous country, rich with violent natural magic that causes it to have a low birth-rate, and children are often born with...problems. It's hard to grow food in the mountains, and sustain their population. The powerful families were having fewer and fewer children, despite marriages to noble families from Sanq and other countries. Treize wanted to do what was best for his people. He knew that they needed more room, they needed away from the mountains that had given them their power but were slowly choking them.

"Unfortunately, he got so caught up in this that he went insane. I guess. It's hard to tell genius from insanity for someone so bright, so strong and powerful. We were very lucky to beat him. In the end, sorcery failed against manpower and organized resistance. And I think the madness, his passions, they finally consumed him, and made him careless. Still, we were lucky.

"I will tell you more one day. About Treize, Lin and your- your mother. But not tonight." He tried to smile at the two children squeezed together against the warm stone of the chimney. "Not tonight."

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One day, Zechs would have to tell them the whole story. But, watching the twelve-year old boys laughing and rough-housing under a pale spring sun, he decided to put it off once more, another few months, another year. He had plenty of time.
A twelve year old boy occasionally needs a measure of independence. Being a prince does not make that less true. So Odin and Maxwell did no more than heave a sigh as they watched their charges escape over the horizon. The king's hunting wood was safe enough, and the boys were excellent horse riders. The men spurred their horses a bit and followed the trail the princes had left with resignation. They would scold them when they caught up with them - this was expected, it wouldn't be half as fun if it wasn't against the rules - but they wouldn't really mean it.

Heero outpaced Duo's laughter, keeping his head low as his horse plunged through trees. He was normally the cooler head of the pair, but he was also twelve and full of energy, and a rare excited smile curled his lips as the branches of trees whipped past and the speed of the race made him breathless. He burst into the clearing, took in the sight in an instant, and pulled his horse up so abruptly that Duo almost crashed into him.

Both horses danced and pawed, and Heero let loose a few words he'd picked up in the soldier's training ground when Odin hadn't been around. Duo snickered.

"Why did you stop?" Duo shouted. Heero finally managed to get his horse under control. Duo's was still spooked.

"Oh." The long-haired boy added as he took in their surroundings. They were in a clearing. At the center of which stood a long-abandoned hunting lodge.

Both boys slid from their horses in silence. They hesitated, then looped the harnesses over a tree at the edge of the clearing and walked towards the structure. Boards had rotted, nails had rusted, structures had caved in, but the roof and pillars still looked solid. It was dark and dusty inside, cobwebs and dust caught and smeared what little light fell into the clearing. A rotten leather tether, once meant to attach hunting dogs to a hitching post, creaked back and forth, the only sound and movement. A light smell of smoke with some unpleasant scorched herbal undertone floated in the air, overlaying the smell of earth, trees and dust.

Any twelve year old would have felt a thrill at finding something so spooky while they were alone. But the boys' feelings ran much deeper than that. Memories stirred bringing dread to the surface, and they found themselves holding hands.

"Heero!" Duo hissed, as his cousin took two steps forwards as if he'd been shoved. Heero blinked, frowned. His next step was more deliberate. They were still holding hands, Duo was tugged forward as well.

"Hey, Heero? I'm the curious one, right, but that place - er- ", he couldn't bring himself to admit it gave him the screaming wiggins, "-it don't look safe. Maybe we should-"

Closer now, they could see deeper into the darkness. There was a brazero at the center of the hut.

It was lit, smoking slightly. Next to it was a tall cloaked figure.

Duo yelped and shied away as Heero took another bold step forward. Their arms tugged, then their fingers were slipping apart. Duo felt a wrenching heart-rending feeling of loss and separation when he saw his empty fingers falling back from Heero's hand, and he knew then where they were, why this place chilled them so much. For one moment of pure illogical terror he knew who the figure near the brazero had to be as well, but that was impossible, she'd died several years before...
The figure moved forward. And something behind it, a huge misshapen black shadow against the far wall, moved forward as well, with a creaking complaint of boards from the lodge floor, and a sound like wet leather.

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Back in the palace of Sanq, Zechs was studying several reports on border activity to the north, when he felt a presence behind him. His mind had barely registered that no one had knocked or been showed in, his body had already reacted, sending his chair crashing. His sword, which he always wore even in days of peace, was out of its scabbard and between him and danger.

"Well your majesty, I'm glad to see the years have not made you rusty. But your sword isn't pointed towards the right target right now."

Zechs gasped at the man who had managed to get through his city walls, his guard and his palace unnoticed. "J-Jay? Master Jay?"

"I'm also glad you still recognize me, or we'd be wasting a lot of time. And we don't have any. Instead of waving that thing around, grab a mage shield and get us a couple of horses. We need to be twelve miles from here, and we need to be there five minutes ago."

"What? Just a minute, why should-"

"Your little princes are in serious danger."

"This way!" Zechs snapped, running towards the door, mind on the shortest route to the armory and stables.

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As the bigger shadow moved forward, the light filtering through the gloom of the lodge began assembling half-visible details together like an ugly puzzle. It didn't take many pieces to realize what they were facing.

The princes reacted each according to his character. Heero whipped out his long hunting dagger, falling back into a defensive stance, while Duo went "Yaaagh!" and tried to bolt. Only to find himself slammed backward again as if he'd run into a wall.

"Heero! There's a ward! There's a gods-damned magical ward around the whole clearing, we're -"

"Duo, get over here." His cousin's voice was calm and commanding. Duo's dagger was already drawn; he stumbled back hesitantly.

"Duo, can you break that ward?"

Duo whimpered. "Are you shitting me? It's like a freakin' wall! I can't break that!"

"Anything else you can do?" Heero's voice was tight. Duo didn't need to answer.
The creature ripped itself from the shadows of the lodge reluctantly. Something like that wasn't meant to walk in sunlight, it thrived in darkness and evil dreams. Taller than a man by two good heads, it had immense shoulders falling to a thick waist and small bowed legs. Its hide was gray and covered in scars and oozing sores, showing pale white flesh through the gaping wounds that could never heal. Swathes of long, greasy hair, metallic gray, fell in handfuls from torso and shoulders, thicker on the abdomen, with the groin and legs completely covered. Large feet were bare and white with long toes like those of a gigantic rat. Even Heero shivered as the face came into view. It was flattened and twisted, completely asymmetric, and weeping pustules ruptured it further. Fangs curved up from the mouth, gashing the upper lip. It had no nose, just slits in the flesh. Asymmetric eyes, small and entirely black, fixed the boys with a stare that was a bit smarter than an animal's and much crueler.

Duo knew from his studies that this misshapen creature was a conjuration, a lump of hurting, tortured flesh build to house an evil spirit, and that the only way to kill it was to pierce its heart.

Heero knew from Odin that the being would be fairly slow but very strong, and the huge rough spike it carried could either pierce or crush. And he knew they were going to die.

The creature halted reluctantly as the smaller shadow behind it snapped its fingers. The other figure was a man in his forties, small, with short brown hair and a small pencil mustache. He was dressed in dark green with a black symbol on the chest of the robe half-seen beneath his brown cloak. He drew level with the fiend without a sideways glance at it, his gaze fixed on the boys. Duo had come to stand near Heero, close enough to guard his side but far enough to let him swing. Not that that was going to help.

"You both showed up." The man's voice was high and nasal. "I might have known, the cast of the fortune sticks was muddled."

"What do you want?" Heero barked aggressively, to Duo's admiration.

"What I am here for is to kill one of you, both if I need to. That is what the council appointed me to do. What I want, personally, is to not have to kill my nephew. Would that be you, boy?" The man’s voice was haughty, but his eyes on Heero were incandescent.

"Nephew?" Duo echoed in surprise. "We don't have any uncles, mister, so you got the wrong guys. Now if you'll just let us-"

"You have an uncle, boy. One of you does. One of you is the son of that cur Zechs. The other one is much more fortunate."

Duo's jaw clamped in anger. But you didn't trade insults with a sorcerer when his fiend was staring at you and wondering what your guts tasted like.

"What do you mean?" Heero was as usual more prosaic.

"I mean that one of you is a noble of Lin, boy. One of you is the son of my brother, Treize, ruler of Lin. I don't know why Zechs didn't strangle you when he found out. Maybe he doesn't know, although even he can't be that stupid. I take it from the looks you are giving me that you didn't know, though. That is not surprising but rather... unfortunate. I don't have much time to start-" his grin widened beneath his mustache "splitting heirs. I guess there's only one way to cut to the quick. I won't lose all that much either way."

He waved a lazy hand and the fiend started to lumber forwards. Duo twisted around and sent a desperate lance of white magic towards the wards around the clearing that was blocking their escape.
It bounced off without even causing a tremble in the wall.

"We're stuck." Duo's voice was suddenly as calm as his cousin's as he turned back towards the slowly advancing creature. "What was he going on about?" He glanced at Heero, whose face was a mask.

"He's saying one of us is Treize's son." The creature was moving very slowly, deliberately, it was waiting for them to break and run.

"That's nuts!"

"Is it? Think about it Duo. We're cousins. Odin told me Treize had an heir by Lady Une who was Lucrezia's -"

Duo's mouth fell open and a gasp of denial was interrupted by a growl from the fiend. It was a terrible noise, a groan of pain with a moan of pleasure. The boys took an involuntary step back and felt the ward starting to push back at them.

"Which one of us-" Duo started in a voice a whole octave higher than usual, his face pale and horrified.

"It won't matter in a few minutes," Heero said quietly, his eyes finally breaking from their attacker to glance sadly at his best friend. Duo saw resignation in that look, and a sad tenderness for himself that made him want to cry. It ignited anger in him instead.

"Screw that, and screw ugly over there! That's bullshit! Look!" His voice dropped to a hurried whisper, the fiend was only three meters away. "If we kill its controller, it'll go berserk and maybe forget about us. If nothing else the ward will drop and-"

"You take right. The one it follows distracts him, the other one-"

"Gotcha!"

The cousins shot apart, Heero twisting under the pike the creature had swung towards him. The fiend hesitated a few moments, then turned on Heero. Duo swore; he was lighter on his feet, he could have distracted it, while Heero, the better swordsman, could have dealt with 'uncle'. But of course that wasn't how the dice had fallen! He had to kill the controller quickly or his cousin would be mince.

He threw himself towards the cloaked figure who was watching with interest Heero's attempts to dodge the huge pike.

The man didn't even glance his way, merely waved a hand over his shoulder and the air suddenly solidified around Duo like water, then like glue, then like glass. Duo screamed in fury as he saw the man throw him a smirk before turning back towards his fiend.

Heero managed to dodge into the fiend's guard, nullifying the spike's greater length, and slashed his dagger across the sinewy wrist that was holding it. Duo felt a pang of pride through his despair, even though he knew that hurting the shell of the creature would have no effect on it. It didn't even register pain as it tried to hit Heero with its other hand, talons raking down towards the boy. Heero ducked and slithered sideways, then made one desperate lunge to stab the dagger into the fiend's chest and heart, above head height to the young boy.

But the long hunting dagger twisted on the rubbery grey hide and merely scored a rib. The creature gave that groaning grunt again and slammed the boy to the ground.

"Heero!" Duo managed to scream, as the creature backed up a step and swung the pike up. Heero
managed to roll onto his back, dazed, his eyes on the spike about to impale him and pin him to the ground.

Heero had been sad that they were going to die and be finally separated for good. Duo, instead, felt angry. A burning, wrenching fury that they were going to be torn apart. He'd felt anger like this before, a wild heat that engulfed him and turned the world blood red. Not often, though, and he normally recoiled from the emotion.

Now he had nothing to lose and he embraced it. The fury was so sharp, so strong, it felt like nothing could restrain it, it would blow right through the pathetic little grip the sorcerer had on him and allow him to rip out the man's throat before he died. A searing heat was rippling over his body, but the anger kept him focused until-

-it was like breaking through dark water into thin air, he was flying, time had crystallized around him and he was the only pulse beating in the whole world and he knew then who he was. Not Zechs' little jester. Not Treize's offspring.

He was Death.

The sorcerer didn't see it coming, but unfortunately he didn't need to. Since he was half-expecting something to happen when he attacked the boys, he had all his powers in the two wards, one around the clearing, one magic-repellent one around his person. But even so he staggered back and gasped at the sheer magnitude of the raw unchanneled power that rumpled the air and ripped it apart at the seams, blasting out in all directions. The fiend was tossed back against the wards with a howl. The lodge cracked and fell inwards, its front support beams buckling. The ward around the clearing warped out under the pressure and then twanged back.

"Duo?!!"

Duo staggered as he was suddenly free. He glanced around wildly. Heero, laying flat against the ground, had not been affected too much by the force, merely rolled over. Odin was now grabbing him by the collar and jerking him behind him, putting himself between his charge and the recovering creature. Father Maxwell was standing a bit further away, his eyes on Duo.

Duo noted the look of worry the old man was casting over him. And he also saw the slight fear behind the look. He wasn't surprised, just saddened. And just slightly angry again. Had the old man known? Why hadn't he said anything? Had - had his father known? Had Heero?!

"Duo, come over here! Quick!" Maxwell was waving at him frantically. Odin had dragged Heero back to the priest. They stood, the three of them together. Duo had never felt so alone, but he couldn't seem to take that step towards them, to try to belong with them once more.

"Septim! I'll have your scrawny neck for this!" Odin shouted, his sword flickering back and forth, distracting the advancing fiend. His left hand was steadying Heero behind him. "Can you get us back out of this ward?" he threw over his shoulder at the priest.

Father Maxwell, his pained eyes still on Duo, shook his head. "Too tired, I barely managed to lift it enough to get us in," he murmured. He started as the fiend gave an aggrieved huff. The creature's master was distracted, staring at Duo, so it decided to have fun regardless. It swung the pike up and brought it slamming into its palm with a meaty thunk before lumbering forward

Odin's eyes narrowed as he analyzed the situation. He threw a glance over his shoulder at the priest and his charge, and one of his rare smiles flickered. "Take care of the kids, Maxwell. Heero can help you kick Septim's ass, and I'll be cheerin' you on. Good luck, kid. Do your best."
Father Maxwell and Heero barely had time to shout, Odin had already leaped at the fiend. He dodged the pike, twisted and plunged his sword into the creature's chest.

The fiend screamed, a noise like a dying child, and staggered. Odin did his best to leap back, abandoning his sword, but in its agony the creature was faster, and the old soldier's reflexes lost against the instinctive death throw. The pike crashed into him, glancing off his shoulder to crush his skull, sending him falling several feet away, limp as a broken doll.

"Odin!" Three horrified voices almost covered the dying gurgles of the fiend as it collapsed to the ground. Furious, Duo turned back to the sorcerer, who hadn't even glanced behind him. He was staring at Duo like a cat at cream.

Duo's anger ignited once again, intent on removing that expression from the man's face if he had to tear it off with his fingernails. Unbidden, the dark power ran over his hands at the very thought, trembling across his fingers. Duo put all his sadness at Odin's death, his fear for Heero and Maxwell, and above all his anger at having his peaceful illusion of family life torn from him, and let loose all he had.

Septim's grin widened as the power crashed into his wards. And swirled around them like a hurricane, leaving the sorcerer intact in the eye of the storm.

"Why thank you, my nephew. My blasts were never all that powerful. But I'll make good use of yours."

Duo screamed as the power hurled off of Septim's ward to explode around him - engulfing Heero and Father Maxwell in a wall of flames.

"Heero!" Duo felt his mind rip as he fell to his knees. His body was trembling all over, that last blast had taken all he had. He couldn't feel his knees hit the cold dirt as he saw the magical black flames, coiling like snakes, ripple over the three bodies in the clearing and flicker slowly out. Black spots spattered across his vision of the charred bodies of his friends and of Heero, the other part of his soul. "No, not that, don't go, don't leave me alone," Duo whispered. But he was gone, Duo's anger had crushed him. Duo barely felt Septim's hand on his shoulder.

"Well, a good job in all. I get rid of one heir, and apparently I've found another in the process. But now we need to leave. Someone dangerous is close at hand. Too late for the precious Sanq prince though." Septim chuckled.

Numbing darkness rushed from his hand on Duo's shoulder. Duo hoped it was his death sentence, but knew he didn't deserve that small mercy. The clearing and the smoking remains blurred and shimmered in his vision as the sorcerer spent all his power to yank them away from the lodge and back to Lin. Duo sighed as his vision came back. Not dead then. He slumped forward, finally giving up and letting the darkness claim him.
Smoke rose from the scorched grass, cloying in the air. It shifted in the slight breeze. As Zechs ran
towards the clearing, a smell he knew all too well caused his heart to beat in a sudden panicked
frenzy; the smell of burnt human flesh.

"Heero, Duo!" And then he stopped, seeing the charred bodies. The bottom dropped out from the
world and let him hanging alone in the cold of space.

Before the whimper of horror and disbelief could pass his lips he felt movement. He spun towards
the lodge. A small figure was sitting on a fallen beam, holding a sword. He was covered in soot from
head to toe and had sat so still he'd melded right into the singed woodwork.

"Heero!" Relief exploding in his chest, Zechs tripped over burnt sod and smoking grass. His hands
were rough as he brushed his son up and down looking for serious burns or injury. Heero had a
tender lump on the back that was starting to swell, and the skin on his hands and neck was starting to
blister. His hair, which he always insisted on keeping short and in a military cut, was singed even
shorter. His eyes were wide but focused. He didn't respond when Zechs finally concluded he was
alright and pulled him into a bear hug.

"Where's your brother? What happened?" Zechs asked, both questions trying to get out at once.

"...Not my brother."

Zechs stiffened and slowly leaned back to look at his son. The blue eyes caught his. They were flat
and void of emotion.

"A sorcerer of Lin attacked us. He was sent to assassinate the Sanq prince. He set a fiend on us." The
phrases were short and clipped, like a status report. "It was Treize's brother. Septim, Odin called
him. He was also looking for Treize's heir." Zechs jumped so badly he nearly jerked Heero off the
beam. Heero paid no attention. "The fiend caught me. Duo retaliated with a black magic blast. Odin
and Father Max intervened. Odin was k-killed. Duo tried to kill Septim. The spell bounced off his
wards. It hit me and Father Maxwell. Father used up all his strength to shield me. When I came to,
Father Maxwell was dead. Septim had taken Duo. I guess they went back to Lin. You should have
told us."

The last was said in the same tone, as part of the report, so that Zechs, reeling from the repeated
blows, almost missed it. "Heero- I-"

"I know why you didn't. But you should have." The tone was not judgmental. It wasn't anything
really. He's in shock, Zechs thought.

"Son-" he started again.

"Who is that?"

The sword Heero was holding swung up, pointing to a spot behind the king. It was Odin's mage-
tempered blade, Zechs realised. Heero's dagger was lying on the beam at his side, slightly twisted
and dulled by the heat. The sword, designed to resist magical blasts, was shining like a shard of light
as its point centered on the figure that had followed Zechs into the clearing.

"My name is Jay. Which one are you?"
Heero gave the man the same blank stare as he had Zechs. Jay was of average height and square build. He had a mustache hanging down his face, graying chestnut, and long gray hair pulled back over a large forehead. He was wearing little round glasses so thick you could barely see his eyes. He was wearing a dusty beige leather long-coat, and functional brown pants and shirt beneath. He didn't appear to be armed.

"Heero," the youth finally said. His eyes looked suddenly guarded as the flash of the glasses caught his eyes and held them.

"Hmmm. Ok. How long ago did Septim and Duo teleport out of here?"

"About ten minutes."

"Damn. OK. I think I can squeeze a teleport out myself. I don't want the castle guards to go all squirrelly on us when we come back with you in this state."

A minute later they were back in the study where Jay had found Zechs. Five minutes after that, they had made a discreet way to the princes' chambers, where Zechs washed his son down with water from a cold basin, double-checking he didn't have any serious burns. The soldier's ritual stopped his mind from spinning out of control, though his heart was groaning Duo with every beat of his pulse.

"Well, now we're in a bit of a bind," Jay said without preamble. The king and the prince looked at him as he wandered around the room, glancing at scrolls and straightening weapons, clothes and knick-knacks.

"Who are you?" Heero asked again. His cleaned face was pale and set.

"This is Master Jay. He's a very powerful sorcerer who lives in the wastes east of us, on the frontier with Kespar. You've heard of him." Zechs voice was quiet. "He helped us during the war with Treize. Sent us some sorcerers who could actually counter black magic actively. It helped us retake the capital without too much bloodshed."

"That sums it up," Jay grunted. "Now your boy can return the favor, if he chooses."

"What?" Zechs asked, startled.

"The forces of Lin will be moving again one day. This time, things will be even worse. I can't give you any more information, not to someone who isn't working hand in hand with me. I've got my own work, you've got yours, we go our own ways. Heero here however has a choice.

"When things get really bad, I'll need the help of someone with power, to counter the madness that Lin is going to unleash on us. They're already letting slip their hounds. Septim's attack against your heir was only the first of many small moves which will take years to culminate.

"Heero here can hunker down here until Lin decides to try to assassinate him again. He can try to start mobilizing against them and hope that will suffice when the time comes. Or he can come with me and help me from my end."

"Why me?" Heero asked quietly, interrupting Zechs' protests.

"It wasn't just you. I wanted both you princes working for me. Both your bloodlines are powerful, one with white magic - which is always handy whatever anyone might say - and the other with...a different kind. Yeah, the son of Treize was the one I really wanted, truth be told." The cold glass flickered in the afternoon's dying light. Heero's eyes widened slightly and his jaw tightened. "When it comes down to it, he'll be a powerhouse. Plus, added bonus, if I could actually train him, maybe he
wouldn't go crazy like all the other rulers of Lin before him. It's not just their bloodline that's the
problem, you know. The amount of power they use burns out their brains sooner or later. He's
probably not felt it yet since he's avoided using the really powerful kind of magic until now, but that
won't be an option in the next few years.

"Unfortunatley Septim rooked me. Instead of the two of you well trained and working together, Duo
might be helping whatever comes out of Lin in a few years time and that means you will have to
oppose him, whatever path you choose."

"But Duo-" Heero glanced at Zechs and then stared at the floor, perturbed.

"If you stay here, then it's unlikely you will have the power to fight what's coming, especially with
Duo involved, but as I said, it's your choice." The man smiled like a lizard, without feeling or humor.

"I'll do it."

"What?!" Zechs was on his feet, protesting, but flinched at the blue eyes that fastened on his.

"It's my choice. You can't stop me. If you don't let me go, I'll find a way of going on my own." The
voice was as cold as deep sea water, powerful currents pulling underneath a still surface. "I know
why Jay wants me. There is...something wrong out there. A hole in the world. Something Treize
opened during the war, I think. I felt it when--...Duo...He and I are connected to it somehow. It's
already started. It's my responsibility to make sure I can stop it when the time comes."

Zechs could feel himself drowning in those deep blue oceans, logic and authority melting in the face
of steely determination.

"It won't be easy, boy." Jay almost smirked. "I think you know what my training will entail. It might
break you. But I won't have you becoming part of the problem, do you understand?"

"I understand perfectly."

Once more their eyes met. Jay nodded slightly, satisfied. Heero turned towards Zechs.

"You will tell everybody that Duo and I have left for our mother's birthland for a prolonged visit. For
our education. Father Maxwell and Odin will have accompanied us." The steely voice quavered
slightly, in pain and in echo of the grief in Zechs' face. Heero visibly knew how alone the king was
soon going to be, having lost his two best friends as well as Duo in one day.

"You have to keep the people of Sanq from wondering what happened to us," Heero continued,
regaining some control over his voice. "Lin will assume that I have died, and you are trying to hide it
until you can find someone to succeed you. This will stop them from trying to kill me again, or even
look for me. I'll try to keep in touch with you, I'm sure we can manage something. It will only be for
a few years. After that I-"

Suddenly the eyes faltered, and it was a boy who looked at Zechs through wounded eyes, then the
control snapped back, faltering only slightly.

"I can't promise- I - I will try my best, but I may have to--...But I promise to do my best, to make sure
you-you're not alone after... "

Zechs knew he was going to argue. For hours, until it would get dark enough for Jay and Heero to
sneak out of the palace. And he knew he was going to lose. He knew he would soon be alone again.
He didn't understand any of this, but what he saw in his son's eyes frightened him, even more than
the loneliness that was going to silence the palace around him soon. Heero had seen something, he
felt, while the black power of his other half crashed and burned around him, something lurking in their futures. What he was seeing there was making him older than his years.

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A few hours later, two figures left through the east gate of the city, unchallenged, the city watch having been suddenly inexplicably distracted away from their post. Heero made a sour mental note to write to Zechs as soon as he arrived in the no-mans-land of Kespar that was Jay's home. The city watch would have to be beefed up with a white mage for every patrol if it was so easy to break into and out of the city with a bit of mental shenanigans. He was sure Odin would arrange it-

He clutched Odin's sword tightly, bringing his feelings under control. He hadn't lost control of his emotions in the clearing when his mentor had been killed. Maybe it would have been better- no, it was pointless to second guess the past. Now he had to concentrate single-mindedly on the future. He had left all the trappings of a prince behind. The only thing he'd kept was Odin's unadorned but mage-charmed sword, and a vest that Zechs had thrust into his arms as he left. It belonged to the king, it was too big but was in the royal color, green. Heero knew that this was a declaration. You are my heir, so you better come back.

Heero didn't know if he could keep that promise as easily as he'd stuffed the vest into his sack. He hoped it wouldn't hurt Zechs too much if he couldn't.
Duo tested the magical wards half-heartedly. They were as tough as stone. He shrugged. He hadn't expected anything less.

"So, what did you want with me?" He tried to scrounge together some interest. He failed. Septim didn't notice.

"I'll make it short, I have a lot to organize. Twenty years ago, my brother became the leader of Lin. In five years time his reign will end-"

"Treize is dead," Duo said. "He's a charcoal smear near the Gap of Sevring on the borders between Lin and Sanq."

"That doesn't affect the length of his reign." Septim sniffed as if Duo was being stupid. Duo thought that having a dead guy as a ruler was stupider, but couldn't even get up the enthusiasm to bait the man. He felt dead inside. He was dead inside.

In fact there was really only one reason he was keeping himself together at that point, and that was the vague hope that Septim might actually be stupid enough to let him go, and then he could try to kill the bastard again. Duo was a twelve-year old boy in body, but his mind had aged years in the last few hours. He knew quite soberly that he really had nothing else left in the world; no home to go to, no Heero to make it all better, no father to help him, no friends to back him up. He had nothing else to live for but death. Septim's death, to start with.

"So you want me for what?" He schooled his voice to sound uncertain, cowed. Duo was a joker, but he had deep undercurrents in his mind and soul that matched Heero's. He'd just never been comfortable with them, or wanted others to see them, so he'd gotten adept at letting a small part of his mind float to the surface and act the merry fool. It hid those other parts from the people around him, and they liked him for it. Now that he knew what horrors were lurking in the depths, he felt slightly grateful that at least he'd known that time of joy and innocence. Now that small part of him that most people knew as Duo felt fake, as hollow as a worm-eaten wooden mask. But it would be useful, if he could use it to make Septim drop his guard.

"In a few days," Septim started pompously, "the noble-born children of the houses of Lin will announce their decision to vie to become the new heir to our country. They will be tested over the next few years in trials of magic, strength, leadership and discipline. The best will become the sorcerer-king of Lin, and will lead our armies across Sanq again. And this time we'll be staying!"

Septim gave a feral smile.

"This time," Duo countered before he could stop himself, "they'll be handing you your ass same as the last time. They're waiting for you. You know."

The words hung in the air between them. They. They're waiting for you. Septim's smile widened as Duo's face hardened. He really didn't have a home anymore...

"Oh, we have an advantage, my nephew. Duo, I believe your name is? Odd name, but I guess we cannot change it now. Yes, we have an advantage." Duo's ears pricked, Septim seemed awfully sure of himself. "The wheels are already in motion. This time we will crush them. If you become king of Lin, you will learn more. By then, our plans will have come to fruition. In the meantime, you should concentrate on getting used to the Court. It's not for the weak of heart."
"I don't have high hopes for you," he added dismissively. "I would have liked to have my brother's son lead us to victory. Treize had unimaginable resources at his command. I never had any doubts that he was the best choice for our king, even though he was several years younger than I...But even though you are his son, I have no sentimental attachment to you, boy. So don't expect much from me. If you don't want to end up someone's lackey, or worse," his smile became both sick and sensuous, "much worse, then you'll keep your wits about you in the next few days. Your chances will be better if you come to me for help, of course." The smile became even nastier. "But that's your decision. Ask any servant, they'll know where to find me. In the meantime feel free to wander around. Just don't get into a fight. Or use magic. You will be punished quite excruciatingly. "

Septim left in a whisper of cloak. The wards fell from around Duo, but he could feel, as Septim turned to close the door, that they were still thick around his target. He'd felt their strength back in the clearing. He wasn't going to get the drop on the man very easily.

Duo was left alone. The true meaning of that word echoed through the missing half of his soul. But he wouldn't let himself dwell on it. Duo was too young to contemplate his own death. If he could be guaranteed to take Septim -hell, the whole of Lin for that matter- with him, he might be tempted to... but that wouldn't happen. So he was going to have to find a way. And that meant getting out and looking for it, instead of hiding in the small room he'd been assigned.

He was in some kind of school, he gathered. A long corridor led to a series of small rooms like his for the students. The corridor ended in a huge room full of pillars and mezzanines, four stories high. A skylight brightened the room, leaded in a startling beautiful geometric design. The place was one big library, books stacked here and there, overflowing bookcases, hiding in alcoves, abandoned in window-seats. Tables, chairs, oddly placed bookshelves, painted screens, an astrolabe, statuary and other odds and ends cluttered up the place and reduced visibility, like a genteel jungle. A few oddities caught his eye. A fencing strip was set up in one of the bigger alcoves on the first mezzanine. A clear space on the pale rock floor on the ground level was covered in symbols and markings, and a brazero and an incongruous birdbath on a pedestal had been added to the design.

Duo glanced from one window and saw some other buildings, practice grounds, and arid rock gardens all around leading up to a high wall. The entire school didn't look very big, but it didn't need to be, there weren't that many students who qualified. Most of them were in the library, which seemed to be a common gathering place. To Duo's eyes the other pupils were all remarkably similar. Tall, wide of shoulder, with tawny to light brown hair and eyes, regular square features and an air of hunger about them that put him on edge. They were two dozen or so, talking in small groups, reading the many books around the halls, sparring, and all watching him and each other. They looked at him with airs of disdain and challenge, and Duo remembered this competition that the children of the noble houses of Lin were supposed to start soon. He didn't want any part of it, though his hackles rose at the looks he was getting. As the newest arrival he was being weighed to a fine degree.

He was supposed to get in there and talk to them, he realized. That was why they had an air of anticipation as well as hunger and disdain. He was supposed to start checking out the competition. The thought drained him. He would concentrate on Septim - and maybe these other bastards as well - tomorrow. He could grab a book and retreat... but he didn't feel like it, the anger that was apparently now welded to his soul pricking him to not turn tail and run from those stares. Looking around for an acceptable way out, his eyes caught on one exception in the halls.

A figure hunched over a book at a small table in a window seat contrasted with the other young people in the library. Apart from one incurious glance when Duo had walked in, the boy had not looked at him once and was treating him with sublime indifference. With a pang it reminded him of Heero during one of his frequent 'don't bother me' moods. He reacted to it as he usually did.
The boy - they were about the same age - looked up in surprise as Duo took the seat opposite his. Duo could feel surprise from the rest of the company as well. Apparently this was totally unexpected. Good, he thought. He didn't feel like playing games. At least not theirs.

He noticed with a flicker of curiosity that the boy opposite him must come from the distant lands his mother had come from; maybe even further. His eyes were exotic slanted almonds, dark as ebony. His skin was the color of caramel, and his hair, pulled in a short tight ponytail, was black and silky. He looked annoyed as he glanced back down at his book.

"My life is sacred," he snapped.

Duo's smile didn't flicker at the strange greeting. "Really? That's cool. Mine isn't worth dirt."

The boy blinked, looking up again, his dark eyes widening. "Who are you?" He seemed to regret the question immediately.

"My name is Duo. Duo Mar-" Memory made him flinch. He wasn't allowed to use the name Marquise anymore. "Maxwell," he said quickly to cover his confusion. Whatever happened, whatever he had... done, he knew Father Maxwell loved him unconditionally and somehow he felt the priest's name would protect him. Maybe remind him to make sure nobody he loved was nearby when he tried to kill Septim again.

Not that that would be difficult, three of the four people he cared about had died only a few hours ago, and he would never see the fourth again. Duo could feel something ugly and dark tug at his mind behind the anger. He remembered that most of the heirs of Lin in Treize's lineage were stark raving mad. If they'd ever had anything like the day he'd just had, he couldn't blame them. He couldn't even feel all that worried about his own sanity right now. It didn't seem worth it.

Someone was talking to him. He glanced over his shoulder at a tall youth, sixteen or so, with sandy hair, blue-green eyes and regular features. A girl with similar looks was at his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying? And was it worth listening to?" Duo didn't even try to sound polite. He didn't want to be bothered.

From the tension registered by his companion and the rest of the room, it might have been wise to be less rude. Screw that.

The young man at his shoulder smiled. It was the same feral smile as Septim and Duo had to grip the tabletop to stop himself from flying at it in blind hate.

"I said, boy, we know who you are and that Maxwell isn't your last name. Although I can see why you might feel too inadequate to claim the name of your father."

Father? Zechs? No, damn it, of course not. The other one.

"I've got better things to worry about." And his smile slipped slightly as the undercurrents tore at it. The boy's eyes narrowed. "If you feel proud carrying around a name you inherited along with the silver spoon up your ass, good for you."

The other's smile grew broader. These Lin guys are great, Duo thought sourly, the more you insult them, the more they grin at you. "So what claim do you have on the name Maxwell? Someone didn't want it?" the boy sneered.

"It belonged to a man I murdered about four hours ago." Duo's smile returned, a manic slash that wiped the grin off the other's face and had the girl take a nervous step back. "If that doesn't give me
the right to take it, I don't know what does. Now go away, I'm talking to my friend here."

"His life is sacred. For now." The youth smirked at the dark-haired boy, who looked back calmly. Duo felt slightly surprised; the guy didn't look like the kind who would take a tone like that without a fight.

"Yeah, I think I heard that somewhere before. I was planning on talking to him, not killing him. Leave. Now."

The youth smiled again, charming and urbane. Slowly he reached out a hand and gave one of Duo's locks a gentle tug. "Nice hair," he murmured. "I'll be seeing you around then."

Duo sat still, not sure how to react, or rather, not sure he could survive the consequences of reacting how he wanted to. The other turned without looking at him again and walked away slowly, making a point. Duo had never known Treize except through his father-Zechs' descriptions, but he had suddenly a gut feeling of what he had been like. He turned to the other boy with a shudder.

"So, you have a name? Or should I just call you 'sacred guy'."

"You are the son of Treize, aren't you?" The kid had narrowed his almond eyes at him.

"Is that problem?" Duo hedged, although he kept a confident smile.

The boy stared at Duo, weighing him. He looked puzzled but slightly encouraged by what he saw. "No, I guess not. That makes you the son of lady Une as well." Duo managed to hide a flinch of surprise at that, damn, he'd forgotten another detail in the miserable shambles that was his life; Lucrezia was not his mother, Une was. "I have heard of her. She was a complex woman, but very strong, proud and honorable. I guess I am not dishonored in talking with her son. As long as you don't take after your peers." His eyes had slipped towards the two who had just left them. He appeared to regret his words immediately.

"That ass who just talked at me? Yeah, I could see why you wouldn't want that. He always like that?"

Duo picked up a pencil from the table and started flicking it through agile fingers with his usual nervous energy.

"Worse. His name is Rao. Right now you intrigue him, and he won't start anything yet. In three days time, I would be very worried if I were you. He's the most likely to be the one to set foot in conquest over the lands to the South."

That's Sanq you're talking about, in that stilted oh-so-polite way of yours, Duo seethed. He glared at the sandy-haired Rao beneath his lashes. The boy was talking to the girl and a few others, smiling all the while. Anger was building up again.

"I am a hostage here, in case you were wondering why my life is sacred. My name is Chang Wu Fei. I was sent from an empire far to the east of here to a neighboring kingdom, to marry into a clan of my people who had migrated here. They lived in a small colony on this continent, they were charged with the management and protection of the trade routes and embassies to your lands." Wu Fei's voice was collected, almost bored. His eyes were inscrutable.

"Septim has been the acting head of the sorcerers' council since Treize's death, and decided I would be a useful political pawn. He raided my adopted clan, murdered my wife and many of her people, and made me a prisoner here." He smoothed his hands over the scroll with careful attention. "I will be here, a guarantee of neutrality from my birthclan and the empire, until a leader is chosen. I will
then be at his mercy. I will either be executed, or forced into marriage to guarantee the Empire's inaction when the south is attacked. As Rao is the most likely candidate to succeed in the competition, I might end up marrying his sister," his eyes flicked to the girl at Rao's side, "if not Rao himself."

The pencil went sailing. "Uh?? But you're- you're both guys!"

"A minor quibble in a political marriage." Wu Fei seemed unconcerned. "It's done fairly regularly, especially in Lin. They consider the need to adopt the children to the marriage to be an added benefit, a way of avoiding consanguinity. That's interbreeding." He added, with the slight arrogance of a thorough scholar.

"I know what it means!" Duo snapped. Then he stared hard at the smooth bowed head, the calm black eyes that dropped back to the book. Wu Fei expected him to go away now, ignore him.

"You're planning on killing him, aren't you. The next heir." Duo's voice was barely a whisper.

Wu Fei's eyes barely twitched. "That is ridiculous," he answered just as softly. "That would be suicide."

"Yeah, but that wouldn't stop you. Don't lie to me, buddy. I can see death on you as clear as day..."

Wu Fei looked up as if to object, then his eyes widened. Duo realized his mask had slipped again just slightly. But he didn't mind. It looked like he'd found someone of he could relate to.

"As you can see, death and I have recently become the best of buddies. We're practically inseparable." His hands were grasping the tabletop so hard he thought his fingers might break, but the mask was back in place, and the others in the room had not noticed. "So far I've only managed to kill people I cared about, but I'm hoping to be able to improve myself with a bit of practice. Shit..." His fingers were pulsing with more than blood to their tips in the crushing grip. Wu Fei's eyes widened further.

"Don't!" he hissed. "Magic in here is severely punished- Duo, stop!"

"Need... I need some... fresh air I think," Duo said with a caricature of a smile.

Wu Fei shot out of his chair. "This way," he whispered urgently.

Duo stumbled blindly after the slim black ponytail, blind to anything but the pulse that was now shaking his whole body, clawing at him. He realized that he'd staggered down some stairs, through a door and outside into a pit lined with rock, open to the sky, a dead end. He growled "Get the hell out of here if you want to live!" and then allowed himself to think.

To remember.

"Heero!" The scream was nearly drowned out by the pulse of black energy that crashed from his thin body, hitting the stone walls and causing them to spark and moan. "I'll kill him! I'll kill them all!"

Wave upon wave erupted from him as his memory burned like his friends, charred bodies pummeling his mind, biting at his sanity.

Zechs' -no longer his father. His home- now the land of the enemy. His family - a bunch of inbred killers. Wails of grief and screams of fury echoed around the rock pit between surges of waning energy.
When the darkness cleared from his eyes, he was slumped on the floor, panting, bile in his mouth and his heartbeat a cruel thread in his aching head. But he felt slightly better. Or maybe he just managed to burn out a bit more of the part of him that cared.

"I can see why Septim actually has hopes for you."

Wu Fei hadn't left! Horror crawled up his spine until the other sauntered into view, and he saw the youth was unharmed.

"I thought it was a move of pure desperation, digging out Treize's untrained son this late in the game. I know it's been eating at him, not having his own pawn in the match for leadership, but no one thinks you have a hope in hell." Wu Fei glanced around the pit. Rocks were cooling with a ping. New cracks had appeared in the highly corroded surfaces. "But you have a lot of raw power. Too bad you lack any elements of control." He looked thoughtful.

"You better run away," Duo pointed out. "Someone is bound to come see what the hell all that was about."

Wu Fei turned to him with an affronted look. "I don't run away! But don't worry. This pit is set aside for the older students to practice high-energy magic. No one will come to check on explosions out here." He snorted as Duo suddenly took in the details of the pit, the previously melted stone, the echoes of raw power in the air. "Why did you think I took you here in the first place?"

"That was smart. And nice. Thanks," said Duo with his first honest smile. "Now get lost."

"What?" Wu Fei's eyebrows shot up. Then he scowled. "What kind of attitude is that, for someone who-

"Someone I'm beginning to like." Duo was so exhausted he felt hollow, as if the light breeze blowing across the garden and down the pit was going straight through him, blowing the words out without his volition. "A few hours ago, I killed my...my best friend, my- my better half, you could say. And two men who were as close to me as my- as fathers. It was an accident and Septim's fault, but either way-"

"Heero, right?" Wu Fei repeated the name he'd have heard before all hell had broken loose and he'd dodged back behind the reinforced warded doorway.

"...Yeah... Heero." Duo smiled, thinking about his dour friend. The pain seemed better now, more wholesome. Now that he'd let loose, given up, somehow... it was as if he was a different person. He could mourn his friend without going insane. Or maybe he was insane, and he hadn't realized it. He chuckled slightly, a painful sound. Treize had been able to function lethally while being completely barking mad. Maybe Duo had inherited another ability from his- from that man. One that would be useful. He cracked open an eye.

"You're still here."

"Yes, it appears I am." Wu Fei shrugged.

"Why are you still here? I told you, I'm a danger to hang with."

"I'm surrounded by people who would gladly kill me by inches - and probably will - and be proud of it. I'd rather - 'hang', as you say, with someone who'll kill me quickly by accident and then feel very bad about it afterwards. If you don't mind."

Oh yeah, Wu Fei also had a few skeletons in his closet, Duo remembered. The next ruler of Lin was
going to decide his fate for him, and hopefully die as a result. Hmmm.

Something else Wu Fei had said came back to Duo's mind.

"You said Septim has hopes for me? He told me he didn't give a damn."

"You could be dog food for all he cares about you as a person, but the family members of the king of Lin have powers while he reigns, so-

"Okay, say no more, I get the picture. Wu Fei, my man? You say you've been here how long?"

"Five months." Wu Fei looked bitter. Duo realized that he had dropped the proud, distant mask he had worn in the library. Duo felt touched at that, even as he ached at how much it reminded him of Heero. Duo was not good at functioning alone. If Wu Fei didn't mind risking sudden burning death at his side, maybe...

"Wu Fei, buddy!" He smiled, seeing this annoyed the boy almost as much as it had annoyed Heero. "Why don't you tell me a bit more about all those trained inbred poodles in there, and maybe we can see about helping each other out a little. Hmmm?"
"Greetings! You must be one of the new arrivals? From Sanq?"

Heero looked the boy over carefully. He appeared to be a year or so younger than himself, though he behaved with the assurance of someone older. Not arrogant, on the contrary he seemed quite friendly, but he met Heero's eyes with open sincerity and mature appraisal.

"I'm from Sanq. My name is Yuy." Heero and Jay had agreed he should leave his name behind him. This would further throw any other Lin assassins off the track, as well as avoid any rumors in Sanq about his presence near Kespar. Jay had given him the name Yuy as if it were some kind of in-joke. He'd later admitted it was a word in the prince's mother's tongue that was close in meaning to 'Heero'. The boy didn't care either way.

"Thank you for honoring me." The other boy's hand gesture, bow and response were formal but his smile was warm. "I am Quatre Rebarba Winner, I am the son of the current sheik of Saoun, much further to the South."

Heero's eyes lingered on sunlit hair, eyes like the summer sky and pale skin. "You're kidding, right?"

Quatre's smile grew rueful. "I know, I get that reaction all the time. Let's just say that my mother was from the western isles and I take after her. A lot."

Heero cursed himself internally, remembering his manners. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean- thank you for honoring me." He tried to imitate the gestures the other had made.

Quatre's hand made a scrubbing movement in midair, wiping away the awkward moment. "No, that's okay, I've been here for two years now and I'm quite over formalities by now. Come on, I'll show you to your room, you must be tired. It's five days hard ride from Sanq, isn't it?"

"Hn." Heero didn't feel like talking. Five days ride he could handle, he wasn't Odin's best pupil for nothing. The training in mental control he'd received every evening along the way had been more taxing.

Fortunately the boy didn't seem to mind his curtness, leading the way with quick light steps. He seemed out of place in the gloomy surroundings. The waste of Kespar was a small zone of desert between the two kingdoms. It was so barren and poisoned with heavy mineral deposits that not even a cactus could grow there, despite the presence of a crystal clear river running through the region. The only thing that seemed to thrive in the barren landscape were rocks. They reared out of the sand and dirt, twisted and ragged. Some seemed to slope forward as if partially melted, with planes of what appeared to be fractured glass along one side. It was as desolate as the face of the moon.

The buildings that Jay had lead him to seemed to be in battle with the scenery, in constant danger of being obliterated by the rocks rearing up from the desert floor. Several houses, of widely different construction -but all of stone of course, the nearest forest was two days' ride away- were scattered between rocky outcrops, crouching against the rasping sandy winds. A dozen buildings in all, to house Jay and his associates.

No one had come to greet them, the place looked deserted when they'd arrived. Jay had led the horses into a stable off of the biggest building, sunk so low into the ground that even the shorter Heero could see over the flat roof. Jay took care of the horses himself, Heero stabling his own when he realized no one was coming to assist the master.
Jay had told him to go into the main building, find a room, get unpacked and washed and then rest for the day, he would see him after the evening meal. This was the longest sentence he's used in their five days of travel. Heero had been grateful for the silence, it reminded him of the comfortable understanding he'd had with Odin.

Quatre, in comparison, was a fount of information. He led Heero through cool dark corridors until they reached one of the rooms at the back of the building. It had two long thin windows just above head height, and at ground level outside. They were covered in horn, not glass, bathing the room in opalescent light that was a relief from the strong sunshine outside. The room contained a brazero, pushed up against one wall, a bookcase, several shelves, a wooden dresser near the door and two long tables with a dozen chairs around them.

"This is the common room. We study together here," Quatre said, slightly out of breath. In the short trip through the corridors, Heero had learned that there was a bathhouse in the next building, that dinner was at six, that another building housed Quatre's retinue -he named them Maguanacs- that the weather was quite pleasant right now, though later in the season it would be scorching hot, that the nights could be cold, that Quatre had never been to Sanq though he heard it was a nice place, had Yuy ever visited Saoun?

Heero didn't answer. It didn't seem required, and all this small talk reminded him of the Duo-shaped hole in his heart that he'd managed to bury in the last five days. He was more taciturn than ever when he put his bags in one of the small windowless cells that surrounded the common room, containing a bed and a chest of drawers and nothing else. He took ten minutes to put his few things away, but after that there was really nothing else to do in the barren little room so he returned to the main one, dreading another avalanche of cheerful information.

The ebullient Quatre had been replaced by a tall boy who stood up politely from his chair when he saw Heero.

"Your highness," he said in a soft neutral voice, bowing slightly.

Heero's initial flash of irritation was immediately compounded when Quatre's voice rang from the door. "Oh, so you're a prince as well?"

"Yes," Heero said shortly. Quatre, coming to the tall boy's side, didn't notice, but the other's eyes, almost hidden by thick bangs swept to one side of his face, narrowed ever so slightly at Heero's tone.

"And who might you be?" Heero bit off, glaring at the brown-haired boy. "Yet another prince? A grand noble of Kespar maybe?"

Quatre finally picked up on Heero's tone, his smile fading and his eyes widened in surprise. But the taller one didn't seem to mind having Heero's bluntness applied to himself. Or so Heero thought until a dagger appeared in his hand.

Heero grabbed the sword which hadn't left his belt since his departure. But instead of leaping across the table at him, the boy started tossing the dagger in the air, the blade twirling and flashing. A second dagger appeared in his other hand as suddenly as the first. Heero stared at him; the boy was dressed in simple brown pants and vest, both tight on his lanky body. Where the hell had he pulled those daggers from? His calm eyes still on Heero, the boy tossed the second dagger into the air as well. Then it glittered in the light as it arched over to the other hand, and both daggers were now being tossed up one after the other single-handedly. A third knife had appeared in the other hand by the time Heero had looked away from the other two. The three daggers started spinning above the boy's head in a simple passing circle, hand to hand. The boy stepped back, his eyes now on what he was doing, and Heero slipped the two inches of sword he'd unsheathed back into the scabbard.
The youth put one foot on the chair he'd been sitting on when Heero had entered, then he stepped up on it in a fluid graceful gesture, the daggers still flashing like silver fish in front of him. Quatre, his face wreathed in smiles again, darted to a sideboard to grab some wrinkled winter apples from a bowl. At an unseen signal from the other boy - this had to be something they'd done many times before - Quatre tossed first one then another apple into the path of the shining daggers. The knives chased the apples around and around in complex patterns.

The boy put one foot on the backrest of the sturdy chair, and slowly shifted his weight. Heero felt his jaw drop involuntarily before he caught himself, as the chair tipped slowly and surely, until it rested on two legs only, the boy balancing perfectly with one foot on the seat's edge and one on the back. Amazingly, the green eyes flickered back at Heero.

"So, do you think I'm a noble of Kespar?" The voice was laconic, as if someone else was performing the juggling and he was merely a bored spectator.

Heero lifted an eyebrow. "I doubt it, you're more interesting than all the nobility I've met before. Today excluded," he added diplomatically, though Quatre hadn't caught the potential barb.

The green eyes judged him, found his response adequate. The daggers and apples suddenly vanished from his hands, a steely whisper tore the air and thunks behind him made Heero spin around. The two apples had been pinned to the old wooden dresser near the door, the third dagger buried two inches into the wood between them. The dresser had many other holes in the wood that had not been caused by termites.

"Much more interesting..." Heero murmured. Quatre burst into applause as the boy did a back flip off the chair. He landed lightly and bowed automatically and without conceit in Heero's direction, then with more warmth to Quatre.

"Yuy - " Quatre started, then corrected himself. "I'm sorry, your highness I mean!"

"No, just Yuy. I'm not a prince, now," Heero said quietly. Quatre looked momentarily puzzled but bounced back quickly.

"If you don't mind, I would like to introduce you to Trowa Barton. He's a member of the Romany nation, and he used to travel with a circus. He's been here for - four years was it, Trowa?"

A circus, that explained the display. The fact he'd lived so long with Jay explained a lot about his laconic disposition as well. Heero held out a hand. "Yuy, from Sanq. Apparently you were expecting me?"

Trowa nodded slightly, shaking Heero's hand in return. "Master Jay asked me to get your rooms ready. Though he wasn't sure if you would be coming or not. So, where is your brother?"

Heero froze, his face suddenly blank.

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"What-... do you think you're doing?" Duo's voice was like a dagger suddenly unsheathed.

Wu Fei paused, the scissors half lifted behind Duo, his eyes caught by Duo's in the reflection from the small mirror in front of them.
"Your hair. You're going to have to-"

"No-one touches the hair!" Wu Fei took a step back from the creature staring out from the young boy's eyes. "I don't even let my father cut my-"

Duo's face flinched, and he spun away from Wu Fei to go stand at the small window.

Wu Fei carefully put the scissors down on the big box they were using as dresser, made a soothing gesture and spoke gently, as if he were trying to talk a maniac down from a tree.

"Duo, I know it is nice hair, but surely you've noticed that all the children of Lin have it cut short, even the girls. Anybody who practices black magic does that. You don't want it flying freely about your shoulders while you've got flames wrapping around you, right?"

His voice dropped out of the unfamiliar soothing tone he'd been using to return to his usual arrogant bite. "If you want to do this, you can't let trivialities stop you. You have to play their game, or you don't have a chance." His eyes burned, he'd had to swallow a lot himself in the past few months, small barbs and insults he did not consider trivialities, but was willing to put up with to reach his goal.

"No, it's if I play their game that I don't have a chance," Duo said, his voice still a bit high but otherwise composed. "They've been playing it all their lives. I've been a child of Lin for less than a day. What do you fancy my chances are, knowing that?"

"Your chances are virtually nil whatever you do," Wu Fei said with astounding tact. "Completely nil if you need me to outline the obvious steps for you."

"Hmm, humor me." Duo smirked, but his eyes were serious as he turned from the window.

Wu Fei rolled his eyes and considered leaving, abandoning Duo to his fate. But he didn't. Duo was obviously a few moves away from a full kata, but he was powerful, friendly, probably not as dumb as he looked, willing to help Wu Fei, and dying to kill Septim and wreak havoc on Lin. What were the chances of finding someone else like that running around the school? Worse than 'virtually nil'.

"Very well. If you want to stand a chance of not ending up with your throat cut, or as a family pet for one of the houses - or your uncle - you have to become a competitor for the government of Lin. That'll happen if you are here in two days time and recite the Acknowledgment. It's a little speech where you accept the rules of the trial. You will then have to find a candidate who has a chance of becoming the heir of Lin, and ingratiate yourself to him. Or her. You're better off with a man though, the women in this place are uniformly weak and volatile." Wu Fei made a contemptuous face.

"You will have to be sure to not stand out, which means, erm, trimming your hair, getting some new clothes - something not too fancy, you don't want to overshadow or provoke anybody. You saw the sort of blue or grey uniforms they were wearing, along those lines. What else? Being nice would help, or at least not rude. You probably don't want to be seen with me either," He added, brutally honest and with only passing regret. Wu Fei was too focused on his own concerns to let himself long for friendship and conversation.

"Why do I have to find a good candidate and kiss his ass?" Duo sounded puzzled.

"Because in two day's time, everybody is going to fall into two categories; the potential heirs and the followers. If someone tries to become the heir, he has to have the power to back up that claim, at least in the others' eyes. They'll not take a chance of moving against someone strong at this point of the game, but if they sniff out weakness, they'll hound you. That's why you need to find someone
who is strong enough to protect you. If he becomes heir, then you'll be a member of his government. Well, that's not really an issue, right? You're not doing this for politics." Duo snorted. "All you care about is that while you are in the trials, your life is as sacred as mine."

"Oh good, here I was feeling all jealous of you for being sacred."

"No one can interfere with the children of Lin once the challenge starts, it would make the whole thing pointless otherwise. The only ones who can do anything to you are the children themselves. The first year, no one is allowed to use magic or kill one another. The first year," Wu Fei stressed.

"Hmm okay. Anything else I should be doing?"

Wu Fei hesitated. Duo had looked ready to maim when he'd suggested cutting his hair, so he didn't know how this suggestion was going to go down. But Wu Fei didn't know the meaning of the word fear. Or tact.

"It will go against the grain, but you will want to put yourself in the hands of your uncle Septim until the trial starts."

Duo curled a lock of his hair around his finger. "Really?" he asked softly. Wu Fei thought he'd have preferred shouts of protest.

"The school will provide you with food and a place to sleep," Wu Fei said firmly, knowing he was right. "But as I said, you need more. You need clothes, grooming, training in magic and the rites of the trial. At the very least, a safe place to sleep. That last is important. From what you say, Septim is trying to pretend he doesn't much care for you or think highly of your chances of getting a good position in the next council. But I think he's lying, that he's actually hoping you'll gain a position of some power, and others may think so as well. They may decide to assassinate Treize's son before he gets placed under the protection of the trials."

"Would you? Try to gain Septim's protection?"

Wu Fei looked at him, his face a mask. Then he nodded. "He wouldn't give it to me, I am not his concern, but if he did, I would take it."

"Because you wanted his protection, or because you're hoping he'll let his guard down around you and you can slip that knife you have hidden in your boot into his slimy little heart?"

Wu Fei stiffened ever so slightly. Duo smiled. "Don't even bother answering that, buddy, I think we have an understanding here. Why go for Rao and not Septim in the first place?"

"Because I have at least a chance of getting near Rao in an unguarded moment. Septim has survived many years as the head of the council. He's as prudent as an old snake hiding under a rock. When I die, I want to take someone with me, a burial gift worthy of my wife and her clan." The dark eyes were blazing with a fire that rivaled the black magic that had charred Duo’s soul. "Whoever becomes heir of Lin will be designated to reign for twenty five years. Even if I kill him. That will leave a council full of infighting inbred idiots to rule Lin for another twenty five years, without a driving force like Treize was. Septim will have lost his place in the council with the new heir, and he will be powerless to do anything but watch. I hope it eats his guts out. That will have to be good enough."

Duo thought about this.

"Hmm, nope," he finally said, tugging at his locks again. "Sorry. I'd still rather see him get slowly burned to a crisp, if that's alright by you."
Wu Fei snorted. Wishful thinking was contemptible to him. "How do you think you are going to accomplish that? Even if you ask for his protection, I doubt he will let his guard down around you for awhile yet."

Duo turned with a manic smile and shoved open the small window before him. "Which is why I'm not going to bother asking him for protection. I don't need it. I'm staying up here until the competition starts, that should throw any assassins off my trail."

Wu Fei looked wildly around the small attic space that Duo had found under the rafters of the school. He had thought Duo had wanted a place to talk privately. He now understood why Duo had stolen a lamp, a mirror, some toiletries and some bed sheets from various rooms on the way up.

"I'm not going to settle for anything less than Septim's life," Duo said dreamily, leaning out the small attic window leading onto the roof. "And there's some other stuff I'd like. I want to know exactly what he has in mind for Sanq. It didn't sound like idle threats earlier... I know a really good way of doing that, getting Septim to trust me, and screwing this shithole of a country while I'm doing so."

Wu Fei stared, suddenly wondering just how crazy Duo was. "You don't mean-!"

"You better get going, Wuffie. If you think I have a chance - or that the ride might be fun enough while it lasts - then you can bring me some stuff to eat tomorrow, and help me get ready. If not, I don't blame you, but you better leave now, cause you won't want to be seen near me. Now if you don't mind..."

"Duo!" Wu Fei shouted, leaping to the window from which the his new acquaintance had thrown himself.

Dusk was falling quickly in the thin mountain air. Duo stared up at the dark boy, framed in the window above him. He was balancing on the thin stone guttering of the roof as if he were strolling down a street. "Yes?"

"What do you think you're doing?!" Wu Fei hissed, anxiety adding venom to his voice.

"Going to do what I do best! Steal some clothes and some food, and think up ways of driving each and every sorcerer in Lin screaming up the wall. Why?"

"Just asking." Wu Fei sighed in sudden resignation. Maybe Duo didn't have much of a chance, but suddenly Wu Fei was curious to see how far he would be able to go... and it would probably be fun to watch. "I'll grab you some stuff at dinner and bring it to you tomorrow. Don't get caught."

Duo's grin was as bright as the last glint of the setting sun. "Ah! No worries. Thanks, Wuffie, and see you tomorrow!"

"Wu Fei." It was just a mutter as he watched the nimble figure run along the roof's edge, over some low eaves and into the gathering darkness.
The library of Lin was dark now that night had fallen. The big room was lit by carefully covered lamps and four brazeros in its center, but the room's clutter and odd angles meant that most of the spectators were in deep shadow up in the mezzanines. Murmurs ran through the adults of the houses of Lin as one after another, their children walked to the spot between the four brazeros and announced their intent to participate in the trial.

A throng of those who’d already been presented had formed at one end of the library. Children as young as ten or as old as sixteen, dressed in clothes of rigid military cut in blue, dove gray or red. Small groups were forming as one or the other gravitated towards those candidates they believed had the best chance of reaching the coveted position of heir designate of Lin, throwing in their lot with the rising star of their choice.

Their parents, the members of the houses of Lin, cast curious - and sometimes cruelly amused - glances down at the dais on which stood the three most important members of the present council, Septim first among them. There had been no official announcement, but it was obvious to any who played the game of the Court that he’d intended the child he’d brought back with him for the Trials. It was a bit much of a coincidence to imagine that he had brought back Treize's son at this point in time only to have the lad become a minor lackey in his house. How embarrassing that the boy had disappeared almost on arrival and hadn't been found for the last two days.

Septim himself appeared unruffled; a man in his position did not show frustration or any other emotion that could be used against him. Inside he seethed.

He hadn't been expecting much! He thought the boy would come crawling to him, beg him for protection, some advice, a few rags... He’d had a uniform already prepared, gray with blue piping, Septim's own colors, to give the boy some moral support in the trials. It would remind the other candidates that the boy had the backing of the head of the present council and was not to be taken lightly. It would have given him a bit of political weight with the faction he joined - Rao's, if he was smart, but Septim would not have interfered with his decision, as he believed in the spirit of the trial.

The first year of the trial was essentially education in arcana, law and military skills, no magic or real fighting allowed. But Septim knew from harsh personal experience that this did not make it easy, especially for someone that young, with no friends in Lin. It was amazing how much damage children could do without actually causing too much physical harm. Septim felt a flush of pride; the children of Lin were no milk-sops, they were wolves. If the sacred mountains that infused them with magic weren't so harmful to the human body, reducing their population, then they would have overrun the pitiful kingdoms around them long ago.

Probably the boy didn't fit in here, he was just too weak. Being raised by the Peacecraft fool had apparently leeched the spirit of his true family from his blood.

Septim cursed the fact that he hadn't realized his nephew was alive until recently. He'd never thought Une's son had survived. Then, when the boy had neared puberty, his power started to grow, and was sufficient to start showing up in the fortune tellers' casts. His lineage had been clear to those who could read the ebb and flow of power in the bloodlines of Lin. Once he knew the boy existed, it didn't take too much of a genius to figure out where and who he was. He'd never quite bought that 'twins' story Marquise had put out, but he'd just imagined the man had pulled a couple of distant
cousins from somewhere to designate as his heir, seeing as he'd lost his own.

Septim was a cautious man by nature, but the timetable of the trials of Lin had forced his hand, and he'd still barely been able to get the boy here in time. Well, no, actually he'd obviously been too late, seeing as the brat had failed to show up today.

At least he'd managed to eliminate the Peacecraft heir. That was the main reason the council had granted him the right to take hostile actions in Sanq, and also allowed him to borrow power from a gestalt of sorcerers to give him the ability to teleport out of Sanq and back into Lin before the white mages could react. That murder had been as important as bringing back Treize's seed. It was vital to keep Zechs off balance right now, keep him from spending too much time on the defenses near the Gap of Sevring. Finding a new heir and getting his people to accept him would keep him busy until it was too late.

Where could the boy be? Thinking of the future reminded Septim that he would not be part of it, and he was shaken with frustration, though he did not show it. There were magical wards around the walls of the school, he couldn't have got out, could he? If he had, he was probably dead in a ravine somewhere, the mountains of Lin were unforgiving to the uninitiated. Had someone managed to get to the boy? That had been the only positive thing about finding the brat so late in the game; his enemies had had very little time to react. Not that they had to. Damn the boy!

He hadn't expected much. Some small position for the child, a little bowing and scraping to the most likely candidate, enough to get him in the new council in five year's time. Then Septim could have shown him how to get further ahead, given them both a small amount of power, a stake in the future.

The boy would probably not have gotten that far. The first year would have been very difficult for him, even with Septim's support. A few children dropped out even in the first year, unable to stand the pressure of competing studies, the isolation, the infighting. Weeding out the weak, this was good, Septim thought automatically.

The first year wasn't a test of raw power, but it was a good start, and allowed the youngest to get ready for the real struggle later on. It was a time for choosing alliances, and, for the real candidates, a time to develop presence, charisma, and the ability to generate awe and fear without necessarily a demonstration of power. These were qualities that were hard to define, but Lin knew how important they could be. They would allow one man to lead a nation of strong-willed sorcerers and fighters. It was an indefinable quantity, but the child who would be heir would have to make them believe he could carry it off, or they would eat him alive.

The last child stepped forward to recite the Acknowledgment. Septim allowed disappointment to replace the anger in his gut. Maybe he should have helped the boy more? It repulsed him, catering to a weakness, but seeing how the child was raised...

No, that wasn't why he hadn't helped the boy.

Septim recalled the blazing hate in those eyes, before the boy had concealed it quite proficiently. Septim knew adults who would have had a harder time masking their hatred for him than that twelve year old lad. Recalling that flicker - and the power of anger that had unleashed itself in the clearing - Septim remembered why he'd not helped the boy. Why he thought it important to get the child to crawl to him and beg. The boy wouldn't be able to make it that far in the trials on his own, after all, he needed to learn to bow and scrape to a candidate, he needed to be tamed. And he needed Septim, and he needed to know that. A painful lesson but one that was necessary, if Septim were to mold the stripling into something greater.

For an instant he thought the boy had shown up as he felt again that hatred wash against him. He
glanced around with the discretion of long habit. No, it was that oriental boy, the hostage. An interesting lad. His beautiful features were now schooled once more into that arrogant air of contempt for his surroundings, the flash had been only momentary. Septim didn't fear that hate. The people from the Eastern isles did not know magic, though they were powerful warriors, excellent doctors and scientists, and knew enough shamanistic rituals to keep most monsters at bay. But no danger to a sorcerer like Septim. He wondered what would happen to the boy. He seemed a bit less cautious about showing his feelings today. Maybe the ceremony was upsetting him. His new master or mistress was being chosen this evening.

The last child, a ten year old girl, left the center of the room. She went to stand next to other candidates around Rao, who was gloatting at the number of supporters already declaring for him. There were more children standing free of any groups than expected, however. The appearance of Treize's son had thrown the carefully constructed allegiances into a bit of a spin, unsure loyalties shaken until they could see which side a potentially powerful mage would join. Septim stirred, about to take a step forward to officially begin the trial.

"Nice party. Bit quiet though. Mind if I join?"

The voice lifting from the shadows did not sound like that of a twelve year old. People looked around, surprised, trying to see which corner it was coming from.

The boy stepped through the door. Septim actually gaped for a split second, fortunately no eyes were on the old sorcerer. The figure moved slowly but surely forward, and the children of Lin made way for him with nervous glances.

He was dressed in black from head to toe, a stark contrast to the others. Septim suddenly felt a fierce smile on his lips. Of course, Treize's battle colors. Had he cropped his hair? No, it was there, swinging behind him in a braid that reached down to his shoulder blades, another distinction. Another sign that he was different. But the way the boy moved, the way he smiled and looked around him, indicated that he wasn't isolating himself from the others; he was isolating them.

The boy stopped in the center of the ring of fire and rapped out the Acknowledgment, word-perfect. All eyes were glued to the arrogant figure, almost sounding bored, radiating confidence and power well beyond his age. Septim's eyes were flicking over the other candidates, noting reactions, judging. Ah yes, the Chang boy. His lips were twitching along with the words of the Acknowledgment, as if ready to prompt the other if he faltered, not that that seemed conceivable. He'd have access to the texts, he was the only one here who wasn't utterly amazed...So the whelp from Sanq had managed to find an ally after all. How interesting.

Septim fixed his eyes on his nephew. Who was looking at him. Septim made the response of Acknowledgment, noting the well-concealed rage behind those eyes. Yes, the boy - Duo was reaching for the top, taking the hardest road, and he had his chances at that. Septim smiled ever so slightly, catching those eyes, acknowledging the feelings behind them. A mental sparring. Finally Duo's eyes dropped just a little. He was still very young, thought Septim, but that would change.

Well, well, well. He thought he would have to break the boy and mold him, but this was better, much better. Treize had been the one to dare, Septim the one to hold back and not take chances. But his nephew took after his father, and might still carry them both to power like Treize had.

He didn't care that Duo hated him now more than anything else in the world. Septim believed in the trials, in the strength of Lin. If Duo won this, he would deserve it. He would be what was best for Lin, the strongest there was. And then Septim would convince him that the old dog could still teach the young pup a trick or two. Hate was not a problem in their future relation. He'd hated his brother after all, as much as he'd admired him and served him, and Treize had despised him as much as he'd
counted on him and used him. Septim smiled like a snake, and found an echoing smile on the boy's face. I won't go down so easily boy, Septim thought, but you are welcome to try. If you have that much strength... you're welcome to try.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought." An echo of Rao's snippy comment made its way to the dais. Duo wandered over to the other candidates as if he didn't have a care in the world. Septim desperately pricked his ears, trying to hear the exchange.

"Just how far do you think you can go?" Rao's voice was soft, and dripping with disdain. He'd moved a bit away from his group, hedging Duo back against one of the brazeros. It was starting; the dog fight for ascendancy, for the throne.

Duo gave a manic grin. Septim hoped the lad hadn't been pushed too far in the last three days, insanity did tend to run in the family.

"All the way, blondie, all the way," said Duo in a voice like a dagger.

Duo couldn't beat Septim yet, but he could apparently draw a stalemate from Rao, as the later turned with a sniff. "Nice hairdo," he sneered over his shoulder.

Duo's grin widened as his eyes dropped. "Nise ass."

Rao spun around. "You dare-"

"You do keep showing it to me!"

Rao replied something along the lines of it being all that Duo deserved, but Septim had stopped listening, thinking that if Rao were smart he would actually listen to the warning that lay behind those words.

Septim, for one, wouldn't be turning his back on Duo any time soon.

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Dinner was nutritious but plain. Heero liked this. He'd always had frugal tastes, he would now be able to indulge them as a prince could not.

Trowa and Quatre were talking softly opposite him - Quatre was doing most of the talking, the other boy occasionally smiling and dropping a word in response. They seemed to get along really well, despite differences in background, character and appearance that made them almost comically disparate. But if they'd been stuck in the wastes for years with nothing but Jay and his silent disciples for company, no wonder they were close despite this.

There were only five other people at the long dinner table. Echoes of song and laughter in the distance indicated that Quatre's Maguanacs ate outside, and were a bit more cheerful about it. In the dinning hall, there was only silence apart from Heero's two peers. The four men and one woman at the other end of the table ate in silence, faces partially hidden by veils or cloaks they'd been wearing when they'd come in from the baking sun. What they'd been doing was a mystery -certainly no cultivation or anything useful in this desert. Maybe they'd been accompanying a caravan that made a frequent trip to the desert retreat to bring food and fuel. Or maybe they were also sorcerers, older pupils who still worked with Jay. The master himself had not joined them for dinner.
Heero had just put down his spoon when one of the men rose from the table and leaned over him. A whisper informed him that Jay (just 'Jay', not master Jay or any honorific) wished to see him.

Jay's room was a combination of bedroom and office. It was Spartan to the extreme, making it seem bigger than its actual modest size. There was nothing that wasn't functional, and little even of that. A worn unadorned sword hung from a wall; Heero had noticed that Jay's hands were callused, though he'd not worn a weapon on the way back from Sanq. The desk held some charts, writing equipment, three books and nothing else. The bed looked like a soldier's cot. A cheap dresser and chest, wood warped by the desiccation of the desert air, hid whatever few personal items Jay had. A bookshelf off to one side held a paltry two dozen books and some manuscripts.

Jay was standing behind the desk. He nodded at a stool in the center of the room. Heero sat obediently.

"Well, we're safe from prying ears, here," the man said abruptly. "Start talking. I didn't think it would be that easy to convince you to come here. I take it you have some knowledge of what's going on."

"No." Heero lifted his eyes to the cold glints of glass facing him. "I don't know anything specific. But I've... become aware of something. I can't describe it, But it's something big and I'm connected to it. I had to come."

"Tell me," Jay grunted.

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The boy, Heero, spoke in a monotone, as if this could reduce the feelings behind the words. Maybe they could. It would be a promising start, thought Jay, if he already had that much control over his emotions, his weaknesses, and... maybe something worse. Jay listened as Heero told him about the nightmares, his strange upbringing, the hiding, and what had finally appeared to him, crystal clear, as he came within an inch of death, wrapped in black flames, by the hands of the one who was his other half. Heero didn't understand what it was that he had seen, what he could sense coming in the future. But he knew enough. That was why he'd come with Jay.

After he finished talking, Jay sat in a worn chair behind the desk, a finger toying lightly with his mustache. His eyes behind the thick glasses bored into Heero's.

"I hope you realize what you've let yourself in for. Any idiot can die for a cause. You will have to master yourself for it. Burn out the weakness in your blood, your mind. I can teach you this, but it will be hard, and very painful, and you may not like the end result." Jay's smile was as barren as the desert around his home. "You will have a choice of what you let me teach you and what you refuse to learn because it will be too hard." The voice was slightly condescending. Heero met his gaze flatly. "But I warn you that what I will teach you will be nothing short of perfection, and that is a very hard road to walk, and an end that is even harder to reach."

Heero shrugged. It was acceptance, and it was disdain for weakness, any weakness. Jay smiled again, this time it was downright cruel.

"Before you agree to this, my arrogant young man, maybe you should read this report."

Heero frowned, puzzled, at the piece of vellum Jay handed him. He glanced over it, then froze. Jay noticed approvingly that he tried to control his emotions, his shock, his grief. Maybe they all had a chance. Maybe the world wouldn't end in five year's time.
"What is Duo thinking?" Heero finally whispered. "How can he hope-"

"Your cousin is a very interesting young man. My correspondent actually thinks he has a chance. And you know what that means, right? Now think carefully. Knowing this--"

"All the way." The voice was still the light voice of a young boy. The eyes were not. "I'll go all the way."

Jay nodded slowly. "Very well. Get a good night's sleep, because lessons start tomorrow. And will last every minute for the rest of your life."

Jay smiled at Heero's puzzled frown. "The control I'm going to teach you is absolute. It is not something you can put on and off like a cloak. It's why I brought young Quatre here. I knew we'd need him sooner or later."

"Uh?" Heero seemed caught by surprise at the intrusion of the golden light-hearted boy into the conversation.

"He doesn't control it very well yet, it comes and goes, but that young man has a gift. He can feel what is in other people's hearts, their feelings and emotions." Jay smiled again, amused. "You will be living in very close proximity with him. The day you can convince Quatre that you are a cold, heartless, unemotional soldier, that will be the day I will start to believe in you as someone who will go 'all the way'. Understand?"

"And if I can put up with his babbling, that will tell you even more about my ability to control myself." Heero muttered.

"If I were you, I'd enjoy every minute of your stay here. Quatre and his cheerfulness will be the least of your problems soon enough."

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Heero wandered back to the common room, his mind in a daze. What was Duo thinking! Joining the trials? Heir of Lin? He thought his cousin would be dead by now. Or worse, a slave in Septim's house, a sad shadow of his former self. But this?

The common room was quiet. Quatre was reading, Trowa was sharpening his daggers before heading off to his room. Neither did more than glance curiously at Heero as he came in.

Heero respected his cousin and his abilities. The rest of Sanq knew Duo as a jester, but Heero knew better. But this...and the worst was, if Duo was going to do this, join the trials, he would not be aiming for a subservient position. He would be aiming for the top. He never could resist a challenge. But he didn't stand a chance. Did he? How far would he go...?

"All the way. He'll go all the way."

The words dropped into Heero's mind like stones, it took him a full minute to detach himself from his thoughts and realize who had spoken, and by then Trowa had picked up his things and left as if he'd never said those cryptic words at all. Heero stared after him, then anger flooded him and he took a step forward. To find Quatre blocking his path, his face frantic, a finger on his lips.
"Goodnight Trowa," Quatre said over his shoulder, his voice bright and cheerful; his face, turned towards Heero, was twisted with anxiety.

"'Night." Trowa's door closed with a soft click.

Heero stared at the blond. "What was that about?" he ground out, trying to apply Jay's lessons to keep his anger under control, and only partially succeeding. Quatre took a nervous step back, and Heero remembered that Quatre was part of Jay's test, a way of seeing how well he could hide and control himself. Apparently he wasn't doing too good right now.

Quatre's voice was a small whisper and his eyes were serious. "Didn't you wonder what Trowa was doing here? With Jay's group?"

Heero blinked. He hadn't.

"Trowa has an ability, one that runs in his family. He's...not comfortable with it though, because...well, I can't tell you that. Trowa will one day, if he trusts you." Quatre's voice implied he doubted that would ever happen, and Heero realized that his first judgment of Quatre had probably been wrong. He wasn't the cheerful innocent twit he appeared to be. "Trowa can sense things in the future. That's why Jay knows what is going to happen, he uses Trowa to cast fortunes. It's normally a draining magical process, but sometimes Trowa can do it without the rites. He doesn't know he's doing it, and he doesn't remember anything about it afterwards. He won't be able to explain what he just said, those words, so please don't mention it to him, because he'll just get upset. Please?" The quick words were now timid.

Heero contemplated this, then turned without a word and went to his own small room. He could feel Quatre's pained eyes on him, but he didn't care.

A minute later, Heero was on the bed, staring at the ceiling while his thoughts spooled out slowly.

Well, aren't we all special here. One of them can tell the future, the other can read feelings. And then there's me. I know what Jay expects of me. I'm the one who is going to have to stop the destruction unleashed by the heir of Lin.

Even if that's Duo.

Which means that I have to be as perfect as Jay wants me to be. Because otherwise I won't be able to keep the promise I made to Zechs. I said he would have a son after all this is over with. But one of us is going to die.

If one of us is to survive this, then I'm going to have to go all the way as well.

Chapter End Notes

Note: those familiar with the original will notice I collapsed some chapters into others, some of them were very short.
Four and a half years later, the political landscape of the kingdoms of that continent had changed considerably. Being overrun by fiends of hell can do a lot more than diplomacy sometimes.

The baron of Sansbury would once have died at the thought his barony could be invaded by the lords of Lin, like Sanq had once been. Now he'd personally invited two of them to help him save his lands.

Well actually he'd only sent a desperate plea for help to the two great powers in his immediate neighborhood. Sanq had responded with a white mage who'd been slaughtered almost on arrival. The kingdom had its own problems and had been unable to do more. Lin had sent their two strongest young Lords and a hundred men or so, which was a very impressive response indeed. But then again, when it came to fighting fiends from hell, Lin had a natural advantage.

The problem had crept up on baron Sansbury, as it had on other leaders of the kingdoms on the continent. The increase in the numbers of monsters raiding villages had gone unnoticed for a time. They were just isolated reports of ugly incidents in the backwaters here and there. Then a bad year turned into several, turned into worst, then turned into a nightmare as even small towns were raided by the powerful creatures.

No one could figure out where they were coming from. They were not conjurations, which were magical creatures built at great cost of time and power to serve the sorcerer who captured and enslaved the demon to inhabit them. Conjurations were far and few between. They were also easy to recognize, perpetually wounded, hulking masses of flesh, slow but powerful, and never further than a stone's throw from their mage and master.

The nightmares that had come slowly to the lands of the scattered kingdoms were of a different sort altogether. Small, agile, skittering shapes, half flesh, half spirit; forms fluid like puddles of dark oil suddenly solidifying into a horror of thrashing tentacles and claws. Not very strong physically but they were numerous now and their touch could chill, poison or kill.

All of the kingdoms had been affected. Lin had been no exception, though their long habit of demonic magic made them very successful in fighting them off. Other kingdoms such as Sanq retreated behind barriers of white magic and tried to study this new foe, so far without success. And the smaller kingdoms, lands and baronies suffered. New alliances were being formed as their leaders tried to oppose this growing threat. Politically and militarily, Lin had successfully stepped into the breach.

The baron of Sansbury had been amazed -and very suspicious - when Lin had sent him two companies to defend him. But they were very efficient, tremendously so. Each company seemed in fact hells-bent on outdoing the other in numbers of creatures killed and towns saved. It was almost, he reflected a bit dourly, as if they were having some sort of competition...

A clatter of hooves alerted him. Half a dozen riders were making their way towards him over the rocks of the mountain pass. For once the two Lords of Lin were actually together, which was a surprise. It didn't take a great feat of perception to realize that the Lords Rao Karon and Duo Maxwell couldn't stand one another.

The fact that they were both here meant that the two nests of fiends they had been sent to uproot were now messes of flame and ichor. They were very efficient, he had to give them that.
The baron of Sansbury had left a message back at the main camp that a large group of the creatures were trying to get past this mountain col to prey on the farmlands beyond. He'd assumed though that they would need some rest before coming back to the fray. Apparently this was true of their men, but the young Lords had energy to spare, and were probably coming to sneer at his own attempts to solve his country's problems. The lord sighed. He would have rather they'd rested with their troops.

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Duo dismounted, throwing his reins to a page. Wu Fei followed a few steps behind him as he advanced towards the edge of the bluff rising a hundred meters from the col. The baron of Sansbury gave him a respectful nod.

"Glad you could join us, Lord Duo," the baron visibly lied. "I hope we won't need any of your help today."

Duo looked down at the forty men below him and the seething mass of creatures trying to rush them over the col. "...You do have a backup plan, right?"

"Did you invite us here to see your men torn to pieces?" Rao inquired, not even bothering to get off his horse. His tone suggested that this was an acceptable way of passing the time as far as he was concerned.

"Those aren't my men." The baron's mustache had twitched, but his tone was calm. "They're a mercenary band from Kespar. They're very good, particularly at fighting these infernal creatures. We hired them to guard our southern border a few months ago, and this is the first time anything has actually managed to get this far." His tone implied that though he was grateful for the assistance of Lin, he did have other resources to fall back on.

Rao's handsome, urbane smile didn't register the slight barb, but Duo knew his enemy well now and thought the baron of Sansbury had probably made something of a mistake. The two children of Lin were only here because the council of sorcerers had thought it would be a good occasion for the two remaining candidates in the trials to learn field tactics, the command of men, and distinguish themselves in battle. If the council told them to leave tomorrow, Rao would do so in an instant, possibly torching the barony of Sansbury on his way out.

"Duo, come and look at this."

Duo came over to the edge of the bluff, which was a small natural wall against the upcoming wave of creatures. Sansbury had his men ready to defend the rampart, while the mercenaries were below, taking on the enemy as they came out of a narrow pass onto the col. Duo hadn't been looking too intently, knowing that none of his small band of men were involved in the skirmish. He wanted to talk to Sansbury about accommodations, and getting some better rations for his troops. He wasn't all that interested in the fight, but Wu Fei's voice had a tinge of excitement that intrigued him.

"What is it, Fei?"

Wu Fei was silent, his eyes still on the action below as Duo drew level with him. They'd both grown in the past four years, Duo topping Wu Fei by an inch or so. Duo, always in black from head to toe, was lither than his friend. Wu Fei's body showed the effects of his constant sword practice; he was still slender but his shoulders were broader than Duo's and his chest was strong and muscular. He
was dressed in practical leather armor, but he often chose to wear white when in court, in a style that harkened back to his native land, and a pleasing contrast to Duo.

Wu Fei's position in Lin had changed slowly but surely as Duo had risen in the trials. He was still a hostage, his life would still belong to the heir of Lin when the contest was decided. In the meantime, Duo used him as his first lieutenant and completely ignored what anybody had to say about it. If someone got too pushy about this...Well, Duo occasionally let his relaxed, easy-going facade slip and brought out his true colors. Enough times that he was being nicknamed 'Death's Hand' or even 'The God of Death' in the hallways and fortresses of Lin.

Their friendship looked easy and casual. In fact it ran deep as they watched each other's backs in the plot-strewn corridors of Lin.

Duo's long braid swayed as he shook his head in a parody of enthusiasm. "Wow, a battle field. Never seen one of those before. What am I looking at, Fei?"

His voice trailed away as he saw what Wu Fei was watching.

The mercenaries formed a motley band, disparate armor and no uniforms. But they were visibly well trained and coordinated, ruthlessly cutting down any attempts by the chittering, crawling menaces to outflank them. For a moment Duo was puzzled, because they'd left a chink in their defense, where only two men stood, back to back. But it was obvious, as a few of the half-intelligent creatures found the gap and skittered in, that this was not a flaw in the defense but the jaws of the trap that was slowly chewing the enemy to pieces.

The creatures looked like half-melted spiders, darting back and forth, skittering sideways, lunging with pincers that would suddenly sprout from their shoulders, their heads, from between their grotesque faceted eyes or from other limbs. The two men were parrying the thrusts and then retaliating with deadly efficiency. The taller figure was doing most of the parrying, two short swords flashing and dancing as they cut and block, keeping the other from being overwhelmed. His partner was doing the killing and being very efficient about it.

Duo felt his jaw drop as the man dropped in a crouch to dodge a hooked claw, came up like a spring trap inside the creature's guard to lop off a misshapen head, spun to slash at another while a steel-toed boot shot out to crash down on a tentacle snatching at him, spinning again to slice the twitching limb off before bringing the sword straight up through the jaws of the nightmare plunging towards his throat in one smooth continuous swing.

Duo knew his deathblows, and he was impressed. The man never stopped moving, every movement was a deadly strike and also the preparation for the next cut, like a complex formal dance.

"That is a very impressive warrior." Wu Fei, who still disdained magic, was openly admiring.

"He'd better be," Duo sighed. He might be a child of Lin, and the god of death to his enemies, but he didn't like to see people who hadn't hurt him be massacred, and he had a feeling that was about to happen.

The creatures -no one had a name for them, but they were called fiends as a convenient handle- had fallen back a bit, and something else started crawling through the pass. Every one of the fiends was different, in size, form, shades of black, strength, smarts...and some were obviously bigger and better than others. The thing dragging itself over the ground was as big as a horse, twice the size of the others, and that meant a similar increase in strength, speed and cunning as well. It slithered forward, and the others regrouped behind it, a wall of chitin that would overwhelm the defenders.
At a signal from the taller of the two main defenders, the mercenaries started to fall back in admirable order, still fighting those fiends who hadn't gathered behind their leader. The creature, two huge arms pulling it along the ground, two pincer limbs slicing the air, the rest of its body dragging behind it like an obscene fat snake, accelerated towards the two men who had been the pivot of the attack and were now defending the retreat to the bluff. A face like a squashed praying mantis screeched in anticipation of blood.

Duo barely heard a panicked baron Sansbury order his men to get ready. A retreat was never pretty, but the mercenaries were regrouping well, in a tighter formation backs to the bluff, where Sansbury's archers and pikemen could lend them support. The two men who were at the pivot of their previous attack were now at the apex of their defense, the first to face their enemies while their men regrouped and prepared. The shorter one had taken a step forward, menacing, and was visibly going to take on the hulking monster crawling towards him with little or no backup.

"That man does not know the meaning of the word fear," Wu Fei said quietly.

"He's about to learn the meaning of the word dismemberment," Duo muttered.

"This should be amusing." Rao had dismounted and wandered up to the lip of the bluff as well. Baron Sansbury had hurried up behind them and was twisting him hands, visibly wondering how to ask the Lords of Lin for help.

"Sirs, Lords, I wonder, these men are valuable fighters, I wonder if you could-" Rao sneered. "I'm sorry, I don't have the energy to waste on hired riffraff."

"That's ok Rao-baby," Duo drawled, "I've got it to spare."

The warning was barely enough; Wu Fei managed to hurl himself backwards, jerking Sansbury along with him, as black energy erupted from his deadly friend.

"Maxwell!" Rao's enraged shriek was covered by the crackle of rising energy crashing against his wards as he stumbled back, his cloak smoldering.

The big creature was smart, it had pulled up immediately and hunched down defensively when it felt the curling of black forces in the air. It was nonetheless picked up like a stuffed doll and hurled back into the side of the col a dozen meters away with an ichorous crack that could be heard even over the rumbles of energy sweeping the mountain pass.

"No, stay back!" Wu Fei shouted as some of the mercenaries below started to move forward in an instinctive move to take advantage of the suddenly hesitant creatures. It was good strategy but Wu Fei would recognize the sudden hitch in power and the manic grin on Duo's face, half-seen in the rippling air around him. Duo had been under a lot of pressure the last few weeks, forced to restrain himself and command troops to do his fighting. Someone else would have decided to rest and recuperate, but Duo had another approach to work-related stress...

Duo took a step off the bluff - and the bucking screaming air seemed to support him for a few paces as he floated more than fell to the ground. Wu Fei threw himself off the bluff, keeping a safe distance from his friend -a distance he'd learned the hard way, through many painful burns and brushes with death- and charged towards the men at the foot of the bluff. The warrior didn't want to see good men killed by his friend, even accidentally.

"Everybody get down, now!"

Someone was apparently familiar with black magic and its tendency to not discriminate friend from
foe, because similar shouts were rising from the ranks, and most men were crouching defensively. Including WuFei. Duo saw him hit the ground and throw up his leather hood to protect his long ponytail.

The air crackled and burst into flame, but Duo had improved his control immensely during his years in the harshest of schools. The fire started a few meters away from the front of the troops and swept outwards in a deadly wall, the occasional explosion of boiling ichor and chitin marking its effectiveness. The backwash of smoke and heat blew Duo’s cape out behind him, he could feel the skin of his face prickle. He didn't see how many of the fiends managed to escape and dodge back behind the col, but judging from the stinking carbonized mess in front of him, there weren't enough to mount a counterattack any time soon.

The silence was sudden and deafening; the only noise in the pass were a few whimpers from frightened soldiers, the cooling ping of rock and the bubbling hiss of smoking fluids.

"Fei!" Duo forced his step to slow as he saw his friend was all right. Of all the stupid stunts, running forwards instead of back- Wu Fei of all people should know better by now! Duo glanced around, tallying. His head felt light, his body tingled with release, the tension of the last few days blasted away. It didn't look like he'd killed anybody either, that was good. Control was always his greatest problem, but working with his own troops for a year, having to protect those lives from his own powers, had taught him much more than Doctor G's lessons ever could.

A scramble of feet made him turn, flexing his protective wards instinctively. Rao had only tried to attack him once before after a blast; just a probe, a discreet jab to test his defenses. Duo had left him off relatively unharmed, it had been too early on in the trials to move against him openly. But he was ready for a rematch.

It wasn't Rao, though his rival had skidded down the buff and was walking forwards slowly, his cloak singed and his face dark with anger. It was Sansbury's general, a dour old warrior who didn't look like anything -fiends from hell, black magic, Lords of Lin- could faze him. He was walking swiftly towards the two leaders of the mercs, also glancing over the men and checking for damage. He gave Duo a respectful nod in passing, visibly thankful that the sorcerer hadn't harmed any of the troops.

Wu Fei waited for them, shrugging arrogantly at Duo's reproving scowl, then the three of them approached the leaders of the mercs who were still facing the col, barking orders to their men, getting ready for a possible counter attack. When it was obvious none would come, the taller one fell back to check his men, the shorter whipped off his helmet and spun, scowling, towards the approaching men.

"That was dangerous and unnecessary, we -"

His voice strangled itself, the scowl momentarily faltering.

Duo's feet caught against the stone and he felt his vision waver, his breath catching and tearing in his chest. The diplomatic voice of Sansbury's general sounded very far away.

"Lord Maxwell, if you don't mind, may I introduce Captain Yuy?"

The man in front of Duo had dropped his eyes almost immediately, letting a curtain of brown bangs fall over them. He was running a rag over his sword mechanically, cleaning it of ichor and fluids and chunks of flesh. Duo found his voice after a bit of searching. It sounded higher than usual. He was trying to get a better glimpse of the man's face.

"Have we met?" It seemed stupid to say, right off like that, yet...
...In the third year of the trials, candidates learned to teleport. Duo was abysmal at it, like he was at any kind of magic that didn't involve blowing things up. That hadn't stopped the council's teleporter from dropping Duo at the top of the highest mountain in Lin - and that was very high indeed. Potential heirs were always tested more strenuously than others.

The cold had been a vicious hand stripping his skin from his body in slivers. The air had been so thin it seemed to want to suck his lungs out, he'd been gasping and shaking like a leaf after only a few seconds. He'd struggled to get the energy and concentration to teleport back, or at least further down the mountain. He'd tipped his head back, trying to look away from the snow-covered rocks that might be his grave marker if he failed this test of the trial.

The sky had been the most amazing shade of cobalt blue. So pure. Clear and cold and uncaring. It had almost provided that fatal distraction that might have killed him...

As the stranger lifted his eyes to him, he was seeing that same patch of sky. The feeling of breathless, heartless, killing cold was exactly the same as well.

"No," said Captain Yuy with a voice as hard as the mountain. "We've never met before."
"What the hell is the matter, Maxwell?!"

Duo glanced in surprise at Wu Fei who was jerking the tent flaps shut with unnecessary force, making the rugged tarp twang. "What do you mean?"

"You look like you saw a ghost! You looked upset even before he gave you that death-glare and told you off for nearly blasting him from the surface of the mountain."

"It was a pretty good glare, you have to admit-"

"If dark looks were enough to throw you off, you'd have been dead the first day of the trials. What's up?"

Duo licked his lips, angry at himself. "Did anybody else see-..."

"I think Rao noticed too." Which explained Wu Fei's anger. He was worried about Duo. Duo was worried about Duo too. This was not the time to show any weakness to his rival, the man was still very dangerous.

"What was that? Do you know this Yuy? Here, eat something. Heavenly ancestors, you look like you're about to collapse. Did you have to blow up the whole pass, after two days fighting on three hours sleep- " Wu Fei's voice dropped to an aggrieved mutter as he shoved Duo into a chair, grabbed some food from the table - this was baron Sansbury's command tent and his supper, but Wu Fei didn't give a damn - and jerked Duo's jacket off roughly. Nothing that really mattered needed to be said after their years together; Wu Fei's brand of tough fussing was just what Duo needed to anchor him back to reality after one of his cathartic power releases and they both knew it. Duo didn't complain. He was having an even tougher time than usual finding his center again.

"He reminded me of someone. A guy I- I was close to. Someone I accidentally killed a few years ago. It-... caught me a bit off guard."

Wu Fei paused in the act of pouring wine into glass. "Really? Who?" Duo had caused considerable harm to his enemies but had only killed a few of them, and wouldn't be particularly bothered by their reappearance. He'd just kill them again. And the people he was close to could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Wu Fei, Doctor G, Amon, Bull and Sally. Last time he checked they were all still alive.

"... Are we talking about your cousin?" Wu Fei frowned in recollection. "What was his name? Started with an E, I think. The one you-"

"Heero. The one Septim helped me murder. The one he's going to die for." Duo's voice had dropped to a dark whisper. This was between them only, and rarely discussed.

"I don't see it." Wu Fei's voice had dropped as well, but he kept his usual curt, precise tone. "You said you were identical when you were children, but this man looks nothing like you."

"That's-... another story. He doesn't look much like Heero, I guess... And the look he gave me when he caught me staring, whoa! I-... I don't know why I thought-... " Duo knew he sounded confused and disliked it, but this was Wu Fei, the one person he didn't have to hide anything from. The only one now that Heero was dead.
"I couldn't see it myself, once I actually looked at him," he continued thoughtfully. "The eyes are similar, but all the rest... Heero would die rather than have long messy bangs hanging in his face like that." Duo's usual grin faltered a bit, becoming a ghost of a sad smile. Wu Fei pressed the glass into his hand and turned, embarrassed by this show of uncertainty from his usually manic friend. He moved to the tent flaps to make doubly sure no one was eaves-dropping on Duo in a moment of weakness. Both their lives depended on Duo's strength in the next few months.

Duo sipped the wine and shrugged, the moment passing. "I was probably just tired. You're right, I shouldn't have interfered at all."

"I'm glad you did," Wu Fei stated, turning back now that Duo sounded normal again. "Rao is a dishonorable dog who wouldn't appreciate courage or a warrior's spirit if it came up and ran him through with a sword. Those men deserved better than to be ripped to shreds by the fiends."

"Captain Yuy kinda disagreed that that was going to be the case." Duo winced a bit, remembering the cold precise tones explaining what he, Duo, could do with his magic blasts next time he felt like blowing off steam while the mercs were in front of him. And that scowl... That was probably when Rao and the others had sensed something was wrong with Duo. He'd not taken anything like that from anybody since he'd entered the Trials. But at the time he'd been nearly speechless, a rare occurrence in itself. Damn, no wonder Rao had picked something up. He'd managed to toss off one of his usual comebacks and leave with a swing of his braid and his dignity partially intact, but it had been a struggle to slip the mask back on for once. Considering he'd just saved the man's life and was getting told off for it, he should have done something a bit more drastic...

"Well, I guess... I guess you don't get on too well with that Captain." Wu Fei sounded hesitant as he sank into the chair opposite Duo, shoving maps from the table to lean against it. He glared at his Lord. "Eat, Duo."

Duo's knife flickered into his hand and he started to slice bread and cheese. "I'd say it was the Captain who doesn't get along too well with me. Why?" He could feel a question hovering on his friend's lips.

"I was talking with Captain Barton on our way back to camp. Trowa Barton. The other one, the taller man," Wu Fei added.

"Oh." Duo hadn't even caught the man's name, damn he was off his game today.

"He was saying their contract with Sansbury ends next week. This was their last real engagement, they just have mop-up duty now. He was wondering..." Wu Fei glanced at his friend. "He was wondering if we might want to hire them. There's only twenty of them once the week's up and they're paid off and disband. They're good fighters, and they'd be loyal to us," Wu Fei added quickly as Duo let the glass of wine slowly sink from his lips, untasted.

Duo's eyes were unfocused. Then he stood abruptly, put the wine down, rolled some bread around the cheese, grabbed his black jacket and left, an intrigued Wu Fei on his heels.

The mercs had settled down quickly. They'd been fighting more and more fiends in the last month, and were used to snatching sleep when and where they could between battles. Their captains - younger than almost any of the men they commanded, not that that meant anything anymore - passed among them, tallying wounds, making sure provisions were available, the surgeon on hand, the men
cared for.

Now it was their turn to rest. Which meant Trowa was taking care of the dozen horses the company possessed, watering, grooming and feeding them, while Heero sharpened his swords and checked his armor.

"You OK?" Trowa finally asked, after a careful look around. They were alone.

"Hn." The flint rang out with monotonous regularity against the steel of the mage-blade. The rasp of Trowa's brush against the flanks of a roan charger was a gentler counterpoint. The horses ignored the both of them, used to their presence and habits.

"You recovered well." Trowa's voice was not accusatory, in fact there was a slight tinge of sympathy behind what was in fact a reprimand. Trowa knew that there should have been no need for recovery at all. He didn't pretend he could do what his friend was doing. The idea of having to pretend not to know Quatre, in Trowa's case, and being treated like a stranger in turn, was inconceivable. But both their lives and much more depended on this, and 'Yuy' couldn't allow himself a moment's weakness.

The ring of flint on steel grew louder as self-directed anger momentarily tightened the young man's shoulders, but in an instant the emotion was caught, tamed and dismissed. Trowa found himself shaking his head. He admitted to being laconic; but he couldn't do something like that either. He didn't want to be able to do that.

"So... I guess he didn't recognize you..."

Heero glared at him from below messy brown bangs. Of course he hadn't been recognized, they were still alive and free in the middle of a camp full of Lin soldiers, weren't they? It wasn't like Trowa to flap his lips needlessly, that was one reason they worked so well together.

The brush switched to the roan's shoulder. "One of these days you'll have to tell me how you do that. Hide yourself like that. Will it continue to work? Will he be able to recognize you in the future?"

Another scowl. "No."

"Good, 'cause he's heading our way now."

Rasp, rasp, sh-clang, sh-clang, neither Captains showed they'd spotted the pair approaching the mercenary camp. Heero kept his gaze on his work until a pair of black boots entered his hair-framed vision. He glanced up into well-known violet eyes without any sign of recognition or the slightest flicker of emotion.

"Yes?" He didn't have to be polite though. Shortness would hide any slip he might make, and besides it was his character. He saw Duo's lips quirk in amusement, a gesture so familiar that he let his gaze drop back to his sword, just in case the slightest hint of feeling escaped his rigid control.

None did. He felt the other dark-haired boy shift uncomfortably at the slight insult to the Lord of Lin. Wu Fei Chang, Trowa had informed him, one of Duo's only friends. His training automatically suppressed the feeling of curiosity at knowing what it was that Duo looked for in a friend these days; it left only the cold analysis of how he could find out more about the young man and use that knowledge to further their aims.

Duo looked down at the brown hair falling over handsome features and his smile widened. He
glanced at the other man, Barton; at least he'd stopped grooming the horse and stood at attention. He was tall, good-looking behind that rather strange hairdo, and also surprisingly young. Duo put his age at seventeen or eighteen. He thought Yuy might be a year older than that, although his sour looks might be making him look older than his actual age. No, surely one of them had to be at least within spitting distance of twenty to command a troop of mercenaries. Duo was commanding as many men since he'd turned sixteen, but then he was a child of Lin, it was expected of him.

"Chang here informs me you would like to move out with my troops in a week or two. Is that right?"

The tall one, Trowa Barton, nodded slowly. Yuy -did he have a first name?- said nothing.

Duo felt a small weight leave his chest. That was why! Why this strange dark-haired blue-eyed stranger had reminded him so much of Heero. Yeah the looks matched a bit, but that hadn't been why. It was the attitude, that cold, stand-offish, serious attitude that Duo had always felt the need to tease a bit. And his cousin had let him, because beneath it he was warm and caring, and just didn't know how to show it. It had become something of a game, like their mock fights. Now that he was actually looking at the man, facing the memories, Duo felt himself relax.

He wouldn't have been able to hire the fighter, however good he was, if the man had-- always reminded him of Heero. But now that he actively confronted this man and his memories... Heero had been the other half of his soul, hiding the parts he wanted to protect behind a cold demeanor. This guy was nothing like that. The ice went all the way through and out the other side. The last flicker of what had seemed to be recognition died as he watched the man sharpen steel like an automaton.

He felt a tickle of amusement again. He liked people who didn't bow and fawn to him, and he felt the beginnings of interest, wondering what it would take to get this guy to drop the facade a bit, if it even was one. Yeah, he could see this working.

"OK, you're on. Do you guys want to work for hire, or on retinue?"

Trowa glanced at his partner, then bowed slightly to Duo. "We've heard a lot about you, Lord Maxwell. And seen a lot today as well. I believe we would like to join your retinue, if you will have us."

No surprise there. Duo knew that Kespar had a very strict hierarchical society. These guys were obviously not nobility, and would never amount to anything in that rigid class system, however superb they were on a battlefield. If they joined Duo, and he became the next heir, they could become citizens of Lin, and they would advance on merit alone. He thought they would go far.

"Well, welcome to Lin, gentlemen. My first order is, don't you both jump up and hug me at once, okay?" A manic grin greeted them as they both glanced up at him, startled. Behind him, he heard Wu Fei snort softly.

"Unlike what you may have heard, Captains, there's at least one lord of Lin who has a sense of humor. You'll learn to dodge it like my black magic blasts. Tidy things up here and keep in touch with Wu Fei, I'll tell you when we're pulling out." He turned with a wave of a hand and a sway of his braid, a grin on his face, mind already planning the end of the campaign and the return to Lin. And more immediately, some food and some sleep. He'd have to be ready for whatever Rao thought fit to throw at him next...
The two men watched the Lord of Lin and his friend walk back towards the main camp.

"Well, that was easy enough, I guess. Looks like we're in. I'll get in touch with Qatre tonight." At the thought, the mind-link that had grown between him and his prince, along with their relationship, hummed in his head. Trowa's brush started moving again, distracting him as the roan nickered. He'd do it later, when he could better concentrate to get the mental message across to Quatre, who would relay it to a waiting Jay.

"Hn." If there were any emotions writhing beneath that word, those cold eyes, Trowa couldn't read them. He had a feeling that even Quatre couldn't. But that didn't mean they weren't there.
"Fancy meeting you here." Duo smirked.

Captain Yuy made no sign of recognition, didn't even twitch. As if sitting on a roof examining a map was normal leisure activity. As if finding your employer strolling along that roof's apex was just as normal.

Duo did love a challenge. In the five months Captain Yuy had served him - excellently at that - he'd not been able to get more than a shadow of a raise out of him. Even Trowa had plied a little to the Lord of Lin's well-known charm. Yuy was as pliable as stone, though not quite as friendly.

Duo's grin widened as that oh-so firm and muscled back twitched a bit after all, when Duo spun and sat with cat-like grace to lean his own back against the captain's. Yuy didn't do or say anything else though. After a few minutes he lay down the map and documents, picked up his sword and flint and continued with what had to be his favorite leisure activity. That sword should cut sunlight into prismatic colors by now.

Duo, still leaning against his back, looked out over the rooftops. His highways, even now. As one of the two remaining candidates, Duo was allowed free access to any parts of the council complex he wished. In practice, though, Duo had found that his ability to sneak around and break into places was still very useful when trying to catch people off guard or learning what they didn't want you to know.

He'd spotted Yuy out here before. The captain was looking for solitude, not excitement or a discreet route around the council complex. Duo had never disturbed the solitary man before. But now they were both relaxed - well Duo was relaxed, Yuy probably didn't know the meaning of the word - after a week of Rao and his men being sent out into the boondocks to flush out some more fiends. Duo's troops had been given the day off after a week of rigorous training. The Lord of Lin was getting slightly bored, and, wanting to keep his wits sharp while waiting for Rao's return, decided to indulge in one of his own favorite leisure activities, baiting the dour captain. A little fun never hurt.

Duo and his men had also been sent out several times to protect Lin, this last week's respite had been much needed. Lin had been hard-hit by the creatures, who were, like most monsters, attracted to the spoiled pools of raw magic that coiled about its mountains and valleys. But they'd not found it easy living; the smallest village of Lin, the weakest child, possessed defenses of magic and steel and would fight to the death to hold on to the little they could scrape from the mountain.

Duo shifted on the tiles beneath him. They were rough and pitted with age, but durable, like all of Linheights, the capital of Lin. He glanced around them, sheltering his eyes from the sun which was warming the gray slate despite the chill of mountain air. They had been lodged in the council complex since they'd returned from Sansbury. The place was huge, a sprawl of interconnecting stone buildings and towers, like a net thrown across the pass between two tall peaks from which it clung. The council complex held the school, the Library of Lin, the council hall, and all the halls and living quarters of the Houses of Lin. The rest of Linheights, the houses of servants, merchants and the family of soldiers, hung off the web of the complex wherever it could, between cliffs and crags and ravines cutting the mountain faces like scars.

The only thing moving in the afternoon sun was a couple of old crows on a roof nearby. Duo brought his attention back to the man behind him, whose back muscles shifted rhythmically beneath his as he ran the flint along his blade.

"So, how'd you like it here in Lin? We do have the best roofs, you gotta admit. Much pointier than in
Kespar. But with these neat flat stone gulleys on top you can sit on comfortably. Plus all these great gargoyles. Whopping big crows too."

The flint rang on the steel as if its owner were deaf to the babble of his lord.

Duo was thinking how he could poke the man next when Yuy unexpectedly spoke.

"It's a rough country. But it presents opportunity. How do you like it?"

It was Duo's turn to stiffen. As much in surprise that Yuy had asked a question that was not mission-related as at the question itself. On reflection, it was a very strange question.

"What do you mean, how do I like my own country?"

"Ring, ring... Pause to test the blade with a thumb... Ring... "Sergeant Bull told me you had not been raised in Lin."

The ringing punctuated the silence that fell over them. Duo found his eyes wandering over the sturdy, venerable towers of the council complex, the lower houses beyond hanging stubbornly to the mountain face, the mountains themselves rearing like fists shaken at the sky... The houses were gray and rugged like the peaks that cradled them. Rough and built for a purpose. And inside, you would find a small library, or a pulpit of rare wood, or a stained glass window, or a garden waterfall with three alpine plants arranged in simple harmony around it...

"I like it here."

The ringing was ever so slightly off tone. "Really?"

"What do you mean by that?" That 'really' had sounded like it'd slipped out involuntarily, but to his knowledge Yuy had no spontaneity whatsoever. And why would he be surprised that Duo would love his own country?

The ring of flint on steel was his only answer for a minute, then: "I just wanted to know if that's what you really thought. It's a hard country, and you have had to fight here every day since you arrived. But of course as a candidate to the throne you'd have to say that you like-"

"I don't lie!" It was a snarl. "The first twelve years of my life were one big lie. I never lie, Yuy."

The ringing stopped abruptly, a slight hiss behind him and the back under his moved forward. Duo glanced, frowning, over his shoulder.

"What, surprised I'm not a lying conniving snake like- hmm, so you actually do bleed. I was beginning to wonder."

Yuy's eyes were hidden by his long bangs as he bowed his head over the small cut in his hand, clasped around the flint. He said nothing as Duo moved around him to sit facing him.

"Here, give me your hand. I'm not mad at you, buddy," he added as Yuy made no move. Duo was regretting his lapse. This man had now heard more about his inner feelings than anyone apart from Wu Fei.

This wasn't the first time he'd let slip more than he'd intended with the captain, and since this was one of the rare times they'd been alone, he'd said even more than usual. Duo was always left slightly reeling as the mile-thick defenses he kept between himself and others were suddenly inexplicably missing when he was around those dark-blue eyes. It was probably because talking to Yuy was a lot
like talking to a wall.

Duo settled gracefully, cross-legged, on the sun-warmed tiles and reached out to gently grab Yuy’s hand. There was no resistance, it was as if it belonged to someone who wasn't anywhere near the roof. Duo covered the hand with his free one and concentrated. He saw Yuy’s eyes widen slightly as the small sword wound on the side of his hand started knitting together.

"Bet you didn't know a Lord of Lin could do that."

"...No, I didn't."

"I can't heal anything much bigger than that." Mainly because his white magic was out of practice, but he wasn't going to admit that much about himself or his past. "I use it to get rid of Wu Fei's burns when he hasn't moved away from me quick enough."

This time the words were deliberate. A reminder to himself that people he got near to got hurt. You didn't walk side by side with death without feeling it brush you from time to time. Wu Fei had nothing to lose, but Yuy had a future ahead of him.

"You like Chang a lot." Once more, Duo thought this sounded less premeditated than most of Yuy's crisp, factual statements.

"Yeah, well, I'm not going to marry the man, okay?" Duo snorted.

The hand in his went rigid as Yuy's head flew up. "What?" he blurted, momentarily off guard. Duo blinked in surprise. He'd never asked Yuy his age or any other personal detail, despite his teasing; the man just looked like he didn't have a life and never had had one. Duo had always assumed the captain was a few years older than he was, but in that one unguarded moment he looked as young as Duo.

"Don't worry, it's a joke between us." A joke that would be deadly serious if Duo lost the race against Rao. Wu Fei's life was the sick punchline to that joke. "If I become the next heir of Lin, I'll let Wu Fei go, I won't force him into an 'alliance'. I like the guy but not that much," he added in a mutter.

Yuy nodded slightly. Apparently he was aware of Wu Fei's situation. Though he seemed to have the curiosity of a cat - a cat that had died three weeks ago and had been buried under a pile of rocks, that is - he must have inquired about Duo and Wu Fei and the others around him. Probably the wise move of a tactician who wanted to know the details of those he needed to deal with, Duo thought sourly, not any personal curiosity. He admitted that Yuy's single-mindedness was a quality, one that he was beginning to slowly rely on, but it was not something he could relate to at all.

He realized, with some embarrassment, that he was still holding Yuy's hand, though the cut was now completely healed. He dropped it as casually as he could manage and turned a bit, looking out across the view as Yuy tested the mended skin with a rough thumb.

"I do like it here." Duo didn't know why he was still talking. Yuy wasn't someone you could reach, whatever you said, however much you revealed. But his question about Lin had touched something in Duo. Something that had taken a lot of time to come out from behind the fury and the madness that had buried him for so long.

"I know what everybody thinks of Lin. I... thought the same for a long time. Some of it is true. People here are hard. Cruel even. But when you see where they live, all the raw natural magic that can obliterate villages, or produces monsters bigger than houses, or... Still, there's something about
this place, the mountains, the sheer raw power... Besides... Well you come from Kespar, right? So you should appreciate this. I know there's the Lords of Lin, but that's nothing like the nobility in Kespar or - or Sanq or elsewhere. Their nobility is pretty useless for the most part, their only accomplishment is to have been born. Big deal. I was born. Hell, I bet even you were born, Yuy, though that stretches the imagination!

"The current batch of Lords in the council are, I grant you, kinda rotten. But that can change radically in just one generation. If you ever developed the ability to cast magic, Yuy, or if your children did, then their children would become the next generation of Lords of Lin, if they were strong enough. One of them could even be the next king! Lin won't look down on you because you're some low-born Kespar mercenary. You'll be treated like scum anyway, as I'm sure you've noticed." Duo grinned as Yuy snorted. "But it's because you're assumed to be weak until you've proved otherwise. But when you've proved otherwise... you'll be a citizen of this country on equal footing with someone who has ten generations behind him. You'll be respected here for your merits alone." Duo recalled ragged little street urchins in the streets of Sanq who, smart, precocious and talented as they were, would never amount to anything and would probably end up in a galley or a whorehouse by the time they were adults.

"But a lot less if I'm not a sorcerer." The words were quiet, without emotional content. But Duo winced a bit anyway.

"Okay, I didn't say it was perfect," he muttered. And it certainly wasn't.

He wasn't lying about his feelings though. Because he didn't lie anymore, and yes, he did believe in Lin now. It had crept up on him slowly, and it had been quite undesired. The first year in the hothouse of the school of Lin had done little to change his hatred for the country that had ravaged Sanq. But afterwards, when he finally came into contact with what he thought of as the 'real' people of Lin, his hatred had started to fade.

Even while in school, Amon and a few others who'd rejoined his faction that first hard year had almost reconciled him with the children of Lin themselves. Most of them were inbred over-powered half-insane maniacs - actually, he could relate to that, but not the arrogance, intolerance and cruelty that had been bred into them. But Amon was what Duo had been telling Yuy about, a second generation Lord of Lin, his family only recently accorded a House because of their mastery of sorcery. Amon had been refreshingly real, both in his support and his behavior, and he was now one of Duo's rare friends.

Then when he'd mingled with the troops he'd been given - and Duo did mingle, it was the only way he knew how to relate to people - he'd met Bull and Sally and others, soldiers and warriors of Lin, and as tough and straightforward as the mountains that had spawned them. They accepted their lot in life; the interminable struggle against man and nature, the overrule of sorcerers, the way they would be called to sacrifice themselves for the good of their country at the bidding of the man who was strong enough to win their kingship and trust. Duo had found a reluctant respect growing in him ever since.

It had been hard to start with, because he thought this was isolating him from the only real close friend he had. He couldn't imagine Wu Fei ever feeling anything but absolute hatred for the country that had wiped out his wife's clan and enslaved him. But that was a miscalculation. Wu Fei hated Septim and the degenerate vermin who ruled the country and had ordered the cowardly massacre of a clan that couldn't defend itself against such odds. But Wu Fei also admired strength and rectitude, and the ordinary men - and women - of Lin had those in spades.

Duo had realized he might have misjudged his friend's attitude when he'd figured out just how much
time Wu Fei was spending with Lieutenant Sally Po, teaching her more and more about the advanced medicine from the orient. Wu Fei had been downright cagey about that, Duo recalled with a delighted grin, saying it was important for one of the officers that had been assigned to the potential heir to have good knowledge of field medicine, to care for their soldiers. Duo hadn't bought it. Judging by Sally's gentle smile, he didn't think she'd bought it either. He snickered, and caught a small glance from beneath dark brown bangs.

"Duo." The curt voice echoed from the tower that jutted above their rooftop, interrupting Duo's thoughts. He twisted and spotted the scarred face of Dr G in the window of the tower.

"Hey, you lookin' for me?" Duo hopped to his feet with the lithe assured grace of a cat.

"If you don't mind. I have put together a warding cantrip you might find useful. You know, for when your arch-rival gets back in a few days and tries to kill you again. But if you'd rather spend time sitting on a roof-"

"Gods, okay, okay, I'm coming!" Duo's grin was good-natured. When he was heir of Lin, he hoped Dr G would not change his attitude, and would always be there to remind Duo to get off his high horse and cope a dose of reality.

Dr G was a first-generation foreigner in Lin, his last name was too complicated to pronounce and had been conveniently shortened. He had been Duo's personal tutor in the arts for nearly four years now.

The second year of schooling in Lin saw students choose mentors in the higher ranks of sorcery to teach them their craft firsthand. If Septim had hoped Duo would come to him - well, no, the old buzzard probably didn't expect that. He wasn't stupid.

Duo had hesitated. The best and brightest of the sorcerers of Lin had died with Treize near the Gap of Sevring, eight years previously. The ones that were left were cowardly, verminous maniacs like Septim, and he'd wanted nothing to do with them. He'd broken out of the school on numerous opportunities, taking to the roofs and windows to spy on them, pinch their magical books, study them and their craft in secret, hoping to be able to do without a mentor. The fools hadn't even known a thirteen year old was having them all for a ride.

Except Dr G who'd caught Duo with almost disarming ease. Although the old man had later admitted that the thought of anyone, much less a skinny half-trained monkey, breaking through his wards, into his study and trying to make off with some of his manuscripts had impressed him.

Duo and Dr G had realized that they would make a good team. Duo was quick-witted, powerful and refreshingly different from the rest of the children of Lin. And Dr G, on his side, hated Septim and the ruling clique with a passion.

The small, scarred man - Duo always described him as a walking nose in a sorcerer's robe - had been isolated from the corridors of power before Treize had even attacked Sanq, because he was powerful but not Lin born and bred. Lin would have accepted his children as one of their own, if he'd had any, but considered him to still be suspicious. As he had the tact and diplomacy of a landslide, this had not improved over the years. He was still very much respected as a sorcerer, and the council occasionally unbent enough to ask him for help on some matter or other, but he didn't have any direct input in the running of the country. He didn't seem to mind his role of political outcast; his studies seemed to consume him. But over the years, Duo had realized the man did have a strong sense of ethics and plans for the future, and they'd grown close enough that he counted as one of Duo's rare friends. Although this wouldn't be obvious to the casual observer of one of their conversations.
"Well, have fun, Yuy! Don't lop off any fingers, you might need to count to ten one day. I want to see you, Trowa and Sally tomorrow night, we'll have a lil' talk around a jug of wine and see what we can do to get ready for Rao's return. Bye!"

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Heero sat as still as the stone statuary hanging from the eaves. One hand covered the other where Duo had healed the small cut.

So gentle. So dangerous. A great big grin. A manic smile. Death and the jester rolled into one. Duo had always been the more complex of the two boys, and now he was a bigger puzzle than ever, a puzzle to which Heero no longer possessed a key.

He couldn't say how Duo would react to the truth. He'd dared to ask out loud the question that had been gnawing at him these past few months, seeing Duo fight alongside his troops, study in the council library, talk with sorcerers and soldiers, apparently well integrated into the society of Lin. He'd never quite understood why Duo had made a try for the throne in the first place. The simple will to survive? There had to be easier ways. The wish to take revenge on Lin? Well that was not it, Duo himself had confirmed it. Revenge on Septim? That was the only hope Heero had to cling to.

Heero was afraid. It was an emotion he'd grown very unfamiliar with in the past few years, like most emotions. Trust Duo to unravel several years' work in a few months.

He was afraid he might have to trust Duo with his life and the fate of all the kingdoms.

He was afraid he couldn't do that and might have to kill Duo instead.

He was afraid he might not be able do either.
Rao didn't have time for any shenanigans when he returned from the back country. He and Duo were ordered to each select some of their men and head out of Linheights to a place near the southern frontier.

Although their orders were to go and investigate a possible origin of the fiends, it was obvious what was going on. The council was about to decide who the next ruler of Lin would be; the inheritance ceremony was only a month away. It was time for a final showdown. And it was to everybody's advantage that it not take place in Linheights where property damage would be expensive.

It was obvious what this was about because both candidates were being sent on the same mission, and also because the council observer sent to watch them was none other than Septim himself.

Duo glanced over his shoulder. By common accord he and Rao had selected different approaches to the final camp in the dark, bleak hills a few miles from the Gap of Sevring. This kept their troops apart and avoided any unpleasantness before the grand finale.

Duo's men were in good order behind him. Wu Fei was on his left, Yuy on his right, hand on sword as per usual, eyes flicking around for signs of danger. Amon was talking to Bull; he'd stopped chatting to Sally after the third thunderous glare from black eyes. Bull, Duo's burly sergeant, answered the smaller sorcerer politely, but kept glancing back at the twenty select troops Duo had chosen, keeping them in line with a glare and a waggle of bushy eyebrows. Other sorcerers of Duo's faction would arrive over the next few days with their own men. Even Dr G would be there, though he'd opted to come with Septim and the council guards.

The camp was a loose arrangement of tents and pavilions in the lee of a rounded hill. Septim's quarters were in the center of the camp, separating Rao and Duo's sections. A clear message. The competition traditionally ended with an official confrontation between remaining candidates before a council member, and this would take place within a week or so if all went according to plan. The candidates were being asked not to wreak too much havoc in the meantime.

Duo was not in any hurry. He knew he had the sheer power to win an open confrontation, so it was to his advantage to wait for it. Which meant that Rao was the one who had to take chances, force a confrontation, maybe even try to catch Duo off guard with a less official approach.

The competition had been getting fiercer than ever since the first year of the trials. Duo had had to kill two other children of Lin before now, and some less official assassins as well. Duo wasn't as bloodthirsty as Rao, but anybody who attacked him met the God of Death up close and personal. Rao wouldn't risk a headlong approach; he would try to gain any advantage over his dangerous adversary he could. Duo was going to have to watch his back.

He glanced sideways. Wu Fei, his old friend, face set and determined despite the fact that his fate was going to be decided in the next week. Yuy, his new - well, friend, yes, he supposed. His stalwart support, certainly. Most of the troops were his, or had been trained by him in the last few months. The man was a mountain of efficiency in war. Duo grinned; as he'd told the captain, he liked mountains.

His back felt safe.
The next day, Duo and his two shadows were away from the main camp when things came to a head, much sooner than expected and in the worst possible way.

They were on a small rounded hill inspecting the area around the camp in a very large circle. The Gap of Sevrimg was in Lin territory, but close to the borders of Sanq. The kingdom of white magic had its hands more than full with the fiends roaming its countryside and attacking its villages, but Duo had become an adept commander in the past few years. He wasn't about to ignore the possibility of a border raid. Yuy would have made him check it out anyway.

Duo had his protective wards in place - they'd been there for the past few years now - but he still flinched when he felt the presences reveal themselves behind the trio.

Rao. His sister, Kelna. His three most powerful cronies, smirking behind him like miniature Septims. And a lot of tension in the air.

Duo's smile hid his worry and his surprise. This was stupid. His wards were top-class, which was why he hadn't worried about leaving camp with only two non-sorcerers to guard him. Rao might have had the slimmest of chances hitting him all at once and in complete surprise. He would still have been swiftly introduced to the words 'spontaneous Duo-induced combustion' of course, but at least he'd have had a sliver of hope. But he didn't have a prayer with a heads-on attack, so what kind of strategy was he trying here?

"What's up, Ra-baby?"

"Nothing to do with you, Maxwell." Rao liked to use that name, to remind everyone that Duo had never claimed Treize's name.

"Then stop ruining my view, will you?"

"But I'm afraid I have business with your captain Yuy here."

Yuy? Duo's gut suddenly froze. Damn! He'd screwed up! He'd overlooked something!

"Yes, Lord Rao?" Yuy's tone was completely flat.

"Come here, captain."

"Captain Yuy is under my command, Rao," Duo said tersely.

"Yes, but he is also a servant of Lin now, and as such will respond to our laws. And to the orders of one of the lords of Lin."

Duo's jaw tightened as Yuy strode slowly but without hesitation towards Rao. He knew the law.

"Fei, tell you what." Duo's eyes were still glued to Yuy's back. "I'm about to have a bit of a discussion with Rao here about politics and the rights of the common citizen of Lin. It'll probably bore a foreigner like you to tears. Why don't you head back to camp and see if you can find anything interesting to do there."

"Duo!" Wu Fei whispered, his black eyes pleading, flicking between his best friend and a man he had grown to like and respect as well. He knew where this was going.

"Fei."
Wu Fei glared murderously at Rao, then spun on his heels and ran. His life was sacred, which was why no one had ever tried using him against Duo. He would be left unmolested while he ran back to the camp, a mile away, to warn Duo's friends that the confrontation was going down now. By the time they got back it would, in all likelihood, be too late; either for Duo, if he decided to stop this, or for Yuy if he didn't.

"I wasn't aware of any rudeness on my part towards lady Kelna." Yuy's voice broke through Duo's black self-recrimination. Duo hadn't really been listening. It didn't matter what excuse Rao had found, what ploy he would try, it was all a gambit. The Lords of Lin normally treated their subordinates with respect, if they wanted it back from the rugged mountain people, but the law was there; a non-sorcerer who insulted a Lord was in trouble. Rao couldn't kill Yuy, but he could punish him for some imagined slight to Kelna and hopefully get the captain to fight back, which would be much more serious. If it worked, he might get a shot at Duo while the latter tried to defend his captain. At the least, he would score a point and rob him of one of his best men on the eve of their confrontation. And all this with little or no risk to himself.

But Yuy's voice was calm and steady. Maybe, just maybe they could spin this out until reinforcements arrived. Yuy might get hurt, but Duo could take care of that. Just as long as he didn't openly confront a Lord of Lin, they just might squeak out of this.

Duo drifted closer, barely listened to Yuy apologizing for whatever insult Kelna thought he'd given her. Knowing Yuy, if she had actually approached him - and Kelna had the mores of an alleycat, she might have - he probably had been rude, or at least very short and untactful. The apology sounded sincere. That would make no difference.

"I'm glad you know your place, captain." Rao smirked as Kelna leaned towards him and whispered in his ear. "But unfortunately my sister is not happy with your apology. She was really quite offended."

Crack. Rao's thick, spiked riding crop thundered full force across Yuy's cheek.

The harsh logic of the Lords of Lin dictated that Duo not put himself at risk for an underling, one who was not a sorcerer, a foreigner at that. Nonetheless Duo flinched and barely stopped himself reaching up to the trickle of blood he could almost feel running down his own cheek.

Yuy stood there, face slightly turned. He was smarter than the fuming Duo. He'd made no move in defense, did not even lift his eyes now. Duo was only a few steps away, he couldn't even see any pain in those cold blue eyes, though his cheek was laid open almost two inches.

The next blow took him on the neck, and made him stagger just a bit, but his face still looked impassive beneath the trickle of blood and messy brown hair.

Duo found his fingernails piercing his palms. Anger was burning him, he could feel it try to pool together at his fingertips.

But to attack Rao with enough strength to actually do any harm, he'd have to drop his protective wards. And Rao was waiting for just that.

As if sensing his Lord's temptation, he saw Yuy cast him one of his patented scowls before turning back to Rao. The look made Duo shake - and not because Yuy's glares could be used to etch glass - as he realized that Yuy was quite willing to go through with this to stop Duo from entering a confrontation that could get him killed.

The riding crop twitched in Rao's hands. Though the man was looking at Yuy, he was concentrating
on Duo. There was anger in his face, behind the urbane smile. He must have been hoping that Yuy, a notoriously violent killer, would have reacted by now, resisted. One of his sorcerers was ready to intervene with a freezing spell if he did. Then he'd have his excuse to really do some damage. But if Yuy didn't give him that excuse, then the harm done to the captain would probably not be too serious when Wu Fei returned.

The captain was made of the same granite as the mountains of Lin. His straight back and calm eyes informed the world that he could take on more than Rao could ever dish out. Duo would just have to stand there and stay calm.

Yeah, stay calm while that dog Rao ripped shreds out of his Yuy for the sake of his little power plays! Duo was trembling all over with hurt and fury. He didn't know if he'd be able to last as long as the stoic captain.

His Yuy... that was the heart of the problem. Rao wouldn't have tried this with any other of his friends - bar Wu Fei, perhaps, and he couldn't harm the court’s hostage. With anybody else, Duo would have glared, but let the attack continue until he was in a position to heal the damage, and then make Rao pay with ten times the pain. This had been the case for years, and so Rao had never tried this gambit before. But apparently he'd seen what Duo was only just beginning to realize. He might not have known Yuy for long, but the man had inexplicably gotten closer to him than any before, bar one, and Duo was going to find it hard to see the man badly injured for his sake.

Rao's crop struck Yuy on the shoulder, but he was protected by a thick leather jerkin and almost sneered in contempt at the blow. Rao's eyes narrowed, but his smile grew wide and almost charming.

"Well Captain, I'm glad to see you accept that you should receive punishment for your grievous insult to the person of a noble of Lin. I'll make this quick then." The crop swished again, gesturing in a small circle. "Turn around, captain, strip down to the waist and kneel."

Duo's heart skipped a beat - then another as he saw Yuy's back twitch. His mind ripped in two. Nothing in him wanted to see the young man horsewhipped for his sake, but if he refused-

"Captain?" Rao's nostrils flared, sensing an unexpected opening. Duo's mouth was dry as he tried to find the words to stop what was going to happen, just as he knew that there weren't any. Nothing could stop Rao now.

"Captain, we're waiting."

It wasn't fear of pain, Duo's mind gibbered, or humiliation that was stopping Yuy from complying; he didn't know what it was! But Yuy's eyes had flicked towards Duo at the moment his arms had raised to comply. Duo could read the cold mask by now, but he couldn't understand the look of agonized indecision that flickered across the set face for a brief instant. What... ?

Yuy's face was like rock again as he slowly turned his back to Rao. His hands reached down, as if to pull the leather jerkin from the belt, but Duo, in tune with the captain's smallest gestures, knew that the right hand was moving to his sword hilt instead.

He's not going to do it! But he knows what that means! He’s going to attack- he’s going to die and he's going to try to take Rao with him! No!

The reaction was as instinctive as it had been when facing Septim five years ago. Laboriously built protective wards flickered out as Duo leaped at Yuy, jerking him towards his chest, hand rising to blast as he was hammered with several immediate and powerful attacks aimed straight at him.
The explosion engulfed the two young men in a wave of obliterating heat and darkness.
The place where Maxwell and his captain had stood was a vortex of raw power. The air combusted and flared. The rock around the edges of the maelstrom began to scorch, blacken, then redden and melt. Rao had his wards fully up and had stepped back enough to avoid getting caught in the backlash. He watched with a feral grin as his enemy, the crude, foreign bastard, the thorn in his side, finally died screaming. As previously agreed, Kelna and his followers poured every last ounce of power they possessed to feed the small black tornado of flame and destruction, though it was unnecessary. Duo must have died instantly; Rao had felt the man's protective wards fall as he leaped forward, preparing to blast Rao.

Black magic wards were elaborate constructs, impervious to either magic or weapons, though not both, the mage had to choose which to guard against. The wards could be maintained with a minimum of energy, even while the mage slept. The downside was that you couldn't cast through a magic-repellent ward without weakening it, and you couldn't drive a major blast through without dropping it completely. And once gone, a ward took several hours to rebuild. Duo had been left defenseless in the face of the onslaught.

Rao sneered. He'd been right. His spies had tried to convince him the two men weren't lovers, but Rao had sensed a weakness with the instinct of dozens of generations of the wolves of Lin, a predator scented blood. And he'd been right. Maxwell had shown the weakness he'd known was there, trying to defend the man, and had died for it.

One by one his followers ran out of energy. The storm flickered and died, leaving only a smoking pool of blackening lava.

The smoke dwindled. Shimmering heat waves from the heated rock warped the vision of...

Duo was crouched, one hand flung out, the other arm wrapped protectively around captain Yuy, thrown to his knees by the initial force of the blast.

"No... " It was an incredulous whisper from Kelna. No one else said anything.

Then Rao let fly. It was a desperate blow, it was now a matter of life and death, his death to be exact. He lanced a concentrated beam of pure energy straight at his enemy's heart.

It didn't bounce and flare off a ward. Duo had dropped those.

Instead it dissipated like smoke around a slight shimmer that covered Duo and a badly singed Yuy. Where Rao's black magic struck, a gentle light briefly glimmered, forming strange elegant symbols that flickered briefly and then vanished.

"Hey Rao!" Duo's voice was insanely light and sarcastic, as if he hadn't noticed the molten rock cooling in a ring around him a few feet away. "What's the matter, buddy? Surprised I could cast a white magic shield? Didn't you know? I'm a man of infinite resources!"

Rao's mind flailed in confusion. No Lord of Lin could cast white magic! This was insane! The delicate shields couldn't bear much of an assault, though they could be raised in a second. They depended on strength of heart and mind instead of elaborate cantrips of wards. But surely no white magic shield could withstand against him!

"Yeah, I was taught by one of the best." Duo's grin broadened, turned wolfs, as if guessing Rao’s train of thought. Rao’s 'friends' and even his sibling, empty of power, unable to cast any protection
for themselves or their leader, had prudently taken a few steps back.

"Laugh it up, Maxwell. I don't know how you're doing this, but I do know that you can't cast through a white shield, and it's feeding off your strength as we speak. How long can you keep it up? That's how long you have to live!"

"Rao..." Duo let his voice slip into gentle disapproval. He lifted his hand (Rao's followers took a few more steps back), holding it palm up. Rao just sneered, knowing no magic could pass Duo's shield in either direction. "Rao, you really are a complete ass..."

All sorcerers relied on two or three types of magic, disdaining other forms of attack or defense.

But Maxwell had always flaunted rules and traditions.

Instead of a ball of black magic, it was a silver flicker that sprang from his spring-loaded wrist-sheathe into his hand and out through the shield as swift as any mage bolt. It flashed through the intangible white magic shield, past Rao's magic-repellent wards and into his heart with a meaty thunk.

Rao gasped, and slowly sank to his knees, barely feeling the ground beneath him as his heart seized around the dagger's blade like a torn oilskin belching out blood. By the time he fell onto his back, his whole body had gone numb, and his life flickered and faded without further notice from those around him.

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Duo, an arm supporting his captain, walked towards Rao's supporters with condescending slowness. Kelna choked once, more in fear of her own life than out of any consideration for her brother.

Duo slowly lifted a hand, finger stretched like a weapon, and centered it on the girl. Kelna flinched back, trying to keep some dignity in what she knew was her death.

"Come over here, your ladyship." Duo's voice still had that casual tone, but an undercurrent of steel supplied the 'or else'. Kelna straightened up and approached the two, circling the growing pool of blood from her brother's now still body.

Duo's hand turned palm up, the menacingly stretched finger crooked to beckon Kelna closer, closer. Kelna, white as a sheet, got near enough for that hand to brush her cheek.

It suddenly darted forward and grabbed her by the neck. She managed not to squeal, her eyes liquid with fright but otherwise still dry and determined. Duo's lips quirked. Lin fed its children to each other like jackals, but say what you wanted, they bred strong and true. He didn't like it, but the end result was nonetheless impressive.

"Oh don't worry, you little tart, I'm not going to kill you." Duo had let Lin make him into a killer, but he was damned if he was ever going to enjoy pain or death, Septim's being the only allowable exception.

Kelna, twisted forward by the grip on her neck, stared up at him in growing terror. Duo realized what he'd forgotten to add. "Or torture you either." Disbelief and a slight relief flooded the big eyes.
Duo might have enjoyed a bit more gloating, but he had other concerns. He was drained from casting that desperate white magic shield, dredged from childhood memories and fueled by desperation. It was doubtful Rao's friends might recover and start firing, but he couldn't take the risk.

The shield had barely been in time to save their lives during the concentrated attack. Duo was amazed it had managed even that! The amount of energy pounding into it had been considerable. But holding Yuy to him, he'd felt only calm determination, that come what may, that shield was going to hold. And it had. He wasn't sure where he'd gotten the strength of soul and mind to do that, he didn't want to know. He just wanted to feel grateful they were both alive and leave it at that.

Another reason not to tarry; Yuy was starting to look very pale. His back was scored with a burn from a lick of flame that had managed to get past the shield before it settled. If he hadn't been wearing his thick leather jerkin he would have been very seriously injured. As such, it must hurt like the eleventh circle of hell, but would not incapacitate him too much, if the wound was dealt with quickly.

"I'm going to let this one slide, Missie." Duo told Kelna, now more composed. "On one condition. Well, two of them really. First, I want you to realize that you don't have the feet big enough to slip into your brother's boots, if you see what I mean." Kelna bit her lip, but she obviously knew the truth of the matter. She wasn't anywhere near Rao's level of power. "Second, you're going to move that little ass of yours and teleport us back to camp. I'm kinda lazy and don't want to carry my friend here all the way. I know you're good at that sort of thing. And of course," the grip on her neck tightened, "you will be coming with us so we can be sure to land safe and sound."

"I- I can't- I don't have enough energy-"

"I'm sure you can find it in your heart to make sure I get my friend here taken care of as quickly as possible. Or do you want me to remember what started all this mess...?"

Kelna gritted her teeth at the threat, gathered all her energy together and let the world fade around them, pulling them back to the camp which was mercifully quite close by.
Burned

Duo looked around as the teleport circle faded. Kelna had instinctively brought them back to her usual drop point, on Rao's side of camp in front of his pavilion. They were surrounded by Rao's followers, some of them powerful mages. Fortunately Kelna collapsed before she could even think of capitalizing on the situation.

The people around them took one look at Duo's grim smile, the injured captain, and Kelna's still form, and realized that the confrontation of power had come and gone, and their candidate had lost. Duo met gazes that were fearful, angry, curious or measuring, depending on character and degree of guilt. But he knew as they did that he would not openly move to punish any of them. He was now one corny ceremony away from being their new king, so they were not going to retaliate against him any more than he would waste valuable resources by killing them. That was the way of Lin.

Neither side had to like it, though. He'd have to watch his back.

Duo tugged Yuy. The man was having trouble walking, but he was still taking determined steps towards their side of the camp, a quarter of a mile away.

"No need to push it, buddy. We'll use Rao's pad, he won't mind. He's in a better place now. Oh wait, no he's not!" Duo snickered manically at his own humor, the adrenaline and power rush still tingling in his veins. Yuy looked at him dubiously, then glanced at the people around them. A council observer, courtier to Septim, stared back among the hostile sorcerers. Another of Septim's men was hurrying away towards the lone pavilion in the center of camp, to warn the head of council of the new shape of the political landscape. The die had been cast; no one was going to jump them now.

Duo pulled the wounded man into the pavilion and sat him down on a leather footrest so he could check out his injuries. He only spared a glance at the rich surroundings, to see if there was any water and a medical chest anywhere. He carefully examined the man sitting before him. The jerkin's leather had cracked and buckled and split wide open under the heat that had scorched it. Fortunately the high leather collar had protected Yuy's hair from catching. Duo felt himself shuddering at the closeness of the call. He peeled off the leather jerkin; the hide was so dried and scorched it felt like breaking a chick out of an eggshell. Yuy had stiffened -probably in some pain- but then slowly began pulling the remnants away by himself.

Duo went rooting around the tent for bandages. He'd heal what he could, but he was exhausted, he would probably need to patch up the rest and leave it to Sally.

"Well, you won... " Yuy sounded dazed. Duo didn't blame him, he could hardly believe it himself. He suddenly remembered Wu Fei and the rest of his men who must be taking a useless mile-long jog to the scene of the battle. Oh well, it would be good for their health. They'd realize as soon as they got there and saw Rao's body that they were not needed. They'd figure out where he was soon enough. He gathered a jug of water, a clean cloth and a sheet he could cut for bandages and knelt down behind Yuy again.

"Did you see Rao's eyes when he realized what I'd done?" Duo's grin was almost wider than his face as he reached for Yuy's shirt, starting to lift it gently. "I thought- whoa buddy!"

Yuy had gasped and started off the stool as if Duo had drenched him with ice water. He spun and staggered, face quickly regaining composure. Duo was amazed, both at the move and the will that seemed to completely ignore the pain of a very nasty burn.
"I'm sorry, did I hurt you? Sit down, we've got to treat this."

"I'm okay," Yuy said quickly.

This was so obviously a lie that Duo's jaw dropped. He stared at the pale face, marred by the blood-clotted gash on the left cheek, a bruise rising slowly up to the eye. He was practically swaying with pain and shock. Duo considered it amazing that he was standing at all. I wouldn't be, he thought, remembering the several hand spans of reddened and blackened flesh he'd glimpsed through the hole burned into the light cotton shirt under the jerkin.

"Yuy, just sit down. I'll cut the shirt off, it won't-"

"No, don't bother. I'll be- I mean, I'll get the surgeon to look at it."

If it had been somebody else, Duo might have let it go. But something in him prickled.

"Sally's probably staring down at Rao's body in confusion by now, and won't be back for some time. I can do a better job than her anyway. With a proper heal spell it won't scar too badly. Come on, captain, don't be a wimp about this."

The man didn't even react to that. Duo sighed and stood up, intending to drag him back to the chair. He didn't know what was up with the man, he certainly wasn't the kind to be afraid of any pain. Maybe he didn't want to be beholden to his lord that way. Maybe - this was the little bit that rankled - he didn't trust Duo, though that seemed ridiculous. He had relied on Trowa to bind his wounds last time he'd been hurt in battle (this rankled a bit as well). But whatever the cause, Duo didn't feel like seeing a man who was about to get whipped or even killed for his sake, stay hurt and scarred if he could help it.

The weird memory of Yuy getting ready to draw on Rao rather than strip to the waist in front of Duo flashed through his mind, then out again as confusion and anger took over. Yuy was actually staggering away from him, scowling but his eyes wide and watchful.

"Yuy! Circles of hell, what do you think you're-"

He winced in sympathetic pain as Yuy accidentally backed up against one of the thick supporting pillars of the pavilion. The man gasped and staggered and Duo leaped forward, thinking he was going to collapse.

The stoic captain didn't collapse. Instead Duo found himself being shoved away by arms that would normally send him flying halfway across the tent if Yuy had been fitter. Duo stared at the man leaning painfully against the support, mouthing apologies to his lord and saying that he was fine, while his eyes were wide and hostile.

Blast it, Duo thought angrily, he's more afraid of me then he was of Rao!

Duo could wait a long time for revenge, but in most things his patience was about as durable as a soap bubble, and he could feel it popping right about now. Snarling, he clicked his fingers, angrily wasting a few more mental resources in paralyzing his wayward servant. Yuy gasped and started fighting the air that was solidifying around him as if it were a matter of life or death. Duo's hold was strong enough to stop him moving too much though.

"You're the most stubborn ass of a man I've ever met, Yuy!" he snapped, tugging the man around through the resistance of the spell and shoving him against the tent's support. He gripped the thin cotton shirt at the back of the neck and ripped it easily, most of it was already gone. "You can't tell me you're shy about your body. It's pretty easy on the eyes, you... know... "
He'd cast his eyes in concern over the burn marring the skin, and in appreciation over the rest of the muscular frame -

- and in complete confusion and growing hysteria at the ancient, upright burn mark, like a raised dagger, over Yuy's right shoulder, a match for the two slashes on his own...

The edges of his vision went white and wobbly as that mark filled his entire mind, his holding spell flickering out.

Something in his mind shattered.

"HEER-"

He was grabbed, spun around and slammed against the tent support, a hard hand muffling the scream.

The two men stared at each other. Duo's eyes, huge in a white face, darted over Heero's scowling, tense expression. Duo finally blinked and started to struggle dazedly. Heero let his hand shift a bit, cautiously.

"Heero- it can't- how could - I killed you! I killed you! I saw you die! How did I not recognize you?! This is insane - " Words tumbled from his mouth in a frantic whisper, rising slowly in volume. Heero's hand was back on his mouth, lighter this time, a warning. Duo suddenly realized where they were; he was with the heir of Sanq in the middle of a camp of Lin sorcerers who were hostile enough towards Duo, let alone - he's alive, he's-

The two young men faced each other over Heero's hand until Duo nodded convulsively. Heero let his hand drop with a warning look.

Duo took several deep breaths, which crumbled into a choked hysterical giggle when Heero said, in his usual precise stuffy tone: "Yes, I'm alive."

"Uh. Yeah. H-how?"

"Father Maxwell. He raised a shield and protected me. Much as you did today." Heero's eyes softened a bit.

"F-Father Max? Did he also-" Duo swallowed as Heero shook his head slightly, a stab of pain coming from a wound he'd thought long scarred over.

Duo's eyes seared over Heero's features as if he were trying to burn them into memory. But it was in fact the opposite; how come-

"How in hell did I manage not to recognize you?" It was almost a whimper. "You- you're closer to me than my own reflection, how-"

Heero's eyes dropped and his face closed. "Magic," he said shortly.

Finally, Duo ignited.

"Magic?!" He hissed. "What do you mean, magic? Damn it, I'm one dead body past becoming the heir of Lin, the most powerful sorcerer in the world! You have all the magical ability of a piece of soap! Don't make me believe- Damn you get your hand off of my mouth, Yu-Hee- whatever!"

"Duo, calm down. I-"
"Not until you tell me what the hell is going on!"

"It's simple, it- it is a spell. Sort of. It's one thing I'm good at, magically, well one of two things, and I had to study for years to be good enough to hide myself from-" He hesitated.

Duo's quick intuition filled in the blank.

"From me." He whispered. "You were hiding yourself from me."

"Not only from-"

"You were hiding from me! Gods, Heero I thought you were dead! How could you-"

Duo was striking out blindly at the hand that was trying to cover his mouth once more, his voice rising higher and higher. Finally Heero clasped his face with both hands, stopping him from shaking his head in furious denial over all the pain of the past few years.

"Duo! Hush! I didn't know you thought I was dead! I wasn't sure. We only knew it for sure a couple of years ago-"

"Oh, well, took you long enough to pop up and reassure me, didn't it? No, wait, you were dragging it out even longer than that, since you show up disguised somehow! What were you waiting for, my birthday? That was quite a few months ago, you bastard!"

"We didn't know- Duo, bad things are about to happen, we couldn't take the risk of you recognizing me. Duo, please listen!"

"Oh, I'm listening!" Duo was well aware that the walls of the pavilion couldn't muffle sound too well, that he had to keep his voice down, stay in control, but he was damned if he was going to wait another five years before he heard the end of this! "I'm listening 'cause this is the part where you tell me why you thought it was fun to let me think you were dead, let Septim take me to Lin, let me- oh wait, I forgot, I'm Treize's damn bastard! It's probably what I deserve!"

Heero's grip on his face tightened convulsively, shaking him. There was suddenly a look of such pain in his cousin's eyes that Duo almost sobbed.

"Heero, I-"

And suddenly his defenses, still tattered as they were, registered a familiar tingle.

Duo had survived five years in the courts of Lin and had won the hardest game of all against all odds, and he hadn't done so by being slow-witted and easy to catch off guard. In a flash he'd grabbed a startled Heero by the waist with one hand, dragging him closer, while the other hand snaked up under his cousin's arm to grab his back- covering the identifying upright mark tattooed on his shoulder a mere second before Septim swept aside the curtains of the pavilion.

Septim paused with his 'Duo are you in here' on his lips, as he drew an erroneous - but fairly understandable - conclusion as he saw the two young men leaning against the tent's pillar, Duo's arms around a shirtless Heero, the captain's hands on Duo's face.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're not hurt from your battles, Lord Duo, and that you still have energy to spare." His gaze went up Heero's frame appreciatively - Duo felt a sudden repulsion for the man that had nothing to do with his usual hate for the murderous bastard- then flicked to the burn on his back. "I'd suggest however that your captain might be better off at the surgeons, just for now. That doesn't look good, it'll scar I'm afraid."
Duo swung Heero around before releasing him, so his cousin's back was not towards Septim as he stepped between them.

"Er, yeah, good idea. What did you want, exactly?"

"I need to speak with you, Lord Duo. In private. There is something we have to discuss, something important." A thin tongue licked pale lips. "Now, if you please. In my tent."

Duo glanced back at Heero uncertainly and with some frustration. He caught the look of anxiety in Heero's eyes before he could hide it. Duo suddenly felt that Septim's request was expected and very unwelcome. He felt a chill run down his spine as he realized just how lost he was in this new situation, how little he understood what was going on.

"I really need to take - uh, Yuy here to the-"

"I'll call a man to see to him if you're that worried." Septim's voice dripped irony, since he thought he knew how much Duo had been worried about Heero's injuries before he interrupted. "But please, now?"

Duo shook free the hand Heero had been clutching and took a hesitant step towards Septim. "Okay, okay, keep your robes on," the jester kidded automatically, his mind in a whirl. "You." His voice hardened as he glared back at his half-cousin. "Stay here. I'll be back. We have things to talk about."

He could almost feel Septim smirk in approval at the tone and the implications. Repulsive reptile.

He waited until Heero nodded convulsively, then turned to face the enemy.

"Okay, Septim, let's go."

"After you, Lord Duo."

"As if! You first, uncle dearest."

Septim made a half bow and exited through the tent flaps. After one more glare in Heero's direction and a hand-gesture that said 'wait here!', Duo followed.
Duo glanced around. The plain tent contained a wooden table thick with maps, books and scrolls, a common camp bed, a privacy screen and a few traveling chests. Septim's decor was sober compared to Rao's pavilion. The old sorcerer did not particularly want the trappings of power, as long as he had the power itself and could use it to crush people.

Duo's eyes finally settled on his uncle, putting a small chest on the table with obvious care. His head was spinning. All he'd gone through to avenge himself on this man... and now that Heero turned out to be alive - *Heero's alive, he's alive, he's really* - did he still have a reason to hate the man?

Hmm, hate the man that had caused Duo to lose Heero even temporarily, as well as the death of Father Maxwell and Odin, who had ripped Duo from his innocent, peaceful life, and thrown him to the wolves? *Hell yeah!*

Duo's blood was singing in his veins, but he didn't let it go to his head, however shaken he was. The bombshell of Heero's survival was bad enough. Now he was face to face with his enemy and something was up. Septim had always treated him with indifference until now. He'd never been this insistent on Duo's presence before. Every inch of his skin prickled with tension. He was without any wards or the energy to raise a white magic shield if it became necessary. He didn't even have the knife in its spring-loaded arm-sheathe anymore, he'd left it stuck in Rao's cooling body.

"Please, Lord Duo, have a seat."

"That's okay, I'll stand." Duo kept his voice pleasant while relaxing his body and mind, marshaling his last resources for-

And then it struck him. What was with all the 'Lord Duos' that Septim was showering him with today?

The slightly deferential attitude of the older man finally connected.

Of course. The worm had turned! Duo was now heir of Lin by default, he and Rao had been the only candidates left. The others having declared forfeit or been forcefully removed long before.

He wasn't surprised when Septim turned from the small chest on the table, lifting a seal and a ring from a velvet purse within it.

"Normally we'd do this in the council great hall with a lot of pomp and ceremony. We still can if you insist, of course, Lord Duo." Septim's mustache twitched.

Duo flipped a hand at him. "Skip it, Septim, and hand 'em over."

His uncle did so, with a small bow and smirk. Duo's mind was racing furiously as he slipped the seal of the heir in his pocket and the ring, plain gold with a miniature of the seal on its flat surface, on his finger. The moment he'd been waiting for was upon him; he was finally on equal footing with Septim. On the up side, Duo was the new heir, officially a High Lord of Lin instead of one of its children, which meant he could murder the man with impunity according to the quaint and charming laws of Lin. On the down side, Septim still had protective wards that could beat him even on a good day, while Duo had barely enough energy left to fry a strip of bacon.

Septim was now going to try to worm his way into Duo's favors, or at least insure he would survive Duo's ascension. Duo had been waiting for a day when he'd be able to even the score with his uncle.
and he thought the man knew it. If Septim got frightened enough for his life that he thought he should risk it all and lash out at Duo...

Better to wait and play along with whatever Septim would try. In a month or so, the rule of Treize would officially end and Duo would be crowned Sorcerer-King of Lin. He could then order Septim slowly tortured to death and all his wards, plots and magic be damned. He just had to be careful that his uncle didn't get him into anything that would make the cunning old buzzard indispensable, because surely that was what he would be aiming for.

Septim was looking at him like a snake looked at a mouse. If he was at all worried that the young man before him was now his superior, he didn't show it. Duo met his stare, giving away nothing.

"Well, my nephew." Septim must have decided that being obsequious would get him nowhere, or he was unwilling to make the effort. "I must admit I'm as surprised as I am pleased. Rao was strong, and no fool. That you made it even through the first year of School has never ceased to astonish me, in fact. That you stand here before me now, as my brother once did... " Duo felt a slight shudder of revulsion as he realized his uncle was perversely proud of the accomplishment of his blood kin, despite all that lay between them. There were some aspects of Lin that Duo would never get entirely used to.

"My brother... " Septim's eyes turned inwards, then he glanced at the maps on the table. Duo looked as well. Their present camp was a few miles from the spot where Treize had died on the edge of the Gap of Sevring, a region that was particularly blasted and cursed by the conflagration that had killed the king of Lin and so many of his people

"My brother had great plans. It's time you learned about them, Duo. You are not king yet, but that is only a ceremony after all. You are what you are: the strongest of the children of Lin. That is all I need to know, and I will show you tomorrow what great legacy your father left us all."

Legacy? That brought something else back to Duo's mind, the other reason he'd fought to get where he was. No one had ever said anything more to him about plans to invade the southern kingdoms, starting with Sanq, but all the time he'd spent skulking on rooftops, breaking into libraries and sneaking around eavesdropping, he had learned that something was nonetheless underway, and it was going to be big and ugly. But only a handful of people knew the whole deal and they were as careful as Septim, he'd not been able to hear more.

"We precipitated the confrontation between you and Rao because we need to act soon. There are indications that our enemies may have seen through parts of our plan, that they may be trying to gather information about our... strategies. I doubt that Sanq will be able to set up a defense even then, but I won't take the risk of this going wrong. So we're going to set things in motion tomorrow."

"What exactly-" but Septim was waving a hand.

"No, Duo, I cannot tell you more. I am still acting head of the council until your coronation. Though you outrank me now, you cannot order me to break the vows I took when I accepted that position, and those vows bind me to silence. It's no great deal; instead of telling you today, I will show you tomorrow."

Tomorrow? So this legacy thing was nearby? Uh.

"We will travel before dawn. We won't take the chances that spies of Sanq will follow us through the ward maze, or any unnecessary risks. Can you get your men ready by then, Duo? ... Duo?"

Duo finally managed to nod numbly. Because he'd just realized...
The spies of Sanq were already in on the act. He felt cold to the core of his soul. Even though Heero had been hiding from him, as strange as that seemed, up until then he still couldn't help but believe that his cousin had come here for him. Some strange explanation, possibly steeped with the kind of cautious, discreet, boneheaded logic his cousin was good at, would explain the whole hiding thing, and then it would just be him and Heero and they could...

What, go home? His home was in Lin now. And he knew what his cousin had really come for, and that Duo was not the objective of his visit. He'd been the obstacle, the enemy to hide from.

"I'll be ready tomorrow morning at dawn. We'll come get you." He managed to keep his voice level but he turned quickly before his uncle could see the anger and the hurt warring over his emotions.

---

"Duo! Thank the Lords of the four corners, there you are!"

Duo glanced up at Wu Fei running towards him. Damn it, not now. He hesitated, almost ready to run-

"I'm glad you're alright! Yuy told us what happened, it's amaz-"

"Yuy!?"

"Yes. His wounds aren't too bad. He-"

"He's here?!"

Wu Fei's delicate eyebrows started to hitch up. "Yes, he is. Is something wrong?"

"Where-is-he?" Duo ground out.

"The fool refused to go see Sally. I'm not surprised. He's been very short-tempered with -"

"Where?!"

Wu Fei's eyebrows did the hitching thing again, but his eyes were worried. Duo tried to reel in his temper. Fortunately he was too tired to make anything spontaneously combust but that was no excuse to lose it, he had to be on the ball with this.

"He's with Trowa in the stabling area. Sally's afraid Trowa's going to put horse ointment on that burn and is trying to find you to get Yuy to listen to reason and accept her treatment. Trowa won't let her or anyone else near, you see. I think Yuy insisted on it actually. Duo!?"

Wu Fei gasped as Duo suddenly pulled him into a bear hug and held him close. The young man hesitated, then lifted a hand to pat Duo's shoulder in a clumsy reassurance, trying to figure out what was wrong.

"He is alright, Duo. Er, are you?"

"Wuffers... "

"What?" Wu Fei was worried enough not to react to that. Duo broke off the hug, and leaned back to
watch his friend's face, his hands still on his shoulders.

"Fei, you're my friend. You wouldn't lie to me, right? You... you wouldn't keep things from me..."

Duo tried to put his frazzled mind into order as Wu Fei stared at him in amazed confusion.

"We tell each other everything, I- I rely on that, you wouldn't keep a big secret from me would- would you?!"

The last was a horrified squeak as Duo registered the tinge of shame on Wu Fei's rigid face. No! Had Wu Fei known? Had every one around him know about this, had let him suffer needlessly, had hidden Heero's survival-

"Gods Duo, I- I don't know what to tell you. I - I swear I don't know how it happened, how I could disgrace Meilan's memory so, with someone who is an enemy at that. I should never- but she's not like the nobles of Lin, she's got heart, and honor - I- I'm sorry I kept it from you, but I didn't even want to acknowledge it to myself. I-"

Duo's knees were almost buckling in relief as he tried to cut through the self-recrimination. Finally he gave the man a shake to interrupt him.

"Wu Fei!"

"W-What?"

"Wu Fei, buddy, you're an idiot. But at least you're a reliable one. Now why don't you find big-hearted and honorable Sally and sit on her and keep her away from me and Yuy for the next hour or so, and I'll really owe you something."

"Er, very well." Wu Fei took a few steps and turned back at the sound of his name. Duo looked at him in silence for a second.

"Y-yes?" Wu Fei was visibly shaken and wondering what his manic lord was going to do next.

"Thanks. For everything. You're safe now, if you haven't realized it yet. You'll be free to go as soon as I'm crowned. But I hope you'll stay my friend, Wu Fei Chang. Whatever happens. Wherever you decide to go."

He turned and marched off towards the stables, leaving Wu Fei to stutter behind him.
"Maxwell's a hot-headed loud-mouthed maniac -"

Duo had been approaching the stables with the automatic stealth he always adopted when going into tense situations. He froze, hand still raised towards the flap of canvas that sheltered one side of the corral.

"- but he's not stupid enough to be dragging Septim into this without knowing more about what's going on." It was Trowa's voice.

"Hn." That speaker was even easier to recognize.

There was a moment of silence. Duo listened attentively, wishing he could see within the stable area picketed off by canvas sheets and two wagons.

"This might be all for the best." Trowa continued. Duo could hear him moving around, opening something and rummaging inside. Further away, a horse nickered quietly and stomped.

Silence.

"It will all be a lot easier with Duo's help."

"We would have managed without it." Yuy - Heero's voice was monotonous, as if he wasn't even listening to his own words.

"I know why you weren't going to tell him the truth."

Even though he could not see or hear anything, Duo nonetheless felt a tinge of tension in the silence. Which lasted. And lasted.

Duo almost bit through his braid. Here he was trying to get hold of vital information... by eavesdropping on the two greatest non-communicators of all times.

"You really were hoping you could-... I don't know, cold-cock him while no one was watching, drag him out of harm's way and leave him out of it? He's the heir of Lin, Yuy. He's going to be at the very center of it all when it goes down." Trowa's voice trembled on the edge of exasperation, which was the equivalent of a full blown rant for a normal person.

"Without him, Septim won't have the power to open it all the way." Yuy's voice was still calm.

"Maybe. You know we can't be sure of that. And anyway if that were true then the obvious solution would have been to kill him." Duo felt a prickle run up his spine.

A silence of an interesting texture was his only answer.

"That's what I thought," Trowa concluded simply, without any hint of a gloat.

"It will be hard enough to kill Septim. And we need to reach the place before we can do anything, anyway." Yuy sounded very reasonable.

"Agreed. But Duo was a loose canon. Now that he's found out, we'll at least know which side of the debate he falls on. In case you had any doubts."
"I have none. Duo is not crazy."

"...Are we talking about the same person?"

"He can be a loose canon. But he would not help Septim if the man was on fire. Why would he help him destroy the world?"

Destroy the - ... Duo's jaw dropped to ground level.

"So we're back to: why all the lies? Why didn't you tell him the truth months ago?"

Silence.

"I'm waiting."

"...He's been lied to all his life..."

"So you thought, what's one more?" Trowa asked a bit acidly, taking the words right out of Duo's mouth.

"No. This is my business." Heero's voice sounded mulish, but there was another emotion cracking the shell from within. "I just wanted him to... not know... certain things. He loves Lin now. He will make a good leader. This country will need that in the future. He doesn't need more pain, more doubt, he doesn't need to know how many more lies..." The voice trailed off. Deep within the cold monotones lurked the same pain that Duo had seen in his cousin's eyes back in Rao's tent.

Something inside Duo felt itself slowly unfurl. Still tentative, flinching from any possibility of further blows, but with a flutter of hope.

"Yuy, if you don't tell him, you're doing him the greatest injury you can. I know it's painful to make a choice, but it's worse to not make it and always wonder later what you would have done. I know you're afraid of screwing up. I know that thanks to your training you can't communicate, can't reach him on an emotional level. Well you'll just have to tell him the truth and hope his own good sense makes him realize why you had to do it. I know that Duo will not actually oppose us, or you would have killed him. I know what the mission means to you, that you will go all the way if you really thought it was in danger. No, that's not the problem. You're just afraid that he'll hate you when he realizes what you kept from him. Well, that's a risk, but you-"

"Trowa."

"What?"

"You talk too much."

"There's a first time for everything."

"But I guess you're right. Besides, at this point, he won't stand for anything less than the entire truth."

"The entire truth?"

That dangled in the air...

"I see how he looks at you, Yuy. There's one bit you don't want to tell him." Duo shifted nearer the canvas. Trowa's voice had lowered in something like sympathy, even a bit of sorrow. "I don't know how he'll react to that part of the plan, and that could really compromise the situation. Yuy?" The voice sounded puzzled.
"I'll tell him the truth and what he needs to know." Heero's voice was suddenly back to hard, firm and uncompromising. "Then he can decide what he wants to do, and he'll do it regardless of anything I say. Isn't that right, your lordship?"

Duo snarled silently, then composed his trade-mark grin on his face and lifted the canvas.

Trowa was behind Heero, staring at Duo, blinking, with - sure enough - a pot of horse ointment in his hands. Heero was sitting on an empty box, bare-chested. He looked a bit better than before, his face wasn't quite so pale.

"Trowa, would you be so kind as to leave me alone with my cousin here?" Duo's voice was like silk sliding over a knife. He was still angry. He wasn't sure why. By the sound of it, Heero had a major good reason to have tried to hide things from him, had in fact been trying to avoid him getting into a mess. The anger was as much a shield against feeling too much, as it was a reaction to the lies and for taking him and his pain so lightly.

Trowa's eyes narrowed and he looked like he was going to argue when Heero glanced over his shoulder and said: "Go."

Trowa glanced at them, shrugged, tossed Duo the ointment and left in silence.

Duo gave the ointment a sour glance. "Please tell me he hasn't actually put any of this stuff on your back yet."

"No, he'd just gotten it out. He was cleaning out the burn when you arrived."

Duo humphed and stepped behind Heero, tossing the ointment aside. The burn looked even worse now, out in daylight, reddened and cracked, with beads of water from Trowa's ministrations glistening on charred flesh. Heero showed no signs of the agony he must be in.

"Why'd you not wait where I told you? It must have hurt like a bitch walking back."

"Did Septim tell you what he's doing at the Gap of Sevrin?"

"Er no." It slipped out in surprise. Before Duo could snap 'Are you trying to pump me for information?!', Heero spoke again.

"Then I'll tell you. You will have to be careful around him, though, he must not trust you entirely."

"Oh and you do?"

"I don't have a choice anymore." The voice had hesitated just a second, but was still unemotional. Duo stepped in front of him, to look at his face. Cobalt blue eyes fixed on his.

"I'll make it short. When Treize died twelve years ago, he was trying to cast a spell, a big one. But not some big mage blast like Zechs always thought. The spell was very different, and it had to be cast at the Gap.

"The Gap of Sevrin is a dangerous place. It is very much like the wastes of Kespar. There is a school of sorcerers throughout the world that guard these kinds of places. I have been living with Jay who guards the Kespar breach for the last five years, so I know a lot about it."

"Breach?"

"Places where the walls of the world are thin and fragile. Treize murdered the man who was
guarding the breach of Sevring, and tried to collapse the walls. Only an enormous amount of magic could do this. He failed to control it, it killed him. But the breach was weakened badly. Septim managed to place people around the breach several years ago, shortly before he tried to kill...us, at the lodge. Septim's men have been working on opening the breach. They have already succeeded to an extent. The breaches are a connection to one of the circles of Hell. I think. I've never been all that interested in the arcane details." A slight grimace crossed his face.

Duo's mind was spinning like a wheel and his intuition shot off of it at a right angle. A circle of Hell slowly gaping wider and wider these last few years... "The fiends?"

"Yes. They are escaping from that breach, more and more of them. Septim's sorcerers have placed very strong wards around the entire area, a maze that even Jay cannot enter. They have a very strong teleporter in there as well, who moves the fiends out of the area before they can get too dangerous to the men guarding the breach. He cares little where he drops them, and they've been running around loose in the world, as we both know from first hand experience. That's not good, but what will happen when the breach is fully open is a whole lot worse."

Duo felt a very strong urge to sit down. His braid was clasped in both hands like a security blanket.

"Um, but the fiends have been attacking Lin too."

"That will be nothing to what is to come, and Lin won't be spared."

"But that's crazy! "

"No, not in Septim's mind."

Duo stared at him. Heero looked like he'd bit into something rotten.

"I didn't understand it until I met him again, and lived in Lin for awhile. Even Jay wasn't sure what Septim was trying to accomplish. We thought he might be mad. I think he is a little, it... runs in the blood. But it's not madness that's pushing him on.

"He believes in the strength of Lin, and that strength comes from conflict, in his view. I believe, now that I've studied him, and heard you and Chang talk about him, that he knows what will happen. When he opens the gates to that place, and terrible demons come rampaging out, all the kingdoms will collapse and get run down fighting them. A lot of people will die, in Lin as well. But the strongest will survive. And since he thinks the strongest are in Lin... He thinks Lin will be able to conquer the demons they set loose, when all the other kingdoms will fall helpless. Then Lin will be the only thing left. You know him well. Much better than I ever could. Does that make sense?"

"Yes." Duo could hardly feel his lips, he was so numb with horror. "Yes it does. Man, how many times am I going to have to kill that bastard to give him what he deserves?!"

"Only once will be enough for me," Heero said in what might have been humor but probably wasn't.

Duo grunted. "I'll start with that anyway. What exactly were you planning on doing? Can you tell me that?"

Heero stared at him as if judging his mood. Then he nodded.

"Soon, Septim will take you to the Gap of Sevring, to the breach. He does not have enough power there to open it properly, despite all the work of weakening it that his cronies have been doing over the years. The heir of Lin should have enough raw power to rip it wide open. I think he sees it as an initiation rite as well, something that should be the heir's responsibility. And honor."
"Once more, sounds dead on the money. Uncle dearest. Man, what a family!"

"Trowa and I were going to infiltrate the troops that were accompanying the heir to the Gap. We succeeded beyond expectation for that part at least. Only Septim and a couple of others on the council know their way through the ward maze around the breach, we need him to lead us in. Once we get to the breach...

"Yes?"

"Septim and his sorcerers are going to have to die. They are the key to the ward maze around the place, and we need Jay and his people in there to take care of the breach, like he's been caring for the one in Kespar."

Duo frowned. "Is that it? That sounds easy enough. Well, no, not easy. I had to become the bloody heir of Lin to give me half a chance at a shot at Septim, he's as hard to kill as a fungal infection. But... " His mind was running. "Why didn't you just try to kill Septim outside the wards, like, any time these past few months? Why will you have a better chance inside the wards than outside? Why wait till the last bloody minute?"

"We need to be in place to take care of the breach," Heero said slowly. "If Septim is murdered, the sorcerers he has placed around it will sense it, and react; they will probably try to jam the breach open, maybe even rip it fully apart. If they have nothing left to lose, they might even succeed, with or without the powers of the heir of Lin. We can't take that chance. We have to get to the breach, and kill them all together and... well, get Jay in there to control the mess."

Duo sensed a slight hedging in that part of the plan, but wasn't sure he wanted to dig any deeper. His head was overstuffed with information as it was. Damn, night was falling, they had to leave really early in the morning, he was exhausted but couldn't afford to be anything less than a hundred percent tomorrow... and there was still one important question he had to ask.

"Heero, look at me." His half-cousin lifted his face. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Heero stared at him, his eyes unreadable. "Didn't you hear earlier?"

"I heard bits of it, I think. But I want you to look me in the eyes and give me the whole thing. Now. P-please." He cursed himself for that last, but it had come out. His anger couldn't quite shield the depth of his hurt.

Heero was silent for awhile. Then he sighed. His eyes were suddenly softer than before, though there was still a good deal of darkness within them.

"Duo, I have been training hard these last five years to stop this. To have a chance, I have had to become... very single-minded about it. There was no halfway measures. My own feelings in the matter were never a consideration. I had to learn absolute control over my emotions, my... abilities, to allow me to hide myself from Septim and... and from you, if necessary, hide myself from anyone who might look at me and recognize me as prince Heero of Sanq. Any slip of emotions could shatter the mask I was casting in other people's minds. Like the first time we met, in Sansbury. I was so surprised to see you again after so many years... you almost recognized me there, and I couldn't allow that because we weren't sure what you would do if you knew the truth.

"Five years ago, when we realized you were making a real try for the throne of Lin... no one was sure what was going on. We didn't know what Septim had told you, what he'd done to you. We didn't know if he'd corrupted you. The years passed and you didn't drop out of the trials, in fact you became one of the final candidates. That made you, potentially, one of the enemy."
That cold unemotional voice took some of the sting out of the words. Duo found himself nodding glumly, imagining what Heero must have thought of the reports from Lin.

"Once I got here... you hide yourself well too, Duo. I couldn't tell for awhile what you were thinking, how badly Septim might have influenced you. Even when I realized that you would probably not support his schemes, I couldn't be sure you would keep quiet and follow our plan, or if maybe you would loose your temper with him or- or with me... " Suddenly the eyes dropped and the voice was a whisper, a confession. "I wasn't sure what you would do and I didn't think I could rely on my own judgment when it came to you. And the stakes were too high. I couldn't risk it. I was hoping to just keep you out of the whole thing so I wouldn't have to worry about it.

"We don't have much time, I'm afraid, and we cannot afford... distractions. I know, Duo, that you are going to try to help us. I can see it in your eyes. Whether you are doing it to protect Sanq, or Lin, or the rest of the world, doesn't matter. Whether you forgive me one day for all those years alone doesn't matter either. We need to concentrate on what is to come. After... " A small sad smile suddenly flickered on the chiseled features. "Afterwards it will sort itself out."

Duo was silent. There was too much to deal with right then and there. He slowly walked around to Heero's back again. He could feel him stiffen, then relax as Duo put a gentle hand on his injury. Healing energy started to make a foray against the burn. He lifted the other hand and slipped it against a firm cheekbone, covering the awful gash there. He felt Heero flinch from the touch, and not from pain. But Duo kept his hands firmly against the warm skin and put as much as he could into both injuries, until he felt dizzy. Heero's head was bowed in the silence full of lingering pain and unsaid words.

Duo let both hands fall on the strong shoulders before him. He felt them quake beneath the touch. He leaned his chin against the bowed head, slipping his arms over Heero's shoulders in a loose hug, and closed his eyes. After a second he felt Heero's hands clasping his own, lightly, hesitantly. The slight shaking in his cousin's shoulders subsided. Duo squeezed one of the hands covering his.

"Heero, right now my head's gonna explode. So I can't tell you just how mad I still am at you, or how mad I'm gonna be once I've had time to think it all over. I'll let you know. But one thing you've got right. I'm not going to let Septim do this. Uncle dearest is going down hard. And we don't have the time to sort out what we're feeling, because I'm afraid it's all going down tomorrow."

The strong shoulders under his arms jerked. Heero staggered to his feet and spun around. "Tomorrow!"

"Yes. Septim wants to take me to the Gap tomorrow before dawn and I'm thinking now it's not to leave a wreath on my father's last resting place."

Heero started to swear. Then he leaped to the entrance of the corral. "Trowa!"

The tall warrior was inside the canvas in an instant. Duo wondered sourly if he'd been eavesdropping, but decided it didn't matter. His head still in a whirl, he heard Heero pour out instructions. He heard the words 'tomorrow', 'Quatre', 'Jay', and 'get ready'.

"You guys can include me in your preparations." Duo sighed, straightening up and walking over. "I think I can be of some small help when it comes to crushing evil insane uncles. It's what I've been preparing for these last five years as well."

The two captains looked at him, then at each other, and nodded. "Very well. I need to get this information to Quatre, then we will sit down and decide how to do this." Trowa was all business.
Heero grunted. "I'll go see if our 'friend' is aware of all this and can manage to come with Septim, or if he needs an escort to the breach tomorrow." Heero glanced at Duo, hesitating as he realized his words must be confusing. "You see, we have a spy here, he-"

"That's okay, go, go, Hee- Yuy. Better still call you that, avoid any slips. We don't have time to go into all the ins and outs of your 'mission' here, I trust you."

His hand shot up, catching his cousin's chin when he saw the look of relief and gratitude dawning in his eyes. "Correction, I trust you for now! We kick Septim into the Gap, get rid of the fiends, then have a bloody big party to celebrate. And after that, 'Yuy', we're going to have a real long talk about trust and such stuff and I may end up punching your lights out, before I let myself get all happy about the fact you're still alive. Okay?"

Heero's eyes suddenly went cold and flat, which meant that Duo had been shut off. He also caught a strange look from Trowa before the tall captain left to contact the Quatre person they'd mentioned. There was something here they didn't want him to know about and it chilled Duo, he felt suddenly that there were too many unknowns in this little mission. But he knew that he didn't have the time to go into this in too much detail. He could get some answers from his cousin the day after tomorrow.

Assuming the world hadn't become the fourteenth circle of hell by then.
"So... How's your back doing?" Duo draped an apparently affectionate arm around Heero's shoulders and tugged him close.

They'd had little time to prepare a plan the night before, and they'd headed towards the Gap before first light. They were improvising a lot, so communication on the fly was important. As a means to that end, Duo was playing up his apparent 'relation' with the dour captain to Septim and the two council observers with him so that the cousins could talk as privately as possible while walking a few feet behind the enemy.

Duo quelled any lingering thought that he was not minding this ruse as much as he probably should. If he was enjoying this, it was just that he was glad to see his cousin again after all these years, despite... everything. Right. The fact that he'd wanted to do this with Yuy on occasion before the ball dropped was just because... he'd probably recognized Heero on some deeper level underneath all the magic and misdirection and yeah, okay, concentrate. End of the world. All that.

Heero didn't seem to mind the closeness either, though he was in all likelihood doing it entirely for Septim's benefit. Duo didn't care though, as Heero slipped an arm around his waist and hugged him somewhat awkwardly. The first time they'd done that Wu Fei had walked straight into a rock, so there really was no way he couldn't enjoy this.

Duo had wanted to leave Wu Fei behind, as this was going to be very dangerous, and he couldn't bear the thought of him getting hurt just as he'd gained his freedom. Heero had pointed out though that Wu Fei was his right hand and that Septim might get suspicious if he wasn't with them for no good reason. Duo had tried to get Wu Fei to play sick before they left, so that he'd have a good excuse to leave him behind without Septim smelling a rat. But Wu Fei had immediately sensed something was up and had raised a stink.

Duo couldn't blame him. Wu Fei was slowly getting to a place where he might be able to move on from the events that had scarred his childhood. Move on with a gentle, smiling lieutenant with soothing, healer's hands, Duo was betting. But before he could be completely free, Septim was going to have to die, and Duo had always promised that Wu Fei would be with him the day it happened. He kept his promises. Wu Fei was now walking a few paces behind Duo and Heero, staring at their display of affection and occasionally tripping over small stones. Trowa was walking besides him with a kind hand near his elbow to stop him from taking too bad a fall.

Duo leaned over Heero's - oddly attractive - ear and, in tones of endearment, whispered: "This place really is the ass-end of the world."

Heero smiled a bit. "You should see..." he glanced at Septim's back a few paces away "-the place I spent the last few years."

"It couldn't be worse than this," Duo muttered.

"It wasn't quite as lively," Heero admitted, his eyes tracking something fist-sized and pus-white as it skittered quickly under a rock.

There was no wind over the blasted twisted landscape, the spell wards around the breach were blocking even that. But the scenery still seemed to roil and scamper and twitch out of the corner of the eye. Despite the clear crisp cold of the dawn air - which had seemed pure and refreshing until they'd arrived here - there seemed to be heat-waves rippling just out of line of sight. The whole place
was heaving with dark malice. Duo's magic-sensitive nerves were crawling as much as the countryside.

Heero suddenly squeezed the waist he was holding as if he felt what his friend was going through. He'd warned Duo the night before that as a magic user, he would be perturbed. Even a calmed and controlled breach like Kespar could be disturbing; the first time Jay had taken him to the Kespar breach not far from the compound, Heero had been violently sick. Duo had wisely skipped breakfast that morning or he might have done the same.

The spells around the place were invisible to the naked eye, but the wards could turn away or burn any intruder. Septim walked through the maze with assurance, he'd apparently traced the path through the unseen hazard many times. The entrance of the ward maze was indicated by nothing more than a plain stone marker and a hitching post where they'd left the horses. No animal would get near this place unless trussed up like a chicken and dragged forward on its back. Humans were apparently much dumber, Duo thought glumly as he trudged through thick dust, speckled gray with old ash and shattered twisted bits of stone. It crunched like old dry bones beneath his black boots.

The first bad surprise of the day - hopefully the last - was Septim insisting they leave their troops with the horses. They had been there to protect them against fiends and enemy raids until the edges of the maze, but were no longer needed, and Septim was behaving with his usual paranoia. Duo had managed to talk Septim into letting him have his two captains and Chang as escort. His uncle had not needed too much persuasion, though he'd cast a suspicious eye at Wu Fei. The way skitters and raps followed the small group on their way through the maze to the heart of the breach, Duo now understood why his uncle had allowed the modest escort.

When they arrived, the actual breach turned out to be as invisible and unmarked as the maze. Well, the Gap of Sevring was a bit of a clue that they had arrived; it stretched before them for miles, a ragged wide chasm barring their way. But the breach itself was a very small area mid-air above the gorge, a hundred feet wide or so, and wasn't delimited in any way. Even Wu Fei could sense it though, and his magical abilities were null. Duo was shivering, and he felt Heero slip a supporting hand around his shoulder and squeeze before falling to the side a bit.

"Unpleasant, isn't it?" Septim's voice sounded small and tinny in the heaving air. Strangely human too. Duo looked at him with something like pity. How mad was he to think a small bitter little man like himself could control this- this ugliness. Anybody in their sane mind would be running for the hills and pulling them in after him by now. And he'd been feeding this for five years instead!

Heero was glancing around, calculating eyes scanning the area. Whatever Jay had done to him, it was apparently effective. He seemed even more composed than Septim. He exchanged a glance with Trowa, who was sweating but showed little other sign of stress.

Duo realized their eyes were flicking over small huts built at regular intervals around them, in a loose semi-circle around the breach. They were open towards the Gap, dark small eaved houses like temples to domestic gods at crossroads. He thought he could see a hunched figure crouching in the one closest to them. These were probably the sorcerers who had been slowly weakening the Gap these last few years, and also giving Septim the power to weave a permanent ward maze around it. Duo put his feelings of crawling horror aside with the strength he'd found within himself in the halls of Lin. They were here for a purpose.

He frowned. Now that they were actually here, he realized he had some blanks as to the sequence of events. He'd volunteered to take on Septim, and the others had agreed with relief. It had sounded like Heero and Trowa were going to take out the sorcerers near the Gap, and whatever guard or escort they had nearby, though they had stayed very fuzzy on details...
Why did he feel he was missing something?

Heero kept looking at him, he could feel it, though he would never be doing it when Duo glanced back. He... trusted Heero. He did, whatever he said, whatever had happened. Why did he feel something big was being hidden from him?

He saw Trowa draw near Heero, the one green eye fixed on the nearest hut, hands on swords. The tall captain glanced at Heero in passing and his hand reached out and squeezed Heero's wrist convulsively. The green eyes, suddenly not so blank, brushed Duo's cousin with some unreadable but intense emotion and an unhappy droop to the mouth. Heero gave him a warm smile, freeing his wrist from the hold to gently pat Trowa's hand. Well, they were nervous, they were probably outnumbered and overpowered by the sorcerers and their guards, that's probably why... right...

Septim cleared his throat. Duo turned and caught the look of contempt on his uncle's face. Apparently Duo wasn't supposed to be so concerned with his 'recreation' out here.

"Now, nephew, if I can have your attention, we are on the eve of a glorious-"

Things were tense enough without having to listen to the whole 'I'll conquer the world now, bwaaahahaha!' speech. Duo checked his wards, gave a small flick of the fingers to Trowa and Heero, attacking his uncle before the bastard could finish his sentence.

Septim was caught in an avalanche of pulsing, ripping flames. They coursed around his wards, testing and searching. Duo scowled as he focused himself into his task.

He'd discussed this with Heero last night. Septim had the best wards in the world, that was his specialty. He was so good he could even sustain a magical ward phased with a weapon's ward, making him impervious to Duo's dagger as much as his blasts. There was only one way through the wall, and that was to beat it into submission. Not very subtle, but Duo was finally through with subtle.

But this was going to take some time. Duo ignored his uncle's screams of anger and protest. There was nothing the little maniac could say now that was going to change anything. He didn't even care to let the man know for which of several reasons Duo was going to kill him. Let Septim pick his favorite.

He barely noticed Trowa darting across the blasted landscape towards the first of the sorcerers. Wu Fei, having sensed something all along, had been prudently hanging back out of blast radius. Heero-Heero was way too near him, considering that Septim or one of his cronies could retaliate!

"What do you think you're doing?" Duo ground out. "Go help Trowa!"

"He can manage alone. He's been training for this too." Heero's voice was its usual monotone, as if he weren't standing near a swirling mass of black magic ripping the air apart and burning chunks of it away in pure fury. In fact, he was so close he was actually inside Duo's wards, less than an inch from his back, and so protected from the fallout of the spell. Duo remembered pegging Rao with his dagger through his magical wards, and realized that Heero, mage-blade drawn, was watching his back in case Septim had a less arcane approach and a couple of big burly armed guards nearby, ready to retaliate with.

Duo was so concentrated on the burning waves of unleashed power, it took him a minute to realize something was happening. Was... was the ground shaking?
Septim snarled, hauling his wards in on himself. Suddenly Duo's blasts were curling over a smooth dense barrier of wards. Septim had dropped any ability to cast from that position, which was a strange move seeing that Trowa had already killed six guards and two sorcerers and was moving on steadily. His uncle had all to lose in relying on defense alone - what the hell?

"Why's the ground shaking? What's going on?!"

"The power you are unleashing is combining with the last-ditch efforts of the remaining sorcerers. All this energy is tearing open the breach." Heero sounded like he was commenting on the weather. His hand was resting on Duo's shoulder, tugging him slightly towards him.

"What?! You didn't say this could happen! I have to stay here and keep Septim pinned down or he'll burn us to hell and back! What are we going to do about-"

Septim was held at bay for now, so Duo reigned in a bit of power, hoping to delay the inevitable. He could feel it, claws of malice rendering the air in the Gap behind him, the evil outside of the world sensing the growing weakness of the barrier and trying to rip its way in. He half turned towards his cousin with a hiss of angry panic.

The fact he turned his head was probably why the kiss landed where it did. It was probably meant for his cheek. Duo nearly lost control of his magical blasts and his knees when he felt the lips on his. Just a caress, a warm tender touch.

"Wh-wh-"

Heero smiled. It was the smile he'd given Trowa, only warmer and deeper.

"Good luck, Duo. Kill the rat. Don't worry about the rest. Just... I can't ask you to promise me anything, I don't deserve it, but talk to Jay when this is over, and then go see Zechs, please, and please... try to forgive me. I love you."

Duo still had his mouth open, his blasts frittering out. Heero ran through the trailing blazes, arms raised to protect his face, and headed towards the gap.

What the hell?! Duo's mind rippled like the dancing flames he still maintained around Septim, though it was more a status quo than an attack at present. He could see the air of the Gap twist and bend into ugly mind-ripping shapes. A few fiends skittered out from the canyon, took one look at the magical flames curling around, and darted away as quickly as their mismatched chitinous legs could carry them.

Duo cursed. He didn't know what Heero had planned, there was no way his magically inert half-cousin would be able to do anything about the nightmare taking shape over the Gap. He had to finish Septim quickly and then, well, he didn't know what he'd do, but throwing something hot and nasty at whatever poked its nose out of the breach first would be a good start.

Septim was grinning like a skull from the safety of his wards. Words were lost in the hurricane of Duo's power blasting his shell; Duo had the nasty feeling the rat was gloating. Telling Duo that nothing could stop what was about to happen. Duo's own powers had been twisted and bent to evil purpose again and this time it wouldn't just be Duo's friends who would pay the price... Dammit Heero what were you thinking?

Duo was so concentrated on his uncle that it was the latter's face that warned him something was happening behind him, rather than the massive power surge at his back. Duo blinked, not daring to turn around, afraid to see- but Septim's face was twisting into a look of disbelieving fury and
madness that made him wonder what the hell was upsetting his crazy uncle right at the moment of victory.

"That's impossible!" It was a screech that managed to get through the walls of black magic pounding Septim's wards. "He can't have that power! That is not possible!"

Duo finally glanced over his shoulder.

Heero was standing on the lip of the gap. Black energies, easily rivaling Duo's blaze, were streaming from him and blanketing the Gap of Sevring with crushing force.

Duo's mind froze, refusing to process what he was seeing. Heero- black magic- massive power- didn't make sense. It was Septim's scream that snapped him out of it.

"NO! You can't! You can't do that! I forbid it!"

What _was_ Heero doing? Duo dropped some of his intense bombardment of Septim and eased a tentacle of power out to the Gap, ignoring the sick feeling as it touched the chaos and evil from the tear.

This time it was his heart that froze. Four facts pounded into it, crushing it mercilessly.

Heero was exerting a tremendous amount of black power.

He was using it to drag the breach shut by sheer force, despite the fact that his and Duo's black magic was at the same time widening the tear.

He was going to have enough power to do this... _If_ he went all the way, burning up even his body and mind in the process, all the way to death.

His Heero was going all the way.

"No... " it was a whisper echoing Septim's screams. Duo shook to his soul. "No, you can't do this to me again... I won't let you... "

Duo felt his mind come back from a long distance, parts of it were strangers to him, unseen for the past five years. He glanced at Septim. It was a look of pity, and of dismissal. To hell with the pitiful bastard.

Duo dropped his blasts, dropped even his wards, gathering every ounce of energy he could as he raced to Heero's side, towards the unfolding chaos.
Prayers For The Dead

Septim was shaking. Madness was clawing at his mind as he saw just how well Heero had been trained to do the job he was doing. But the power! No one could have that amount of power. It was right up there with Duo's! How was this possible?

He was left suddenly staggering in empty air, all blasts around him dropped, and he saw Duo run to the Gap. The slight flicker of hope that Duo would stop the stranger from undoing his life's work were crushed into the dust as he realized that Duo's powers were feeding into the other's, harmonizing in ways that Septim knew was just impossible.

He saw his dream of the domination of Lin - of the escape of his dying people from the chains of the magical mountains- shattered through by the pulses of power.

Madness swept up in their place.

Septim's wards were practically solid around him, he'd had them for so long. They slowly dropped one by one.

They'd misjudged him. They all had. They all thought he didn't have the same power as Treize. But he did, he did! It was just focused inwards. Why blast your enemies when you can get someone else to do it for you? Why take risks striking out when you can stay safe behind wards? Treize had done the seizing, the rampaging. But Treize was dead. Septim was alive, and he would not fail where his brother had.

The last ward dropped and power slowly started to pulse in the small, thin hands. His mad eyes were fixed on the two silhouettes burning against a sea of darkness. Now...

He heard the soft sound behind him and spun around, unable to ignore his cautious instincts even now. His eyes widened.

He stared into coal-black almond eyes for a time, as if trying to understand something that was always just beyond his reach. His gaze finally dropped to the sword running through his chest. His eyes stayed blank and fixed when the blade was removed, leaving him to crumple, a scarecrow of straw and twigs in a rumpled robe, glass orbs staring at nothing.

Wu Fei smiled grimly at the figure. In his mind, a prayer for the dead, started five years before, was finally completed. Then he spun, prosaic, to help Trowa attack the five remaining guards grouped around the only sorcerer left. He smiled grimly. Behind Trowa, a good distance away but closing in fast, a contingent of soldiers, sorcerers and servants, those who served the breach wizards but couldn't stand to be this close, were running to assist their seniors. It looked like he would be accompanying Meilan's death gift personally after all. He felt a stab of regret for the steady blue eyes and gentle healing hands he was leaving behind, but it didn't weaken him. Why should he feel sorrow? He was a free man, he was avenged, he was going to die protecting his friends while stopping, he felt, something really bad from happening. He was honored.

"Duo..." It sounded like ground glass. Looked like Heero was angry at him for being here. Duo wasn't too happy either. It felt like every inch of his skin was being peeled away. He was keeping nothing back, nothing for defense, nothing. It looked like they were going to die together after all. He
tried to feel for the anger he'd felt at the thought back at the lodge five years ago. It seemed to fritter away under the clammy rasping wind lashing from the Gap. Nothing could live under that. It wasn't death, the calm cold peace he'd come to know and deal out evenly. This was sheer black malice, the hatred of all that was alive.

He suddenly thought of Father Maxwell. He didn't know why. Father Maxwell giving his life so Heero - and Duo too, if he'd have needed it, whatever his birth - could live.

Somehow that helped a bit, shored up his will to carry on.

He remembered Zechs ruffling his long hair and laughing, holding him close when he'd fallen off his horse, giving him one of his old swords...

He remembered Heero kissing him...

That helped a lot.

"...Not gonna beat us," he snarled into the teeth of annihilation. "Screw you!"

Beside him he thought he heard a startled chocked laugh.

Trowa sighed as he kicked the sorcerer off the point of his sword.

"Right. Your turn, love..."

Wu Fei stared at the man while wiping his sword on a fallen guard's uniform. "What?"

Trowa glanced at him. He looked a bit dazed. He was bleeding from several gashes and his forehead was bruised. The growing pressure around them seemed to crush their words into the dust; it plucked at their bodies, trying to bring them to their knees. Neither looked at the Gap, they knew they would not be able to look away again.

"Thanks, Chang. Looks like I needed some help after all."

"You're going to need more than my help now."

Wu Fei gave him a worried glance. The Lin officer had drawn his sword and seemed to be haranguing and threatening his men in turn. Some of the sorcerers had already advanced, looking at them with venom. Any second now... and his fighting partner was hallucinating about angels.

Oh well, it wouldn't make much difference in the end. They were dead anyway.

The officer raised his sword, turning towards them. Wu Fei thought he saw a couple of men dart away at that opportunity, but not many of them. Damn, the people of Lin just didn't know when to
quit! From the nasty rumbling tearing sound behind him, they should all be running for cover. Maybe it was better to die cleanly on a blade than-

The officer jerked sideways a few feet and fell, his limbs jerking in surprise. No, in death-throes. Wu Fei stared in amazement at the blue-tipped quarrels in the man's neck, chest and thigh. What the-

There was a noise that almost rivaled the scream of air behind them. A long ululation of savage ferocity. Two dozen men were running towards the Lin soldiers and sorcerers, waving pikes and scimitars.

"...Angel," Trowa murmured, dropping to one knee for a moment, a hand to the wound on his head. Then he straightened and walked towards the melee. Among the dark-haired hulky attackers, a small golden figure was darting and killing with deadly finesse. Two short scimitars flashed as he spun and dived and struck again and again. Wu Fei recognized the two-bladed style, he'd seen it plenty of times in the last few months, and again just now, against the Gap sorcerers; Trowa used the same technique. There were almost fifty Lin guards, more servants and half a dozen sorcerers, but Wu Fei didn't favor their chances. Trowa accelerated, a rare warm smile on his face. Wu Fei started to follow.

"Chang!"

The voice stopped him in his tracks, whirling with blade ready. The weapon dipped in shock right away. "D- Dr G? What are you-"

Duo's mentor was standing nearby, eyes fixed on the scene behind Wu Fei's back. He was in the shadow of a taller man in a dusty long-coat, white hair drawn back over his forehead, mustache dangling in the wind from the Gap, small glasses covering his eyes and glinting in the unnatural light.

"Chang, how long have those two been at it?" Dr G barked.

Wu Fei shrugged, helpless. It felt like he'd been fighting and killing against this backdrop of nightmares for half a day at least, but his common sense told him it couldn't be more than an hour since they'd entered the maze.

"They're doing alright. That's a turnout for the books. Why did you say your lad wasn't controlled enough for this, G? He seems fine to me." The stranger smoothed his mustache as he watched Duo intently.

"Don't be an ass, Jay, the kid's a lunatic. I mean, I like him and all, but I wouldn't trust him to light a candle without torching the entire house in the process. Ask Chang here, he's been burned a number of times by Duo's temper."

"I guess Heero's a more stabilizing influence than I thought. Unless... " The grin beneath the mustache twisted in cold amusement. "Unless... Oh well, shall we do anything? Or shall we wait for Heero and his friend to do all the work."

"The latter," G shot back. "I'm old and I'm tired and I've been on a horse for the past three days. Let the younger generation deal, I say."

"Heero?" Wu Fei's voice cracked. Of all the huge questions bouncing around his head at that point, for some reason this one stuck. That was the name of Duo's cousin, why-

"Did I ever thank you for keeping an eye on the lad, G?" The taller man glanced at the Doctor. "You had enough work watching over Septim's little plots, and the numerous smaller breaches scattered all over Lin. This place is a sinkhole of rotten old magic. Why anybody would want to live in these god-

"Well, hopefully both our jobs just got easier. I think we better hide behind something, looks like the boys are ready for the finale."

"Hmm, you're right. Come on, Chang, don't just stand there like an idiot, follow me. Yeah, that overhang looks sturdy enough, should keep us relatively safe. Blasts away."
Just when he thought he had to be running out of energy, new reserves kept surfacing. I wonder if I'm dying too, Duo thought dreamily. If I am, it's not too bad. Lot less painful than I imagined...

The power pulsed like a heartbeat. It had started out fast and frantic, with fear for Heero's life. And then-

It was like two cords beating in harmony. His power hadn't just come alongside Heero's -which was good because Duo didn't have a clue what he was supposed to be doing. Instead it seemed to feed Heero's, each beat of the pulse ringing with his cousin's energy and then back again. Like it was all one and the same power, just coming from two different directions, melding in the heat of despair.

The breach was closing, but so slowly. The noise level seemed to have dropped a bit, he could now hear Heero's painful gasps besides him. Duo, more knowledgeable about these things, cut back just a bit of the energy he was feeding into the Gap to start weaving a ward. It was a quick and dirty job, but it only had a simple purpose. Not protection, they were way beyond that. It was a ward that was meant to isolate and mask their energy patterns. It was what had allowed Septim to get so far within Sanq territory without warning the white mage watchers, five years ago. The purpose here was not to hide them however, but to limit the amount of black magic that was chaotically tearing at the fabric of the gash they were trying to fix.

Heero gasped, then relaxed a fraction as he realized what Duo was doing. Duo grinned. It was easier now, faster. The tear was closing like stitched cloth, nothing ripping it apart on one end while they were fixing the other.

Except-

Just when he was starting to relax and make plans for the future (that being, for now, the next five minutes), Duo felt something poke at the breach from the other side. It was big, ugly, and it wanted out. It was ripping at the closing gap, it had intelligence, power and more malice than he could imagine. A whimper escaped Duo's throat and was throttled by the heaving air.

Heero grunted. And then the power level just went through the roof.

Duo's shout of protest - he knew what this might cost his friend - was ripped from him as he was bowled over and flung from Heero's side. A huge gasp echoed through the entire Gap making it ring like a bell, sending wind billowing up until the clouds above them roiled and writhed like wounded animals.

Then there was an almighty crash.

Duo was staring at the shattered sky, blinking. The silence was roaring in his ears like surf hitting the beach. He blinked again, trying to remember how to move.

He sat up with difficulty. Near the gap, a small figure lay crumpled. His throat closing over a panicked shout, Duo scrabbled forward.

The figure stirred just as he ran up, and the heir of Lin collapsed to his knees in relief at his cousin's
Heero groaned. His nose was bleeding and he'd bitten through his lip, but he looked otherwise unharmed. Well, nearly. If he felt as drained as Duo did, that probably felt bad enough...

Duo saw his half-cousin shake his head and push himself up to his knees. Blue eyes stared without comprehension at the Gap, quiet in a small drop of sunshine leaking through the ripped clouds.

"I'm alive," Heero muttered. "How inconvenient."

A small breeze tossed some dust into the Gap, the only movement now.

Heero gasped and fell over on his side, more in surprise than from the strength of Duo's punch; the brand new king of Lin was weak as a kitten and hadn't leaned into it. Heero rubbed the small red mark on his cheek and stared at his cousin.

"What the hell are you talking about?! What kind of stunt was that, uh? You- you bastard! You almost left me alone again!" Duo realized with some embarrassment that tears were running down his cheeks. For once, his anger felt hollow and weak. There was only hurt and confusion.

"Duo..."

"Shut up! Or I'll punch you again! Why didn't you tell me you were going to do that? Why were you going to do that?! Do you want to die?"

Heero said nothing. Duo felt a chill running through his soul.

"Don't be an ass, Heero! You're not allowed to die! I won't allow you to die. I nee-... Zechs needs you. You're his son. And his heir. Don't think I didn't notice what you were wearing this morning."

Heero smoothed a hand over the green vest Zechs had given him so long ago; it finally fit. It was the first time he'd worn it, and he'd intended it to be the last time. He sighed and glanced out over the Gap, not able to look at Duo.

"Well? What is it?" There was something wrong, Duo could feel it. There certainly was a lack of 'yay, we're alive' feeling in the air.

"Duo... I was going to let Jay tell you the truth. I... didn't know... I didn't want to tell you to your face. I thought I'd be allowed just that little bit of, well, weakness, but apparently I was wrong." His voice was small and hollow as he slowly turned towards Duo.

"Boy, this is going to be good-" Duo started.

"Duo, Zechs needs a son and heir, that's true. But I'm not it. You are. I'm the son of Treize of Lin."

Duo just stared at his cousin for a full minute. Then his hand reached for his braid. It was trembling as he tugged it.

"I think one of us hit his head during that final blast, because I could have sworn you just said-"

"It's the truth, Duo."

"No it's not!" Duo snapped. "Are you crazy? I'm the one who's got Treize's power, not- oh gods..."

"Couldn't you feel it while we were closing the breach? Duo, we have the same power. I mean, really the same. That's because it bled into you when we were small children, when we shared a
bond between our minds. Though the families of Zechs and Treize were very close, you might have had abilities by yourself, but the amount of power you -"

"Nu-uh! This doesn't make sense! I- I have so much power I- I almost killed you when it erupted five years ago, I'm constantly setting stuff on fire, I-

"You've always been good at magic, Duo. White magic. The son of Treize doesn't have that ability. I don't have that ability. On the other hand, since you leached the black power from me, you can't control it too well. I-... I have always been able to control it. I've always been afraid not to. Afraid... of hurting you again."

Heero sighed, then lifted dark eyes to Duo's. What he saw there caused Duo's heart to quiver. It was the pain his cousin had been hiding from him all along.

"Listen to me, Duo. When we were children. Really young children. We were alone. Isolated. We only had one thing and that was each other. It was everything to us. I used my powers then, Duo. I didn't know it, it wasn't conscious. I wanted to protect us from- from her. Make us inseparable. I blended us together, slowly, day by day, making us indistinguishable. If we were one, we could not be separated, even by her.

"But once Zechs took us in, when we were safe... It was too late, I couldn't break off the link between us anymore. I- I knew it was wrong, to deny you your own personality, to-to hang off of you like some parasite. But I didn't know how to stop. And then I hurt you. When I fell in the garden, remember? I - I forced you to bruise yourself, to-

"It was my own hand on my arm!" Duo snapped, hugging himself. Memory was flooding back, from a time that had been obliterated from his mind by the happiness of the family life that had followed.

"But you did it because of me, because of what I was doing to you." Heero's hand drifted towards Duo, but he caught it back and squeezed it into a fist.

"Heero, whatever happened, we both wanted it. We both wanted to survive her. And anyway how do you know it wasn't the other way around? Uh? Maybe I'm the one forcing this bond thing, the one with the magic. Uh?"

Heero shook his head slowly. "Do you remember the nightmares we had? Before she gave us our names?"

Duo shuddered. They were so deep in his mind that he would normally not be able to recall them, but his brush with the thing in the Gap brought them back as much as Heero's words.

"Those nightmares were mine. Like the power. I know you stopped having them after she marked us. I didn't. I've always had them. I've always felt the thing behind my mind clawing at it. It's why I was so... controlled even as a child. I could feel the power and the madness in my blood, and I didn't want you - I didn't want anybody to see it. I pushed it down, never touched it, or the power that went with it. I avoided any form of magic in fact. I... I'd almost forgotten about it. Until Septim attacked us.

"I could feel it when you blasted us by mistake, Duo. It was my power that was at work, killing Father Maxwell, burning me. I realized then what it meant. I felt a link too, something you never felt; a touch of my father's dead hand, pointing me to this, to here, to this hole in the world where all his power had gone to widen the breach. I didn't know what it was but I was linked to it. I knew somehow that I had the power to close it, if I could use it. I had to close it. But my power was turned
in on me, on us, for so long, it took me years to be able to use it where I could destroy the breach without it destroying me first. I also had to disguise myself from Septim, and you. That was something like the spell I used when we were children, but turned around, breaking links to the memory of me, instead of creating links between us. That and the spell to close the breach, was the only magic I could ever learn, without risking my sanity."

Duo took a couple of deep breaths through his nose, trying to stop his head from spinning.

"It doesn't matter," he finally ground out. Then he corrected himself: "Well, I guess I am relieved I won't be going insane now, if it's not in fact running in my family. Er- H-Heero, I didn't mean-"

"It's okay." Heero grimaced. "That was the other reason Jay wanted to train me so badly. The madness is there, I guess. I'm not exactly the most normal seventeen year old in the kingdoms. But as long as I don't use the magic, it shouldn't devour me. And Jay provided me training to limit the damage when I do cast spells. He said he didn't want me to become part of the problem. A new Treize. Neither do I for that matter."

Duo let his eyes drift down his cousin's face, bent under the weight of too many big secrets, to the fists clenched on his knees. He sighed.

"Well, you're not, are you," Duo said prosaically. "You're the heir of Sanq."

Heero blinked, finally lifting his face. "No, Duo, you are-"

"No. I am the heir of Lin. I don't care where I got my powers from, Heero, because they are mine now, they shaped me, and I used them to fight for myself and the people of Lin. Now I am their king, and it has nothing to do with who my father is."

"But- but Zechs-"

"Deserves a son. And that has to be you, Heero Yuy." Duo's usual resilient spirit was once more rising to chase away the hurt and the shock. "You know I'm right, so stop arguing. I'm a king now, anyway, and you're still just a prince, and a delinquent one at that, so just shut up already."

Heero sighed and rubbed his face with a grubby hand. "That's why it is so inconvenient that I'm-"

"What was that?" Heero's eyes shot open as Duo grabbed him by the front of the green vest. "I think I'll pretend I didn't hear that, buddy, or I might just clock you one again."

"It would... have been neater." Heero scowled, gradually returning to his usual controlled self, to Duo's relief. "I thought... our countries have been at each other's throats for a long time now, this can't go on. It would have been practical to have only one heir to both the kingdoms. I thought-"

"Look Yuy, you do the fighting and I'll do the thinking. I'm obviously better at it. If you're the king of Sanq and I'm the king of Lin, we're at least alright for the next twenty five years. So stop arguing-"

"Heero hadn't said anything, but Duo shook him by the shoulder anyway "-and let's get out of this creepy place while we still can. I need to get back to the council and get coronated before the slimy creeps can find a reason not to, and you need to go see-"

"No!"

Duo paused in the act of helping his half-cousin to his feet. Heero had gripped his upper arm in a bruising hold, a flash of panic in his eyes.

"Don't- I - don't want to leave- to go to Sanq. Y-you might need my help," he added, uncertainly.
"Heero, you're not my captain anymore. You're the heir of Sanq. I mean-" Duo squeezed the other youth's arm as pain flared in Heero's eyes "-well, you can't stay here. But... I guess you can visit for awhile. Yeah!" He grinned. "It'd only be diplomatic for the prince of Sanq to be present at my coronation. It shouldn't take long, we don't stand on ceremony in Lin. It'll take even less time to boot the old bastards out and put my people in government, that's the way it works here. That should give me some leeway to take a bit of well-deserved vacation. Maybe a quick state visit to Sanq." He smiled as Heero's face began to relax a bit, back to its usual serious look. "Just to be sure Zechs recuperates his wayward heir. Sound good?"

"I guess... I... don't know what I'll tell him though."

Good question. "We'll have a few weeks to think about it. And by the ninth circle of hell, what is that old geezer doing here?"

"That's Jay. Oh you mean the other one? Hm, Duo, I've got a confession to make."

"Oh man, this is going to be good... Let me guess, Dr G's been working for you all along, hasn't he." It wasn't a question.

"More the other way around. Doctor G and Jay belong to the same school of sorcery, the guardians of breaches. He's the one who's been keeping us informed of what was going on here, though. Um, spying on you, essentially. You're not mad, are you?"

"You just saved the world, I'll give you some credit for that. Anything else you feel like telling me while we're on it? Anything else to confess?"

Heero blinked. "Er- no, I don't think so... "

"Good. Lie to me from now on and I'll show you why they call me the God of Death in the court of Lin. Let's get out of here."

The two heirs trudged wearily, supporting each other, to the waiting group of people. Duo's irrepressible grin grew as it finally penetrated that they'd won, and that they were going to live. Wu Fei was talking to G and shaking his head, looking as overwhelmed with the amount of unexpected information he was receiving as Duo was. Man, Duo was not Treize's son, that was going to take some getting used to.

The man called Jay was giving Heero a careful, measuring look. Finally he turned away with a shrug, and Duo felt Heero relax against him. Swell, another great communicator. Apparently Heero had done okay and didn't look like he was going to go crazy on the spot. Jay was trudging off without a word, taking a detour to go and yank Trowa and a pretty blonde guy from a very close embrace -whoa, something going on there apparently. The bunch of toughs grinning around the pair started putting away scimitars and fell into ranks behind Jay.

I think we'll take the scenic route to Sanq, Duo thought. Maybe if we take a couple of weeks on the trip, Heero will be able to help me fit all the pieces of this crazy day together and fill in all the blanks...

G sighed, scratching his ugly head, and glared sourly at the Gap. "Damn, another sealed breach to watch over. What a headache. Duo my lad, when you're crowned, can you order me to take a vacation?"

"I'll think about it." Duo muttered, wishing the distance back to the horses was a good deal shorter than it was.
Two young men, hoods over their faces, plain traveling cloaks covering the green and the black colors of their respective countries, walked slowly through the palace corridors. Light broke in waves from regularly spaced windows, illuminating pieces of their childhood; their old room, Odin's training hall, Father Maxwell's private library, Zechs' room...

Heero's steps faltered as they neared the study. Duo glanced nervously around the hallway, then tugged at his cousin's sleeve. They were trying for a discreet entrance, to allow Zechs time to decide what he hell he wanted to tell the people of Sanq about their sudden reappearance, and other complications.

"Come on, Yuy, stop dragging your feet."

"I-" Heero's face was frozen, but his eyes were a bit wild.

"Heero, what do you think he's going to do. Make a scene? Attack me with a sword? Burn me at the stake?"

Heero gave him a glazed look. "N-no."

"Well?" He pulled Heero's arm. It was like trying to drag a mountain.

"But he can't- I mean, you- He'll make you leave." That last came out with a scowl that tried to hide pain. "We're political enemies. He'd never be able to explain to the people- Duo this is wrong! I cannot be heir of Sanq!"

"Keep your voice down! We've been through this-"

"In his letters, Zechs kept telling me that as soon as I got back, he wanted me to marry this ditz of a distant relative of mine. Of yours. I- I can't do that."

Duo's smile was only in place by force of habit. Oddly enough the idea made him as uncomfortable as Heero. "Um, why not?"

"Because of my bloodline!" Heero snapped. "I don't want any kids, if they're going to take after me."

"So it's not the girl you object to-" Duo started, then kicked himself. Why did he say that? Heero didn't even know her. Why did the whole idea make him want to burn things (starting with the ditz of a relative)? The whole last week he'd had weird thoughts run through his head whenever he realized that he would have to go back to Lin in a few days. He wanted more time with Zechs. And with Heero. The six busy weeks since their victory weren't enough to catch up on five years. He took his obligations to Lin seriously but... whenever he thought of leaving Heero behind in Sanq, strange half-formed plans would bubble in his mind. They were even more insane than his usual run of plans, so he'd never dared pin them down, and he wasn't about to now. "Let's get this over with, buddy."

Heero sighed and walked slowly to the study. "Sounds like Jay made it here before us," he muttered as the sound of arguing came from the room beyond. Jay's hectoring tone, and another voice, that rang all the way to their childhood.
They stopped of a common accord before the green brocade curtain of the study. Duo found Heero's
hand in his and he squeezed it reassuringly, wishing he felt half that confident. Heero squared his
shoulders.

The curtain swished aside and Zechs glanced away from Jay in annoyance.

"I said I didn't want to be interup-"

The king staggered to his feet, his chair crashing behind him.

"You-you're here!" He hesitated for a fraction, his eyes flashing between them, then he crossed the
few steps in a faltering run and swept Duo up in a hug that threatened to snap his spine.

"Duo! Gods! I- I don't know what to say! I'm so- so sorry about- about everything- I should have
told you- I-"

Duo found himself thrust at arms length. The king - his father, always his father, he realized, even
before Heero had told him the truth- had aged in the past five years, but his grip was still strong on
Duo's shoulders.

"When I heard you were alive, I was going to invade Lin and get you back whatever it took! I would
have- I but Jay said-" Zechs threw a venomous look back at Jay who shrugged it off with a sniff. "I
tried bargaining with Septim to have you back, threatened him, but I guess he knew we couldn't pull
off an invasion - and the jackal wouldn't let you go! I didn't know what else to do, and Heero said
he'd get you back, he'd try to- good Gods, Duo, what have you done to your hair?!
"

Zechs half twisted Duo around to look at the long braid falling down the back of the black leather
jerkin. He blinked as Duo's choice of colors also penetrated his mind, and Duo felt a pang at the
sadness in those blue eyes. But there was resolve as well.

"Jay's been telling me what you've been up to. I still can't believe you survived, but whatever
happened, whatever - I'm proud of you. Jay says you're determined to go through with this- well I
guess you already have, you were crowned two weeks ago, weren't you. I... we have a lot to talk
about, but I guess I'm proud of you for that as well." Zechs coughed and scowled, then pulled Duo
into a hug again so he wouldn't be seen giving his eyes a rough wipe. Duo hugged the king back,
unable to speak, until Zechs gave a shaky laugh.

"Gods, Heero, Jay said you'd grown up, but I- you're almost as tall as I am now... Er, what happened
to your hair? Don't tell me you're wearing a braid as well."

"As if he could have something so classy." Duo snickered as Zechs ruffled Heero's messy bangs and
Heero scowled. He had a hard time keeping it up when Zechs also pulled him into a bone-grinding
hug.

Zechs took a step back, holding them at arms' length.

"I can't believe I have my sons back. I've been living for this day. I don't care what this crazy old
coot says," this in Jay's direction, "you are both my sons! Look at you... holding hands like when
you were children... "

"What was Jay saying?" Heero sounded a bit worried.

"I was saying that however much you want to, Zechs, Duo cannot be known as your son anymore.
Be smart about this, he's the heir of Lin, and everybody in both kingdoms knows he's Treize's heir as
well." Jay's glance swept over Duo and Heero without a pause or further comment on that lie. "No-
one is going to accept you claiming him as your son, not when both countries are still potential
enemies."

Heero and Duo's linked hands tightened convulsively.

Jay continued with a grin.

"Now your son-in-law, though, that's another matter! That's a solid basis for a political alliance.
Besides everybody likes a good wedding party. Something tells me neither of the boys will argue too
strenuously either."

He leered at the two young men staring at him. Then he grabbed Zechs by the arm. "Come on, your
majesty, you can catch up later. Someone's going to blab about their presence here any minute now
and you need to decide what to say about it, which means they have to decide what to say about it
first, and this they might want to talk about in private."

"But-

"But it's unfair to get them to decide their future in about five minutes? Yeah, tough, but if I didn't,
they'd take years and something might go wrong and we might have a messy war again. My way is
better. Come on then."

"What was Jay saying about a son-in-law?" Heero was staring, eyes wide, at the door closing on the
other side of the study.

"Haha, hey, Heero, funny thought!" Duo knew an opening when he saw one. The nebulous ideas
he'd had crashing around his head suddenly coalescing into a plan with his usual speed. Five
minutes, no time for subtlety, but then he wasn't renowned for it anyway. "If you were given the
choice of marrying the ditz of a relative we were talking about, or instead marrying someone else
who you really like and also make sure this keeps the peace between our two kingdoms and will
make me happy and well, yeah, what would you say?"

"I'd say yes, I guess," Heero said slowly after visibly working his way through the convoluted
sentence.

"You-you would? That's great!"

"But who are we talking about?"

Duo took a deep breath. That's okay, he though, I still have four more minutes. "Heero-"

"Whoa! You mean you!?"

"I'm freaking you out. Am I freaking you out? Because-"

Heero shut his mouth with a click. "I've been living in the room next to Trowa and Quatre for the last
few years, I probably know more about it then you do, so no, that's not what's 'freaking me out'."

"Anyway, it's only a political alliance thingy, right?" Duo said, not lying because of course that's
what it would be, at least to start with...

"Duo, you can't marry me, I... I could still go insane in the near future..."

"Popular wisdom says I'm already crazy, so we'd be a perfect match then."
"Duo, you're not insane. I-"

"Anyway, it's better than both of us going crazy, you with the ditzy relative and me with some overbred plotting piece of fluff the council will select for me if I don't take matters into my own hands. They might even ask me to marry Kelna!"

"But-"

"If we two get married instead, neither of us would be expected to produce heirs, for pretty obvious reasons, so we get to adopt someone not too dumb and that puts a final end to Treize and his line."

"True, but I'm the one carrying the bloodline, not-"

"Pleaseeleaseease?"

"Duo, you are the Sorcerer-King of Lin. Making puppy dog eyes is beneath your station."

"Oh, well, in that case, I don't think I ever got 'Captain Yuy's' resignation, did I, so I could just order you to-"

"You very much don't want to go there..."

"Ahh, guess not. When we're married, can you teach me to scowl like that? Okay, fine, we'll do this the proper way. Now, will you-"

"Duo, what in all the circles of hell are you doing?!"

"Getting down on one knee, what's it look like. I don't do more romantic than this, I warn you right now. Heero, will you-"

"Get up! I take it back, you are insane!"

"Maybe I'll just stay like this until you say yes! Ouch! Or maybe not. What did Jay do to make you this strong?"

"Duo, be serious! There is no reason for you to go through with this insanity!"

"You mean, besides making sure my kingdom can finally be at peace with it's neighbor, and create links between our countries, and work out some deal to allow us to have some fallow land in which to expand so the people of Lin can finally start to break away the mountains, and they no longer have a reason to try to open breaches and get fiends to invade the world?"

"...So maybe you have one-"

"How about the one where I don't want us to end up political opponents, or each stuck in two different countries and only seeing each other during the occasional state ceremony."

"I-"

"How about the one w-where I want you to be on my side for once, instead of working around me or against me."

"D-Duo..."

"Or maybe I just want to stay with my best friend and the other half of my soul, instead of growing even further apart than we already -"
The rest was muffled as Heero found the best way of showing him that there were, finally, reasons enough.

"Five minutes are up- oh." Jay closed the door again. "Well that's decided then. I better start working on Zechs now, he'll probably take more than five minutes... Looks like I saved the world again, or at least insured peace in this region for quite a few more years. Sometimes I'm so good I can't stand myself." He wandered off to find Zechs to give him the good news.

Chapter End Notes

End of Part I, but I am going to roll Part II into the same fic, it pretty much follows on from this one.
Up until recently, marriage had never entered Duo's mind. He'd concentrated on claiming his pound of flesh from his dear uncle Septim, as well as saving the world. He hadn't had the time or inclination to cherish cuddly thoughts about matrimony.

Since his engagement to Heero, he'd been thinking about it constantly. His thoughts - too flighty and nervous to firmly pin down - had ranged from breathtaking to frightening.

None of his fevered daydreams had been quite as bad as this...

The talons at his throat tightened, jerking him another inch. He had a death-grip on the ornate sandstone pillar that decorated his bedroom, but in this tug of war, in which he was the rope, the king of Lin wasn't going to be a winner.

The creature was trying not to kill him, but his bruised neck was aching and air was only trickling into his lungs now. He couldn't cry out.

"Ssssstubborn..."

Blunt nails pierced the skin of his shoulder as the creature hissed and tugged at his arm. A warm trickle of blood oozed down his chest, under the ripped cloth of his dressing gown. Duo tried to roll onto himself, clinging desperately to the pillar. His vision was fading. This was bad. Behind the creature, the flickering light of an open teleport circle was seared into his thoughts. He tightened his grip again. Nothing but death was going to get him through that-

There was a noise from the doorway. The grip on his throat and shoulder loosened as the creature turned. Duo gasped in some air, hugged the pillar with all his strength, reestablishing whatever ground he'd lost in the past three minutes. The creature above him hissed in annoyance.

Heero was standing there, the door swinging shut behind him. He was wearing riding clothes, his hair dusty from the road. He was carrying his cloak in one hand, and a bottle and two glasses - Duo wished he could feel something other than huge relief at this point - in the other.

The creature was hesitating. Possibly because it expected the human to start shouting and screaming and running away, and Heero looked like finding a fiend in his husband's bedchamber was in fact perfectly normal.

Duo rephrased that to himself, now that he was getting oxygen back to his brain. This was Heero. Facial expressions were as alien to him as fiends were to Duo's bedroom (thank you very much.)

Heero said nothing. He draped the cloak on a chair near the door and put the bottle and glasses on the chimney piece. Strategically putting himself at an angle where he could attack the creature without Duo getting in the way, and also placing himself nearer the fiend's exit point.

"Ahhhh..." It sounded like the rush of air from a newly opened crypt. "Yoouu musst be the
husssband..."

"Hn." Heero loosened the thongs on the collar of his dark green leather vest with a jerk and drew his mage blade in one fluid movement.

"Weapon's ward!" Duo hissed, a second before the fiend gripped his throat again.

Heero froze, his eyes widening, glancing from the fiend to Duo and back again. Duo could well imagine what was going through his head. Only the mightiest of sorcerers could hold both a weapon and a magic protective ward, so if the creature was warded against weapons, it had to be vulnerable to magic. Yet Duo hadn't turned it into a lump of charcoal...

"Magic's gone!" Duo managed to grind out. Not much of an explanation, but he didn't have any better. Since the creature had grabbed him five minutes ago, he'd been unable to do more than bite and scratch, not that that had helped.

Heero's eyes narrowed. The mage blade returned to its scabbard in the same smooth movement, and he slowly started to move away from the chimney... and away from the fiend's path to the portal.

The fiend made a curious hissing sound. It was vaguely humanoid, taller than a man by a good head, and covered in thick plates of gray hide that coiled around its limbs and torso in uneven sheets, wrapping its head in a mess of scarred spongeous flesh from which an eye and a mouth writhed as if drowning. It looked like the flesh had been cut from them, repeatedly in fact, as the scars were concentrated around them.

Duo had become familiar with conjurations, the magically summoned slaves of the sorcerers of Lin who specialized in this type of magic. There were a few around Linheights. This critter was different. It could talk, words slithering from the scarred mouth like snakes. And it wore a huge bulking gray cloak, so that it might almost appear normal from a distance once the hood was drawn. That was way smarter than most conjurations, who struggled with the mathematics of adding breathing to walking.

The mouth was empty of teeth, pale gray gums making the sibylline hiss mushy and even harder to follow. The 'hands' gripping Duo had a serviceable set of fleshy extrusions that were more horny flesh than claws, but were still hard and sharp enough to pierce skin.

"The husssband from SSsss-"

"Sanq," snapped Heero. He was putting distance between himself and the creature, and now was angling so that Duo was at the creature's side instead of behind it in relation to him. The creature's scars coiled in a smile.

"I wasssss hoping you would attack me with that pitiful sssword. I sssee you are sssmart. You can sssee there's no way you can-"

"Drop him." Heero jerked a chin at Duo.

The creature made a sound like a swamp sucking down a horse. "Ooor whhat? You will ssspit at me? Ssssanq hassss only whhhite magic, and I hear you're not even good at thattt."

"Duo?"

Duo squeaked.

"Do you have your magic wards up?"
Duo swallowed.

The creature did the swamp noise again. "I don't need to use magic against the little kingling. My talons suffice." It glanced down at Duo, who had whispered 'Yes' and dropped the pillar to put his hands over his head.

The creature gurgled in surprise at that, and at the finger Heero was pointing at it.

It didn't even have time to flinch as pure darkness shot from Heero's hand, channeled down the finger and lanced towards it.

The shot was narrow, and not all that powerful, but very, very well aimed. The head of the thing exploded into boiling mush and smoke, and the claws around Duo's throat convulsed once then loosened.

"I'm not good at white magic," Heero agreed with the smoking mess, flexing his fingers.

Duo gasped and took a deep breath, then regretted it. The air was thick with smoke that made burning garbage smell like the perfumes of Saoun.

Strong arms grabbed him unceremoniously and dragged him away from the thrashing creature. Duo stumbled and righted himself, gripping Heero's shoulder for support.

"Are you o--- kay..."

Duo blinked at Heero's unusually hesitant tone. No, more than that. There was a slight tinge of unease in it. Duo spun around to see what had provoked such a strong reaction from his husband.

The creature had stopped its death-throes, but it was still squirming. It looked like maggots were eating it out from the inside, the body's skin rising and falling in turn... then they realized it was the plates of the creature's hide that were coiling against each other. One of the chunks of hide flipped over, falling from the chest in a peel the size of two hands. The underside was dead-flesh white, slimy, with trails of... something from inside the dissolving creature clinging to it.

Duo had seen a lot in his time in Lin, but his stomach was roiling faster than the creature's bits.

Then the part that had flipped over started arching and twitching, causing it to slither towards the pair standing, horrified, nearby.

Duo lost it, and reacted the only way he knew how.

The backwash of the explosion blew out all the candles in the room, scattered the logs in the fireplace, and shot the papers on the desk across the room like grouse breaking cover.

"Duo..." Heero's voice held a tinge of weariness. Duo gasped and spun around.

"Heero, did I hurt you?"

Heero had been bowled back by the force of the confined explosion, but fortunately his clothes weren't on fire. He was looking at Duo with a scowl, trying to make him out in the sudden darkness of the room.

"I thought your magic was gone."

Duo blinked and stared at his fingers. "It seems to be back."
"Lucky me." Heero rubbed his back as he stood up, and stared glumly at the calcinated remains. "Do you have any idea-"

The door behind them slammed open, and Heero's sword was drawn in an instant, flashing towards it in a deadly arc.

Wufei’s katana sang out of its lacquered scabbard instinctively, and dipped only slightly as he realized who was holding the mage-blade aimed at his throat.

"Yuy! What is the meaning- Duo! Are you okay? I heard an explosion!"

Duo quickly reassembled the dressing robe he’d been wearing over his clothes when he’d been jumped, its high neck hiding his bruised throat. The rents and tears in the soft black cloth would be hidden by the darkness in the room.

"What is going on here?" Wufei's voice was very dangerous.

"Nothing. Go away," Heero replied with the charm and tact that characterized him.

"Nothing?! What's that smell!? There's smoke in here! Put away your sword, Yuy, or I swear-"

"Fei!" Duo didn't want to step between them because Wufei would only get excited if he saw what state Duo was in, and also because the air between the two swordsmen was scorching enough to make his braid combust. "Fei, I'm okay. I was... " Damn, he didn't lie!

"Duo was showing me a spell and it got out of hand," Heero completed calmly, since lying wasn't a problem for him. Unfortunately Wu Fei knew this, all too well.

"Duo?" His voice was still dangerous.

"Leave us alone. Now." Heero's voice was downright menacing.

"I am the head of Duo's personal guard," Wufei ground out. "You can't-"

"I'm his husband, and though I won't order you around anywhere else, I can damn well kick you out of this bedroom if I want to."

Both Wufei and Duo gaped at the somber heir of Sanq. Duo cursed the darkness, he really wanted to see Heero's face right then. That had sounded... well, right on the limits of what a political marriage implied.

"Husband?" Wufei choked. The fumes were clearing slowly but were still causing their eyes to sting. "Since when?!"

"Since this afternoon, actually," Duo finally managed to intervene. "The council finally signed the agreement."

"Wasn't there supposed to be some kind of ceremony? I thought this thing was going to last for months." Wufei looked aggrieved.

"It is." Duo sighed. "But as far as the deal goes, it's done and dusted. The ink's dried on the paper." It was all very romantic. Heero and he had been in different countries at the time. Then he remembered his husband's - he'd been practicing the word for the past five hours- roadworn clothes. And the bottle and glasses, fortunately still intact on the mantelpiece.

"Wufei, go." Duo tried to keep his voice calm and polite but he reaaaally didn't want his friend around
right this minute. "I'm fine, as Heero said, it was just a little spell that got out of hand." Which was
ture enough.

Wufei glowered at Heero as he put his sword away, nodded to Duo and turned towards the door. He
stopped as he was closing it.

"Oh, congratulations, Duo." He glanced at Heero. "Yuy," he added, in a tone that wasn't so
congratulatory, more along the lines of, hurt him while I'm anywhere in the vicinity and I'll rip your
heart out and feed it to you. The door shut softly behind him and they heard him explain things to the
nervous guards who had gathered outside.

Duo lit a candle with a flick of mageflame, and looked hopefully at the bottle, then at Heero, who
was putting his sword away slowly, his eyes fixed on the door.

"He doesn't like me much, does he... " Duo was finely tuned to Heero's voice now, so he knew that
the unemotional tones were tinged with anger and also regret.

"Well, Wuffie is stubborn. Once he gets his ideas set... he took the whole Heero-Yuy thing quite
badly. The way he sees it, you betrayed us both, lied to us both, and whatever the aim, that was
dishonorable in his view. He thinks in straight lines." On which point you could be identical, so no
wonder you don't get along all that well, Duo mentally added.

"Hn." Heero turned towards him, and gently lifted the robe's collar away from Duo's neck, angling
his head to catch the candlelight. "That looks nasty. Can you... ?"

"Heal myself? I'd better. The creature was right on one point, your white magic stinks."

"It'd be more accurate to say it's non-existent."

"You have many other talents. Certainly caught it by surprise! Um, are you okay?"

"I am not about to go insane, no," Heero replied sarcastically.

"Just checking, just checking." Duo put a hand on his throat and let healing powers flow into the
bruises, repairing torn flesh and vessels, dissolving pooled blood.

Heero was frowning. "Do you have any idea what that thing was? Where it came from? And what it
wanted with you?"

"No, no, and gods I'd rather not know."

"I wish you hadn't blown it up. Jay could have told us something about it."

"Well next time a fiend like that jumps me, I'll pickle it and preserve it and present it to Jay with- with
a ribbon on top!"

Heero gave Duo - volatile at the best of times - a careful look. Duo was understandably upset, it was
normal. It was also normal for an upset Duo to accidentally set things on fire. It was just something
his friends - his friends and now his husband- had gotten used to in their association with him.

Fortunately Heero, like anybody else who’d gotten close to Duo, knew that a good distraction was
usually more effective than using reason or arguing for calm. "Hn, bottle's not broken." Heero turned
towards the mantelpiece and so missed the sight of Duo's scowl instantly turning into a smirk.

Duo's victory was short-lived as Heero took up the wine and glasses and turned towards the door.
"Where are you going?"

"Trowa put my things in the guest room two doors down from here," Heero explained.

Duo just stared at him. Now that was harsh. He didn't know exactly what he'd expected on his wedding night, but being jumped by fiends and finding his husband sleeping in the guest bedroom was a bit-

Heero was holding the door open, though. "Come on," he said impatiently.

"Wh-what?"

"You aren't going to sleep here, are you?" Heero glanced at the fiend laminated against the far wall, and the acrid smoke still curling like cats around the room. "If nothing else, it's no longer safe. Come on, the guest bed is comfortable." He seemed momentarily puzzled by Duo's sudden good mood as the king of Lin strode through the door, but shrugged it off.

In the guest bedroom, Duo lounged against the bed, not as certain about things as he seemed. He was only mildly surprised and disappointed really when he saw his husband sit down in a chair, his cloak over his knees.

"You're gonna be sleeping there, aren't you." It wasn't even a question.

"No." Heero scowled at him. "After what happened, I think it's best if I keep watch. I'll wake you in four hours and you can take over."

"Yeeeah." Duo sighed, looking at the ceiling. "So what's with the bottle?"

"Oh, yes, Zechs sent this. It's one of two he was saving for our respective weddings for the last thirteen years."

"Eh, he's just saved himself a bottle then."

"He'll give it to us during the final ceremony."

"Oh yeah. Um, could I have a glass?"

Heero hesitated, then rose from the chair and sat on the edge of the bed. He dug the cork out with his dagger. Duo, who had been slightly more acclimatized to courtly behavior than his cousin, winced. Heero poured the liquid into the glasses which, Duo realized as he held his, were fine crystal, also from Zechs' reserve.

He took a sip and grinned.

"Wow, remind me to thank Zechs! Nice gift!"

Heero tilted his own glass, which was only half full, and leaned back against the bedpost. "That reminds me, thank you for the sword."

Duo had leaned back at an angle against the cushions, one leg dangling off the bed. "Sword?" He glanced at Heero's plain mage-blade, hanging from his hip like it had every day since Odin had died.

"The one you sent me with the marriage contract."

"Oh that. The council had that made for you." He vaguely remembered a ceremonial sword heavy with gold fauchon and semi-precious stones, with an edge that might cut butter if given a good push.
"I'm not terribly hurt you're not wearing it."

"It's meant to be exposed, not used. The robe we gave you though—"

Duo yelped, his head shooting up from the pillows. "I'm supposed to wear that? What's the idea, giving me a dress anyway!"

"It's a robe, not a dress, idiot. And I told the foreign minister it was a stupid idea. But your council hinted very strongly that this was the appropriate gift for you. I think they're trying to get you to change your wardrobe." He gave Duo's clothes a pointed glance. The black dressing gown he was wearing had been slipped on and tied over his normal clothes, exposed by a fall of the cloth. Slim black leather pants and a vest to match. Heero frowned and looked away, looking somewhat ill at ease.

Duo grunted, sinking back into the cushions. "I've had this argument with my council before. I might be king of Lin but I'm not wearing a bloody robe. They're just going to have to get used to it." He sighed as Heero stood up and went to sit back down in his chair, settling his cloak on his leg and drawing his sword. Some wedding night.

But it wasn't surprising, really. Duo... Duo didn't really know what he wanted, he couldn't begin to put a name to it. Well, he wanted this, he wanted Heero and himself together, and friends again, and soul mates... the rest... well... this was a political marriage, and nothing more, and since no one expected them to produce heirs, there didn't need to be anything more. Hells, what they shared already went far beyond most noble marriages. Heero had certainly not shown any interest in adding any kind of... physical element to their union. The closest he'd gotten was the vigorous hug that had interrupted Duo while he was trying to find ways to convince Heero they just had to be married. That hug had lasted a long time, but still, it was more friendly than... Duo shook his head. He didn't know what he wanted anyway, so this was probably for the best.

And they were close again. That at least was certain. The past few months had been hard, seeing each other only on occasion while the councils of both country fought out the marriage deal, and both of them organizing the defense against the remaining Gap fiends, and playing political checkers with every other kingdom around them... but they were still the happiest of Duo's life.

And that was a good thing, because the coming months would be difficult.

There had been exactly four people in all of the kingdoms of the continent who'd been happy for Heero and Duo when they'd announced their engagement, daring their respective countries to disagree. Trowa and Quatre had smirked quite infuriatingly, congratulated them, then wandered off laughing together. Duo had found that slightly vexing. And the other two were Jay and G who'd bickered over whose idea it was, before agreeing that at least it was a very good one.

The other reactions...

Sanq and Lin had been at war for too long, and the scars were still fresh. And the advantages that Lin was seeking from the alliance were far from negligible. Wiser heads and colder hearts agreed to the alliance between the countries on principle; but those people had taken one look at the apparently disparate couple and had emitted grave reservations. Normal people could ruin their lives with an unwise marriage if they wanted to, but in a political marriage, fights could go from the bedroom to the battlefield in no time. No one wanted to see that happen.

It was Jay - or maybe G, depending on who you listened to - who came up with the idea. It was an old one, when the use of magic in every day life was common, and warfare rampant. An antique ritual that would insure that the heirs of the two countries would be forced to abide by the
conventions of their marriage.

The circles of bonds and blood...

---

Heero glanced up at the soft wheeze. Duo's glass was listing dangerously. Heero rescued it before the wine could spill from the tilted rim. He looked down at his cousin - now his husband, not that he'd still wrapped his head around that. On his face lingered a smile of quiet affection that Duo would have loved to see were he awake. He put down both glasses on the low table near the chair, then lifted Duo's legs gently onto the bed and folded the blanket around him. His fingers drifted to the rents in the dressing gown's shoulder, and the smile flickered out. He would talk to Jay first thing in the morning, and to Trowa and Quatre as well. Maybe even Wufei, he grumbled internally. He respected the swordsman, however antagonistic he could be, and Heero didn't like to leave Duo alone without a guard who knew what to expect.

What had the creature wanted?

Heero sat back down in the chair, frowning at the darkness hovering around the candle's light. He knew a bit about the politics of Lin. Despite the factions that Duo had beat to accede to the throne, no one was supposed to attack him for that once he'd succeeded. But fiends from hell and sorcerers from Lin went together like two gloves. Had someone decided to break the rules? It wouldn't be the first time, he knew. He'd talk to G as well, the man was more in tune with the factions of the court of Lin.

Someone had attacked Duo. They'd wanted him alive, or things could have been a whole lot worse then they'd been. Heero scowled, an expression almost as dangerous as his newly-learned black magic bolt. His hand flexed on the mage blade's hilt. Whoever had done this... Heero didn't feel like taking them alive. Unless it was to kill them slowly.
"I don't care if you're king of Lin or my aunt Bernize, Duo. I said strip!"

On the desk four feet away, a pile of papers spontaneously combusted.

"Oh well, that's real mature! What kind of sorcerer sets things on fire at every upset?!"

"The kind you shouldn't annoy?" Duo muttered, his cheeks flaming red, though it was more embarrassment than anger.

"Ha! I've battled fiends from the thirteenth circle of Hell, boy! You don't scare me! Now off with your clothes!"

Now in a perfect word, an irresponsible and unmentionable part of Duo's mind whispered, it would be Heero saying those words (in a nicer tone of voice). Duo shuddered. He wasn't... ready to face that thought in any shape or form. And the fact it was Dr G who was barking at him, his long thin nose an inch from Duo's chin... the reality and the thought crashed headlong with a mental crunch that was enough to make him take a vow of celibacy.

The problem was, Heero was present - he was prosaically dumping a jug of water on the flaming papers on the desk- as were Jay, Quatre, Trowa, Wufei just outside the door, and probably half the kingdom of Lin in the hallway outside, eavesdropping.

"Maybe we should give Du- we should give Dr G some room to examine Duo in peace." Quatre suddenly said. Duo tried to look like he didn't care, but inwardly he was so relieved he could have made the young blond a diplomatic plenipotentiary to the country of his choice. With bells on.

"We'll be just outside the door." Trowa said over his shoulder as he took Quatre's hand and left, snagging Wufei in passing. Wufei grumbled a bit - he had been very put out when he heard about the fiend, taking it as a personal insult- but as a private person himself he probably realized what Duo was going through.

Unfortunately, not everyone left. Jay's presence was bad enough, he was standing a few feet away from Duo staring at him from behind the thumb-thick glasses. Heero hadn't left either.

"So, er, Heero, you probably have something better to do, right?" Duo asked casually while he unlaced his vest.

Heero glanced up from the desk where he was trying to rescue some of the papers from the effects of fire and water. "Nothing is more important than finding out why your powers vanished, Duo."

"I should say so!" G humph-ed. "I've been studying magic longer than either of you have been alive-"

"Cumulatively at that." Muttered Jay.

"-and you're no spring chicken either, you relic. But neither of us have heard of a spell that can stop a mage from casting. You sure it just wasn't a really tight spell-ward or anything?"

"No G, I couldn't feel any power moving at all. It was as if something had nailed it down." Duo shivered as he remembered that strangely cold, unmoving feeling as he tried to call upon the reserves of power that had been both his blessing and curse for the last six years.
"Hmm. But it's back now, I see. Don't worry, those papers were only the results of several weeks of work, nothing to worry about." G grumped. "Yet your wards were working?"

"Yes, I could feel them around me distinctly. Fat lot of good they did."

"So your powers weren't completely gone... somehow sealed... ?" The man's bright intelligent eyes glowed. "It's interesting that the fiend had summoned a weapon's ward when it was about to attack a sorcerer. It was obviously expecting the effect, and so is the likely cause, however it did it. Strip, boy."

Duo took off his leather vest and black shirt, and quickly hopped up on the laboratory bench, hoping that would be enough for G. He didn't know why he was embarrassed. Heero and he had grown up together, after all. And he might not be a steely-armed swordsman like Heero, but he wasn't weedy either. He just didn't know how he'd react if Heero looked at him and laughed. Well, smiled (this was Heero, it would take a crowbar to pry a laugh out of him). And yet it would be somehow worse if Heero looked at him and showed absolutely no feelings whatsoever.

Or didn't even look at him at all...

"You did what?!"

Duo suddenly chilled as Jay's voice reminded him that there was something more serious to worry about than G poking at him.

Heero scowled. It came easily to him.

"I used the smallest force I could."

"You shouldn't have used any!"

"Wait a minute." G called from where he was examining Duo. "I thought the kid here killed the creature."

"No." Heero spoke in precise tones without any hint of feeling. "I did."

"But I thought you said Duo blew it up."

"Yes. But it was already dead."

G humph-ed again. "Duo, my lad, you have the worst temper I know of. Remind me not to get you angry."

Heero thought he heard Duo mutter 'Too late', but concentrated on Jay's glinting eyeglasses. He could feel his mentor scrutinizing him.

"The creature had a weapons' ward, and Duo couldn't use his magic. It was the only way I could see-"

"I knew it was a bad idea to let Maxwell teach you the rudiments of black magic!" Jay snapped. "The lust for it is in your blood, it'll be harder and harder to resist the temptation to-"

"It won't be hard at all!" Heero snarled, then caught himself, cursing inwardly. His control was
shattered this morning. Mainly because he'd been unable to sleep the night before, even when Duo had relieved his watch; his body, mind and soul twanging and aching at his use of a little magic to kill the creature.

Jay was looking at him darkly, feeling him slip. It didn't matter what the cause. They both knew what would happen if Heero lost control. The prince took a hold of himself, closed off his feelings expertly. His frustration, his anxiety, his anger at seeing the faint remaining traces of bruises trailing like cruel flowers from Duo's white shoulder and neck. But one thing remained.

"Duo and I are united by marriage contract, and we are responsible for each other's safety from now on. If I had to do it again, I would. Whatever the consequences." Heero's face was like ice under the scrutiny of the cold flat surfaces of Jay's specs.

Jay's little slices of glass flashed in annoyance.

"Pah. This is why I never got married."

"You never got married cause you hate women." G threw over his shoulder as he drew a mystical rune on the chest of a twitching Duo.

"No I- well I do actually, but that's not-"

"You don't like men either for that matter."

"That doesn't mean-"

"Hell man, you don't even have any pets."

"Will you shut up you little runt! What's that got to do with any of it?!"

"Just trying to point out that you might be a good wizard but you know zilch about human relations."

"I know that the circles of bonds and blood will be no party favor for either of them if Heero's heritage drives him insane!"

"The only thing driving him insane is your nagging. One little blast is not going to make him grow a thin moustache, dress up in black and try to take over the world, you know."

"It will if he gets used to it!" (In the background, Heero muttered 'Moustache?' and Duo snapped 'Hey, I wear black!')

"I'm not going to get used to it." Heero said, voice as cold and precise as an ice carving. The reminder of the circles of bonds and blood had chilled him. He would never hesitate to use magic if there were no other way of saving Duo, but neither would he do anything to condemn his husband to sharing life and fate with a madman... or give the king of Lin the responsibility of stopping him if he took the path of his father, Treize.

He wished he'd managed to talk Jay and Duo out of using the circles as a marriage ceremony. Well, he tried to talk Jay out of it. The first words to Duo about it had resulted in the beginning of hurt in the violet eyes that had robbed him of words. Heero was well aware he was abrupt and couldn't express himself well. He didn't know how to convince Duo that the only reason he didn't want to go through with this was because of all the problems he might cause to Duo, not because he didn't want... He'd said nothing, finally, merely took it upon himself, as he signed his part of the marriage contract, to keep a tight grip on his control, his heritage, and never use magic.
That resolve had lasted the time it took him to ride from the frontier to Linheights and walk into Duo's room.

Life just loves its little ironies.

Heero ignored Jay's hectoring and cast a discreet glance at Duo, who was twitching and squirming as G drew another magical rune on his back. The faintest ghost of a smile haunted Heero's eyes. His cousin was still ticklish apparently. He wished... he wished he could be happy about this marriage, instead of worried about its consequences for Duo. He wished... he wished... the control finally settled completely in his mind, cutting out all whimsy, all weakness, all regret. He faced Jay again with eyes like flint. He knew where his duty lay.

Jay's cold panes put him under the microscope and the man finally nodded infinitesimally. No more words were necessary.

"Find anything yet? Or are you just having fun doodling on your king?" Jay turned and snapped at G.

G grunted, his hands slowly traveling an inch above his drawn runes. They glinted ever so slightly, and Duo twitched again, looking uncomfortable under their collective scrutiny. He seemed to be avoiding Heero's eyes.

"Nothing." G finally sighed, turning towards Jay. "I know Duo and his powers well, I trained him after all. He's pretty abnormal-" this got a glare from Duo who was trying to wipe the paint off of his chest- "because of the way he acquired his black magic, and the way it, er, cohabits with his white. You could make a very interesting sorcerer if you set yourself to do some serious studying, lad." He tossed in Duo's direction. "You're pretty much unique, I'd say. But as far as I know there's still no way your black magic should have been inaccessible to you at that point. So... next time, try not to blow your attacker up, right? And maybe we can find out where it comes from, what it is and how it did that."

Duo and Heero's eyes met, and they both frowned. Next time...

"Duo, I suggest you double your guard. And include some real sorcerers in it." Heero grimaced. "Wu Fei would defend you tooth and nail but he has the magical ability of a rock, and none of his picked guards are any better. You should have a sorcerer around you at all times, at least until we can figure this out."

Duo sagged a bit, he hated to lose what little privacy he had, but of course Heero was right. He sighed as he pulled on his shirt.

"Okay, let's get this organized. We also have to plan for the first circle, in a couple of weeks."

"Hn."

"Hn whatever, I'm not getting stuck with all the work, Yuy. Why don't you haul in Wufei and we can get things rolling."

Heero walked to the door as he made his own plans. Duo would not be vulnerable like that again. Wufei would hate him for interfering but he would make sure Duo's guard in Linheights was impregnable, by steel or magic. Duo could be cautious when he needed to be, he would stick to the palace. There was nothing, Heero thought with finality, that would get his cousin to leave Linheights, until they could figure out what was going on.
"Well, your highness, I must say, you're not the pampered court poodle I expected."

Heero frowned ever so slightly, the only sign of emotion on his stone-cold face. No one had ever even thought of calling him a poodle before, or pampered for that matter. He heard Trowa snort softly besides him, a rare show of amusement from the stoic Romany.

"Though I would love to see how good you really are, I'm afraid I can't have you killing any more of my men today." The voice was a parody of wry amusement, with an undercurrent of cold anger beneath it. "So you will drop your sword now and surrender gracefully."

Heero glanced at the six men, dead or incapacitated, that had fallen around himself and Trowa. There were only seven left, two of them injured, plus the scoffer. Neither he nor Trowa were wounded yet. The math was pretty easy.

"Hn."

"That means, come down here and make us," Trowa translated. His two swords glittered and hissed through the air as he flicked the blood from them.

The man sitting atop the dappled gray charger leaned forward slightly, his eyes glinting like Trowa's blades. He looked tempted. He was tall, muscular, broad-shouldered, carrying full armor with ease, and a halberd hung loosely from a huge mailed hand. He looked angry. He had not expected the poodle to possess the teeth of a wolf. He'd lost half his men in that first charge, in what should have been an easy ambush.

But he leaned back, frowning. "Unfortunately, I have to decline, your highness. We have a tight schedule to keep. So if you don't mind, put down your sword or-" he lifted his free hand.

Heero and Trowa glanced at the three men who had drawn and aimed crossbows at them. They drew themselves into a defensive crouch.

"It will be interesting to see how many more of your men the poodle can kill before your arrows bring me down," Heero said calmly. Beside him, Trowa tensed, ready to spring.

"You misunderstand me, your highness." The man nodded at his men. Who all twitched their crossbows to point straight at Trowa. "It so happens we need you alive. Your servant, however..."

Trowa opened his mouth, but whatever he was about to say was cut short by the crunch of Heero's sword dropping into the dry leaves of past autumns that carpeted the alpine forest.

"Drop your weapons, Trowa," he said quietly, and moved in front of his friend to stand between him and the bolts. "If you're smart," he added, his eyes on the crossbows but talking to the leader of the small pack, "you will realize that taking me alive and keeping me that way are two different things. I'll only cooperate if Trowa comes with us, unharmed."

Trowa's swords dropped into the forest one by one, reluctant and heavy. One of their attackers darted from his horse, shoved the auburn-haired man to his knees and pressed a dagger to Trowa's throat.

"Boss?" he snarled. His eyes were wild with blood lust, darting from Heero to his leader to the corpses of the other bandits scattered like the debris of a dead season in a circle around them. A thin droplet of blood ran down Trowa's neck. Green eyes were calm and seemed unconcerned.
"Tie them both up. I don't want any more trouble." The leader was biting the thick salt-and-pepper mustache that hung like worn rope above his mouth. He didn't look happy about it either, but Heero's scowl confirmed that without a hostage, he would be a lot of trouble indeed.

The man behind Trowa growled and continued to hold the dagger ready as another man approached them and nervously tied Heero's hands behind his back. Then Trowa was shoved to his feet and given the same treatment.

The two men exchanged one glance. That was all that was needed. They would cooperate, for now. But they knew that help was already on the way.

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Duo was staring fixedly at the master of ceremonies’ left ear while cleaning his fingernails with his dagger. He found this helped people get to the point a lot faster. It was nice to have a reputation as the crazed sorcerer-king of Lin sometimes. Already the man had stopped pestering him about the order of precedence of guests and the importance of wearing sable robes instead of black leather pants, and was now going through the plans for the rest of the ceremony with commendable speed. In fact he was going a bit red in the face. Maybe Duo should remind him to breathe once in a while. But if he didn't, maybe the man would pass out and then Duo would be able to shorten and simplify the ceremony of the First Circle even more. Anything to make this less of a circus...

He tried to feel angry with Heero for ditching today. But the heir of Sanq had been a trooper for an entire week now, and really, he deserved a break. Duo had grown up partly in Lin and could manage the court duties if he had to. Heero had grown up with Jay, whose idea of ceremony was eating with a fork. This was all alien to Heero, and probably very, very boring. Duo hadn't made much of a fuss when his husband had given some really lame excuse and headed out for the woods at daybreak with only the silent Trowa for company. Seriously, the only annoying thing was that he'd not been able to go with them.

He was bored, and sick and tired of organizing the first ceremony and this was only the start of the whole circles ritual- huh?

Duo perked up as the door crashed open and one of the guards stationed there fell in a dazed heap right next to the master of ceremony, who dropped all twelve of his elaborate scrolls in a frantic fountain of paper. Yay, action!

He had his dagger and blasts ready, but was stunned at what he saw as the door swung open wider. No fiend from hell or assassin to blast into small lumps of soot. Instead... Duo trotted over to the door, curious to see why the normally gentle Quatre was trying to throttle one of the king’s guards.

"Duo!" Quatre had two small red spots at the top of his cheekbones, echoing the burn in his eyes. His face was far from the sweet, gentle youth Duo was vaguely aware of as an apparently indispensable accessory to Trowa.

"Yes?" Duo leaned against the door’s jamb expectantly.

"Come with me at once. Bring Chang Wufei and an escort," Quatre snapped. He'd apparently forgotten his elbow pressed against the guard's windpipe. Duo guessed that the guards had tried to bar the throne-room to the young man, who was no-one as far as they were concerned, only to find
that he might look harmless, but he'd been training with Heero and Trowa for five years and it showed. In the way he handled his two curved shotel and fists, and also, Duo reflected, in the way he tended to bypass arguments and go straight for the jugular when he needed to.

"Sure thing!" Duo nodded enthusiastically, grabbed his cloak from an open-mouthed courtier, gave the trembling master of ceremony a friendly nod and gestured to Quatre, who was staring at him.

"Lead on. Wufee is on leave - Sally made some pretty nasty threats if I didn't give him a break- but I'm sure I can find a few guys to come with us. The one you're strangling might do for a start."

Quatre's head snapped back towards the guard, then he blinked, gasped and let the man go. The guard staggered and slid down the door jamb, wheezing a bit.

"Or maybe not. Come on, then, let's go find someone else. Are we going to need horses?" Duo hopped over the legs of the guard and trotted down the corridor, heading outside.

"...Yes." Quatre was staring at him oddly. If he expected Duo to protest, or ask him where they were going, or why, then he'd misjudged just how bored Duo was at that point. Plus, for the gentle young man to lose his temper like that, it was probably important.

In the courtyard, two dozen Maguanacs were saddling horses.

"Do we need more guards?" Duo asked surprised. "I seem to recall these guys are quite efficient."

"You-... don't you want your own guard to come with us?" Quatre had been visibly prepared to barge in on Duo, argue with him angrily, maybe drag him out bodily whatever opposition he raised, and was reeling slightly as a result of the king's immediate compliance.

"Nah, they just tend to fuss." Duo grabbed one of the spare horses the burly Saoun men were holding and vaulted into the saddle. Wufei would have kittens when he found out about all this, but Duo was used to that. "Come on, before some other bureaucrat tries to bury me in paper."

"Don't you want to know where we're going?" Quatre finally burst out as he quickly swung into his own saddle.

"It's bound to be more interesting than here." Duo grinned. "And I like surprises."

"You might not like this one. But it's probably for the best, we don't have time to deal with you setting fire to things yet."

Duo stared at Quatre's back as the young man spun the horse around, concentrated for a few seconds, his eyes vague, and spurred his horse towards the South gates of Linheights. That had sounded a bit ominous. Duo clicked his tongue and his horse trotted, then galloped after Quatre. Maybe he should be asking a few questions after all...

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Heero judged they were over half a day's ride from Linheights, which wasn't that far at all from a city full of sorcerers. No wonder their captors seemed to be in such a hurry. These men were from Lin and they'd just captured their King's husband. Lin had a no-nonsense approach to crimes of high treason. It involved execution methods that would make a fiend cringe.
They were being led to the central hall of a holt, a fortified group of buildings perched on a rocky outcropping between two crags. Heero's eyes scrutinized every inch of the stone buildings around him, looking for a banner, heraldry, any kind of clue to the identity of the person who had captured them. The buildings were devoid of any trace of luxury, and there were no families. The only women he could see were rangy soldiers or camp followers. There were about fifty armed bodies in all, from what he could see, men with shifty eyes leering at him, or sharpening disparate weapons, or drinking sullenly on dirty stoops. This probably wasn't a military outfit or a proper camp, just the hide-out of some bandit lord. They were close to the border of Kespar and the baronies of Sansbury here, he would lay odds this was a raider, living off the occasional pillage on villages in the kingdoms around them. Heero scowled. What possible reason could small-time fry like that have to capture him?

The hall they were lead to was dark, lit only by the firepit and some flickering torches. The stone walls were bare of any decoration. Several wooden tables indicated this was the common room and dining hall. Only two people occupied it at present. A man was seated in a high-backed chair behind a table on a slightly raised dais. He was thin, gaunt, in his late forties, sallow face shrunken and dull. His clothes were typical for a minor sorcerer-warlord, a mixture of light armor and tough leathers, with no scabbard or weapon belt. Heero noted that the clothes appeared several sizes too large for the man, and momentarily wondered if this was in fact the boss of the bandits. The way the leader of his captors acknowledged the man with a stiff nod confirmed it though.

The boss appeared not to notice them. He didn't even lift his eyes from the dishes before him. Half the plates were empty, and there were quite a few of them, Heero noted. The raider lord was eating rapidly and without visible pleasure; meats, bread, cheeses, pastries, it didn't seem to matter. A very thin, indeed malnourished, woman was at his elbow, staring hungrily at him and the food, though she made no move towards either, merely leaned against the high-backed chair as if she required the support. She wore a limp russet dress, also too large for her, which plunged down to show prominent bones rather than cleavage. Her hair was black and as limp as her dress. Her eyes were huge in her sunken face, as she slowly lifted them towards the captives.

"You got him then," the bandit lord suddenly said, his eyes flickering up then back to his food. He stopped eating, but his hands clenched and twitched as if he wanted to continue with the overcooked ham he'd been tearing into with his fingers when they'd entered.

"Yes sir, the information was correct. He left early this morning with only his man-at-arms for protection." From the sound of it, their captor had not quite believed that until he'd seen it. Princes were supposed to have a few more layers of defense around them. Heero wished he'd had. "We used scrying to follow them as soon as they left Linheights, and attacked them when they turned to go back. They... proved somewhat difficult to capture. I lost some men." The voice was tight and the big muscles clenched.

Heero wondered briefly where they'd gotten their information from. Who had told them that he was leaving Linheights today with only Trowa, but had not bothered to tell them that he wasn't a, what was it, a poodle? Or had their spy not known either? That was likely. Very few people, even in Linheights, knew that Duo's former dour captain Yuy and his new husband, Heero, prince of Sanq, were one and the same person.

"What do you want with me?" Heero asked calmly. He doubted the man would give him all that much information, but it was worth a shot.

The leader stared at him blindly. His hands crawled back to the ham again, spiders in taut skin escaping his control. His eyes looked feverish, darting from his prisoner to the laden table. He didn't look entirely sane, but Heero had yet to meet a Lin sorcerer who was, and that, he thought with a
"When can you move him out?" the lord asked his captain, ignoring Heero.

The burly man shrugged. "Nightfall. He was supposed to be gone all day, it will be awhile before he's missed. If we move him out tonight it will be soon enough, and make it less likely we'll be scryed."

"Where are you taking me?" But no one answered him.

"Are you sure Maxwell won't be able to track him here?" the captain asked carefully, his head slightly down as if ready to fearfully bear the brunt of a storm. All the men seemed afraid of their Lord, watching him carefully. Once more, quite normal for Lin. "Will they be able to follow us to the rendez-vous?" The bandit lair was a pitiful rampart against an attack by the forces of Lin. The mountainous country had a rather hands-off approach to what its citizens did to eke a living out of the harsh environment. Raiding neighboring countries was considered an acceptable career path, as long as you paid your taxes and didn't get noticed. Making away with the heir of one country and the husband of the king of their own land was definitely going to get them noticed.

"I'm sure." Thin dry lips twitched, then teeth ground into them as if they could no longer wait for food anymore. "His presence here is undetectable, and he's no magic user, he won't have left any tracks. Once we reach our destination, they will make sure that Maxwell won't follow until they're ready for him. Take him away, and make sure he's unharmed. What's the other one doing here?" The lord's eyes blank gaze hovered over Trowa as he spoke through ham and bread his hands had caught and crammed into his mouth as if taking advantage of his distraction.

"Hostage. To keep him quiet."

"Is that necessary?"

"Yes," the captain growled, reluctantly.

"Well pack them out together, and the buyers can decide what to do with him." The lord nodded dismissal and his eyes dropped to his plates again. The woman gave Heero one last lingering look, something flickering in her blank gaze. It looked like surprise. Heero scowled at her and she looked down quickly again.

Then hard hands were pulling him and Trowa away, their questions unanswered. For now.
Heero and Trowa's hands were untied only when they'd been shoved in a cell deep under the holt's main building. It was a small stone enclosure, windowless and dank. The only thing in it was a thick scarred wooden bench running along the back wall, and a small drain, for calls of nature it was to be supposed. The dusty smell in the air indicated the place had not been used in a long while. In fact, as they'd been pushed down into the cellars to reach the cell, they'd noticed most of the rooms underground were empty. This was only a temporary hideout; apparently the whole gang would be breaking camp and leaving with them, if the flurry of packing and sorting was to be believed.

Trowa and Heero settled down on the bench to wait. Trowa gathered up a long leg against his chest, glanced around at the cell, which was barely illuminated by light glimmering from torches burning on the other side of the thick oak door, then turned steady green eyes on Heero.

"So... what were we talking about before we were so rudely interrupted?"

Heero scowled.

Trowa had been as companiably silent as Heero had come to expect for the morning ride out of Linheights, but when they'd turned towards home and taken a moment to let their horses rest, he'd begun doing something completely unexpected: asking questions. About Heero's marriage. Specifically, what Heero thought of the marriage to Duo.

Specifically, what Heero thought about Duo.

Heero had been almost grateful for the ambush.

He didn't know what had come over Trowa. Heero had told him once, weeks ago, that he loved Duo as his best friend, like a brother really. Trowa had said nothing, but had given him a look. Heero decided his laconic friend had been hanging around Quatre too much since their victory at the Gap. He was becoming addled-brained and romantic. He seemed somehow persuaded that Heero should be feeling even more towards the man he'd married – was in the process of marrying, seeing that the circles of bonds and blood would take several weeks to complete. Heero didn't know where Trowa had picked up this ridiculous notion, it wasn't as if-

"So... looks like someone is after Duo again."

This distracted Heero and he scowled.

"Hn. I wish we could find out who they were, and if it's the same people as the last attempt. Maybe we'll find out when they take us to 'the buyers', tonight?"

It was a question, and also a plan, but Trowa, with a glance at the door where guards were shifting outside, shook his head with the smallest movement.

"I think, once Duo finds out you've been taken, he'll react rather... hastily."

"A level-headed person by his side could try to restrain him and make him see the advantages of patience?"

Trowa's lips quirked. "I doubt it, and besides, I'm rather attached to that level-headed person, so I'd rather he didn't even try. He might get badly singed."
"Hn."

"... Strange they seem to want him alive."

Heero frowned. He'd been worrying about that. It was bad enough someone had teleported a fiend into his husband's bedroom—and that must have also required insider knowledge—this was even more daring and elaborate. This required organization, planning, and, he hoped, would have left them some clues to follow once the plan fell through.

But it was strange they wanted the most powerful of the new generation of sorcerers alive. That sounded ominous. Last time someone had wanted to use Duo's powers, it had been Septim, trying to rip open a hole in the world to let loose the demons of hell. The breach at the Gap of Sevring was now sealed and well guarded. But there were many others, especially in Lin. Would someone other than Septim be mad enough to try this? Or were they after something else entirely?

"That raider will know who he's trying to sell me to," Heero murmured. Trowa nodded once. They'd have to get their hands on the man intact, well, fairly intact, and get to the bottom of this.

Silence fell between the two reserved men. In the dank cell deep underground, they couldn't see dusk gathering at the outskirts of the holt, but they did hear the distant jangle of gear as horses were made ready.

The quiet of the gathering evening, barely disturbed by the sounds of their captors preparing to haul them off to their final destination, was suddenly ripped apart by a loud wham, followed by a small clatter of falling bricks.

Neither men stirred, though Trowa glanced at the ceiling.

Several loud hisses were followed by a thump of something exploding noisily into flames.

Trowa straightened. "It sounds like your ridiculously overpowered husband has arrived."

"Hn."

Silence. In the cell, that is. Outside, several people were screaming at the top of their lungs, and something was creaking alarmingly.

A huge bang caused several streams of dust and decade-old soot to cascade from the cell's ceiling.

Heero gave it a glance.

"Quatre is with him," Trowa said laconically. So Duo knew where they were, thanks to Quatre's link to Trowa.

The ground shook, a long slow rumble, and several loud pops echoed nearby.

Silence (between them).

"Of course this is Duo we're talking about..."

"Hn."

Something went whirring past the top of the building with a whirky-whirky-whirky noise, quickly followed by an earth-shattering blast that rocked the torches in their holders outside the cell. Debris clattered and pounded the roof far above their heads.
Heero and Trowa glanced at each other, then crawled under the sturdy wooden bench, the only protection in the cell.

"You two are married."

"Hn."

"Can't you teach him some self-restraint?"

"He's just worried about our safety-" There were several possible answers to Trowa's question, 'Hn' being the most obvious, but somehow that was the one that came out of his mouth and in an oddly defensive tone. Heero scowled. It was particularly annoying because of course Trowa was right; as far as Duo was concerned, self-restraint had run for cover long ago.

Trowa let a small grin flit over his laconic features. Its meaning was clear. You've got it bad, Yuy.

Heero's scowl deepened until it was almost as dangerous as the explosions which were starting to die down in amplitude, although they were getting nearer.

A clatter of feet echoed in the hallway and they saw the flickering shadows of men running past the cell door outside. Running away. Very fast.

Then a light scuffle of boots. "Heero?!"

"Here."

Heero prudently stayed beneath the bench.

Three seconds later, the door had met its maker and had been reincarnated as a set of toothpicks. Heero and Trowa were showered with smoking sawdust, pelted with debris and momentarily choked by fumes.

Heero glanced up, his heart in his throat. The cell's doorway seemed too small and mundane to hold the figure glowing there, he seemed to burst out of its confines (or maybe the building was starting to crumble... ) Claws of darkness chased feathers of bright flame around the young man in a slow roil of destruction, clothing Heero's husband in robes of fire and light and death. His face, almost too beautiful a gem for such a cruel bracket, shone in the reflected fire, eyes like amethyst set in ivory, framed by cascading brown silk – Heero shook himself sharply. Must be the fumes.

"Duo, could you power down a bit? We're safe."

"So far," Trowa muttered.

"Heero?!" Duo's gaze darted around him. The remains of the door started to smolder on the bent and twisted hinges. "Hee- what are you doing under there?" The flames and the fury died down a bit. Heero waited a few seconds and crawled out from under the bench.

"Well... " And Heero found himself unable to say anything snippy about self-restraint and Duo's lack of it. To his surprise, he was immensely relieved to see the sorcerer, an unusual surge of emotion for him. He'd not liked the way the raider lord had mentioned that 'the buyers' would be 'ready for him', once they'd had their hands on Heero. His husband would have been walking right into a trap at that point.

"You... look okay." Duo sounded a bit uncertain, which, coming from someone who'd just blown away half a stone fort, was almost funny.
"Hn."

A short silence, highlighted by the crackling of burning wood and the crash of a collapsing building outside, was shattered by a shout as someone barreled through the remains of Duo's magefire, and hurtled at Trowa as he crawled out from under the bench.

"Trowa! Thank the gods you're all right!"

"Quatre." Trowa's calm voice was rich with unspoken emotion as he gently hugged the young man in his arms. "Thank you for coming so quickly, love."

"Nothing in the world would have stopped me."

"I know, little terror, I know." Trowa's voice and smile indicated he meant it. Love, joy, pride warmed the green eyes as Quatre swept the long bang from his forehead as he checked his lover for injury.

Heero suddenly wished he could grab the awkward silence that skulked between him and Duo and snap its neck. But then he refocused, forgetting the contrast between them and the pair of young lovers, to concentrate on the more important issue.

"Duo, on your way down, did you happen to see a man in a big dining hall with his face in a plate?"

Duo stared at him, eyes wide.

"I think the kitchen's closed, Yuy," Trowa said, moving forward with his arm around his lover. "Why don't we see if we can invite him to dinner at the palace in Lingheights."

"Hn. Duo, do you have a sword I can borrow?"

"Er, no."

"I guess I'll just have to use my fists, then. Come on. And don't blow anything up, we need him alive."

"Oh okay," Duo grumbled.

---

The raider lord was still in the dining hall, which, since it was above the prison, was fairly intact. Apparently his captain had come to get him when Duo had attacked. What happened after that, however...

Duo muttered 'whoa' and Quatre gasped.

The lord had apparently attacked his captain while the man's back was turned, with his thin spidery hands and a dinner knife. And had then tried to eat him.

Heero, deep in the refuge of cold clarity that Jay had gifted him with, noted the tracks of bite marks running down the captain's exposed skin, the side of his face, his shoulder... One vicious rip had taken out the man's throat, and blood had spayed over the armor and the fallen halberd. The lord lay on the body of his captain, blood and flesh hanging from an open mouth. He was dead.
"This is the guy who-who-" Duo stuttered. He would have seen a lot in Lin, he wasn't overly upset by the grotesque tableau, his look was one of incomprehension rather than horror. "Why's he- why's he like that?"

The lord was barely recognizable, and not because of the mask of blood and death he was wearing. The thing lying atop the captain's body was in fact barely describable as human; a dry withered object, like a scarecrow without the straw, skin tightened over bones as if ready to rip, the bones themselves like brittle sticks ready to break, not a muscle or lick of flesh left between the two.

"Duo, is your magic working?"

Duo started with surprise, tearing his eyes away from the obscenity. He lifted his hand and power crackled and sparked above the palm. "Where?"

"Over there." Heero nodded at the long table on the dais.

Over a few remaining plates of food, something was squatting like a spider. The woman in the russet dress was crouching on the table, hovering a few inches away from a spilled dish. Her skirt was carelessly hiked up to uncover long thin legs that were as fleshless as the lord's, but where his eyes were lifeless, hers were burning with hunger so intense it seemed to convulse her bony body to the breaking point. Her thin lips were parted over sharp white teeth, a pale white tongue flickered in and out, as if trying to lap up the smell of the food from the air. But she kept hovering, holding back, inching forward then jerking away, face contorted beyond humanity by- no, that thing had never been human in the first place.

"What in all the thirteen circles of hell is that?" Duo asked calmly, a hand slowly lifting towards the creature.

At the sound of his voice, and Heero's movement forward, the thing on the table twitched a fleshless face towards them. Huge eyes, pupils narrowed to pinpoints despite the darkness of the hall, flicked between the two of them.

It hissed. A prickle danced up and down Heero's spine. It was as if something was reaching out to him... a faint stirring of hunger, for something that could never be satisfied. The creature skittered around on all fours and perched on the edge of the table like a cat about to pounce, lips widening in a snarl.

"We need it alive. Or not too badly blown up." Heero muttered.

"Yeah, yeah." Duo's voice was tight but under control. Behind them, Trowa was prosaically picking up the halberd, and tossing an abandoned spear to Quatre. It went without saying that however this creature was stopped, it wasn't going to get within striking distance of any of them. They weren't going to take a chance of ending up like the hag-ridden former lord.

The creature didn't seem to notice, or care, about anybody but Duo, except... at the sound of Heero's voice, the eyes had flickered between them again. Now the figure took a careful step back, hunching upon itself like a leather bag of bones, nose sniffing the air, tongue flicking as if to taste...

"Both... "

The voice was a rattle of bone.

"Both... I don't understand... both... "

Suddenly the creature darted away, still on all fours, and made for the other end of the hall. Duo
stepped forward and coolly sent a small stream of force smashing after it. The table and chairs were swept aside, the logs fell in the fireplace, the russet skirt started to snap-

The creature leaped sideways and landed, hands and bare feet first, against the wall, and skittered away, up towards the rafters, long bony extremities gasping and clicking over stone.

"Well that's something you don't see every day," Duo muttered as he sent another stream of power to knock her off. But she leaped again, barely escaping the force that hit the wall next to her as she skittered still upwards.

"Don't hit the rafters!" Heero hissed. "You'll bring the place down!"

"Damn," Duo growled as the thing vanished in the darkness of the rafters above. Then he spun towards Trowa and Quatre who had their weapons pointed above their heads. "Q, get your guys to surround the place, and tell them to call me if they spot it! Don't let them get near-"

"I know," Quatre snapped, tossing his pike to Heero and darting outside.

Heero held the spear loosely, his eyes on the rafters, but without much hope. He dropped his gaze to the fleshless body of his former captor and his victim and shook his head.

He didn't think they'd find the creature again. They'd just lost their lead. And this time, it was almost certain another attack would occur, sooner or later
First Circle: The Circle Of Truth

Dead sorcerers were glowering at them. Duo would have preferred to have the Circles ceremony anywhere but in the great council hall of Lin -even out in the rain if necessary- but he'd had no choice in the matter. The fact that this was one of the most important decisions he and Heero could make with their lives mattered not a wit. It was the politics of their union that counted, and to give it full force in the eyes of the people, things had to be done by the books. The master of ceremony (the new one, the previous one having suddenly retired a few days before) had refused to veil the portraits of former sorcerer-kings, whose serious faces, mad eyes and long black robes lent an extra air of festivity to the ceremony which was a bundle of fun already.

Duo and Heero stood in a circle of gold paint on the floor of the council chambers. Their hands were joined above a small pedestal bearing two big gold cups, heavily ornamented and encrusted with semi-precious stones. It was the traditional gifts for the Circle of Truth. Duo, who had long ceased to listen to the drone of the venerable relic who presided over what passed as Lin's religion, vaguely wondered at that. Why cups? What were cups to do with a magical oath that was meant to signify there were to be no more secrets between the two spouses? Were they supposed to get drunk at some point and spill their guts out to each other? Duo bit the inside of his cheek to keep the serious air required of him as he tried to imagine what Heero would be like in his cups. Actually, the reality probably wouldn't be so funny...

Duo shifted in his ceremonial clothes. He was dressed in black, of course, but he'd had to compromise on some things with his council. No man alive was going to get him into a robe though. He was wearing a thick knee-length velvet black tunic, granted, but he still had his pants on underneath. He'd scoffed at jewelry and crowns and capes and such. He only wore the ring of the heir, and the simple gold band around his wrist that marked him as the sorcerer-king. It was actually welded on, a shackle that wouldn't come off through magic, force or even his death for the next twenty five years.

Heero was dressed in green, a long dark brocaded tunic. It was nice of him to try to match Duo's knee-length outfit for moral support. No crowns for him either. He had Zechs' ring on one hand, jade and gold. Nobody had tried to dress him up like a circus animal, that was for sure. Duo noticed how the brocaded tunic hugged the toned chest and arms, quite different than his usual loose leather armor... He dropped his gaze.

The crackle of torches and the drone of the cleric became oppressive. Duo stared blankly at the big, calloused hands holding his own, so lightly considering what they were capable of, then glanced up. A frown was settling on Heero's bang-shrouded brow. He was apparently listening to the droning of the relic, so was probably developing a headache. Duo watched the face he knew as well as his own from beneath his long bangs and lashes.

The dry and dusty words trickled through. A lot of rabbiting on about truth... ah, right. Maybe that was why Heero had that faintly constipated look. Probably still feeling a bit guilty about lying to Duo repeatedly and letting him rot in a hell of self-recrimination for five years. At least that shouldn't be happening again...

It wasn't exactly clear what the effect of the Circles of Bonds and Blood would be; the marriage ceremony was so old, only rumors and legends persisted about it. Jay had posited that it wouldn't have much effect at all. Most of the ceremony was shamanistic in nature, and that only really worked if you believed in it.

But the people of the two kingdoms believed in the legends. In their myths, the Circles of Bonds and
Blood linked the fates of the participants, and would brook no betrayal. Once the fifth ceremony was performed, they were officially an item. It didn't matter that no one knew what the consequence of betrayal would be; immediate death, an eternity in hell, a madness of regret, or simply, for all they knew, a nasty rash. Didn't matter. The ceremonies would Make It All Work. They would insure the peace. And in theory, a good marriage as a bonus.

If only things were that simple...

The truth was, Duo found that he was glad that Heero was still in pain over the lies of the past year. He didn't like the feeling, it disturbed him. They were friends, they loved each other like brothers, and that wasn't a sentiment you should have within a family. You were supposed to forgive each other. And he had forgiven Heero, he understood his actions, his decisions, and so on and so forth but when he thought of it something in his chest just seem to twist and ache and he couldn't even say why.

And what was worse, the fact that Heero was still suffering, still blaming himself for the scarred years in Duo's life, well, that also hurt even as it satisfied him. How smart was that...?

Duo felt a bit of cold sweat run down his back. Whoa, was this the result of the ceremony? Self-knowledge was part of the truth package, he seemed to remember. Damn! He didn't want Heero to somehow become aware of all this! That would be... Wait. His finely tuned magic senses were telling him that the only ominous thing hanging over his head was boredom, and the stress of the past few days. He glanced up again at Heero. And noticed his eyes had glazed over and his head was drooping a bit.

Duo bit the inside of his cheek again, and gave the hands in his a gentle squeeze. Heero started ever so slightly and glanced up through the bangs. They shared a quick look, glanced at the cleric who was having trouble remembering which part of the ceremony he’d gotten to, and rolled their eyes in unison.

---

"Knew I'd find you up here."

Duo started out of his reverie to find Heero leaning against one of the slender, weather-beaten ornamental pillars. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here? And what is it with you and roofs?"

Duo stared out at the dusk gathering over Linheights. He was in his favorite rainy-day haunt, an old gazebo improbably forgotten on one of the highest domes of the council building, an easy five minutes from his palace rooms. He went there when he needed a break from being king, or if he wanted to play hooky. Being absent from his own wedding feast was probably pushing it a bit, but he’d stayed the obligatory hour, and he was sick of getting congratulated for putting his private life on display like an idiot. Besides, he liked it here. It was the real Lin, the old stone beauty, weather-beaten yet still tenacious.

"You got tired of it too?" he drawled, knowing that Heero had even less tolerance than he did for that sort of thing.

"Hn."

They shared a friendly silence, Duo sitting on the stone balustrade, lounging against a rain-spattered
pillar, and Heero leaning against another, facing him arms crossed on his chest with his usual tense grace.

"I've got a gift for you."

The tone was abrupt, interrupting Duo's train of thoughts, which were pretty much idling in the station anyway. "Gift? We already gave each other those bloody cups. Not that I'll ever use mine. Unlike you."

Heero gave him a sphinx look down his nose. "Whatever makes you think I'd use something that useless and gaudy?"

"Drinking out of those things will muscle up your sword arm better than sparring with Tro."

"Very funny."

"I thought so."

"Here."

Duo had forgotten the beginning of the conversation and so stared blankly at the small object for a few seconds before reaching for it. Heero dropped its chain into his hand. 

Duo stared. "Wow, that brings back memories... " His mouth was moving automatically, trying to work around the obstruction in his throat and the multitude of raw feelings that suddenly hit him. 

It was the divining sticks. He remembered it all as if he were five years old again, but with his adult knowledge still intact, caught within his emotions like a fly in amber. He remembered the old bitch ('her!' the child inside whimpered) who'd nearly destroyed them in her quest for revenge against phantoms. Who'd forced them to merge together to survive her. Then ripped them apart. He remembered long-fingered hands, still elegant in old age, pointing towards the sticks on the table in a rundown hunting lodge. *Pick them up. All of them.* He'd grabbed two and became Duo... And now he remembered how father Maxwell had taken them from him and Heero on the way back home, and carefully kept them, separate like they were.

The small sticks, of finest ebony, etched in symbols of old wisdom and pagan truths, had been fitted together with gold filigree into the shape of a cross hanging from a golden chain. The wire looped and decorated the cross leaving the symbols clear in the center of the sticks. The child Duo had found the sticks fascinating. The Duo who had spent hours studying in the Library of Lin read the symbols, the shape of the cross allowing them both to be visible. The symbols were subtle and could hold several meanings.

"A flash of lightning, that's Truth, just punishment, and power. And the Heart. Emotional strength, and pain. Was... was that how they landed?"

"No, Father Maxwell took them from us without paying attention to that. Anyway, she's the one who threw them, so who cares. I chose which symbols--- you don't have to wear it if you don't like it."

Duo looked up slowly. "I... I didn't get you anything."

Heero was silent, looking down at the cross in Duo's hands. Then his hand drifted to the laces on his ceremonial tunic, which was heavy with rain, darkened curves clinging to his skin. "If you, well, if you want to wear it-" the short clipped tones sounded abrupt, but Duo knew better. "-well, I guess you can consider wearing it as giving me something, sharing something."
Duo's gaze dropped down to the firm chest that Heero had revealed. On a similar gold chain hung the matching single ebony stick. The filigree had been set to keep it upright and shaped at the top to outline a simple shape like the handguard of a dagger. Duo's eyes caught the symbol.


Heero gave a half shrug, as if it didn't mean anything.

Duo slowly leaned forward and picked up the charm. He turned it. Stared. The filigree was twined the same in the back as in front and another symbol was left clear by the twisting gold wire. Duo got up, lifted the necklace from a startled Heero, turned it and placed it back again, leaving his hand on the firm chest for a moment, covering the charm. Then he leaned against the balustrade, staring out at the night.

Heero stared at the new symbol. "What's this mean? I had to look them up, I can't remember."

"The Oak. Integrity. Strength. Shelter."

Heero's words stuttered out into a silent Oh. He hesitated, lifting the charm.

"You wear it that way and I'll wear mine." Duo slipped the cross around his neck.

Heero still hesitated, then let it fall. "Okay," he said quietly, then gave a small half-smile, not entirely happy. "Looks like you did give me something. Don't catch a cold." The leave was abrupt.

Duo stared out into the night as if he could still see the towers around him, listening to the fading footsteps.

He fingered the cross. Truth. His palm still felt warm on the ebony, from the contact with Heero's chest.

Truth.

This was why the lies in the past hurt him so badly. This was why he could see through the ice that Jay had laid across Heero's soul to what was underneath. It was why Heero's gift rang in him straight to his own soul. Why this mattered so much to him. Why he could forgive and still hurt and hate and writhe and tremble and thrill inside with every look from dark blue eyes.

He didn't have to admit it to anyone but himself, but there it was. He loved Heero.

But not as a friend or brother.

---

The flickering light seemed to bore into rocks writhing like tortured things in the glow. The creature writhed as well. Flesh squirmed, erupted into twitching tentacles, which withered and broke off like dry twigs or curled and bit into muscle and bone...

"BoOTh? Nnnn." The last was a tortured rasp of pain.

The famished thing of skin and bones crouched before it, the russet dress still clinging to the wasted figure.
"Yes. Both."

"I... do NOT undeRSt@nd."  

*Maybe -*  

The voice was less than a whisper and completely drowned out by the screeches echoing from the back of the cavern.

*Can someone make him shut up?* The voice that wasn't one managed to interject this between two screams.

"nO. Le@ve hIM. NnnaANnn." The thing writhed.

*He's going to be a problem.*

"YEssS/ yOU-." The hungry, tortured figure flinched before the majestic writhing obscenity "-l-leave us. wE musT thi-nK./-/ TaKe the toRtuRed onE wiTH you."

The creature emitted an alarmed rattle.

"geT tHe deAd thINGs to -Nn:nnNN:n- to h-hElp."  

The creature bobbed and darted away.  

*I think I understand... If I'm right, we do need them both.*

"hAahhh... "  

*As if getting the King wasn't going to be hard enough.*

The obscenity writhed, something like blue flames scorching it and crackling up one side. A smell of burning rotten leaves filled the small space. Both creatures ignored it. In the distance, screams of inhuman agony faded as the tortured one was dragged away.

"we SHaLl s-sEnd thE 1nFernO."

...*he's not reliable... can't you send...*

"WhO? Nnn!!nnn... WE nE-ed thE cHaiNed One hEre for p-paIn. AnD the de@D thiNg caNnot-t do mUch unalDed."

*I have a bad feeling about this. If only either of us could leave this place...*

"we cAnnOt."

*I know, but using the others -especially fire- is so risky...*

"hE knows We nnn-neED thEm @liVe."

*Let's just hope the inferno can remember that in situ... we can't use two lumps of charcoal...*

"NnNNnnn."
"It seems... smaller than I remember." Heero frowned at the structure in the middle of the clearing.

"Yes, husband dearest, that would be because the roof has collapsed inwards."

Heero glared at Duo. "That's not what I meant. The whole thing seemed much bigger when-"

"When we were twelve? Yeah, well, we've grown since then. You're also half an inch taller than me now, so you better stop it."

"Stop... ?"

"Growing, dimwit."

"Hn."

"Wow, somehow I knew you'd say that."

Heero recognized what was behind the tone of voice, the needling, which was surprising, he wasn't normally this perceptive about other people's behavior. But this was Duo, and besides, in this instance, he felt some of the same; mingled grief and guilt making him feel defensive, closing his barriers. But they were alone here. Maybe there was no need for that.

Duo stiffened, wide-eyed, as Heero slipped an arm around his shoulder.

"Come on." Heero knew his voice sounded gruff - it always did - and he didn't know what else to say. They won't mind? That was obvious, they were dead. What could be said to make this easier?

He led Duo to the two mounds, a little way off from the broken and burned remains of the lodge which had been the backdrop of their childhood traumas. Zechs had had to pretend that Odin and Father Maxwell had left with the princes on the 'trip' which explained their disappearance, six years ago. He'd come back after Heero had left for Kespar, with his spymaster for only help, to bury his two best friends side by side where they had fallen. Their mounds were still unmarked, though Zechs was preparing a beautiful burial slate now that popular memory had let the two fallen slip from general ken.

The two young men stood hand in hand before the mounds. Then Duo knelt, followed by his husband. Duo's mouth drooped, for once it seemed the voluble king of Lin didn't know what to say. Heero knew that Duo blamed himself for the death of Father Maxwell, though it had been Septim who had twisted Duo's power to murder the gentle priest. Both deaths, however, rested firmly upon his own shoulders, his and his cursed heritage.

"How do you reckon that?" Duo snapped when Heero murmured this in an attempt to make him feel better.

Heero shrugged. "Septim was calling me here, using an old blood spell. Blood spells can control people in subtle ways and our shared blood gave him the power to use it. That's how he knew I would be here at that time and place. I was the one who broke away from Odin and Father Max that day, remember? The first one into the clearing, I led the way. The fact that you followed me, and that both of us showed up is what confused the issue. It wasn't a very strong spell, as he was only my uncle, if I'd resisted the urge... they'd both be alive, nothing would have happened."
"Well until five years had passed and the new heir of Lin would have ripped open the breach with Septim's help because we weren't there to stop him. Then lots would have happened, none of it pleasant."

Heero sighed. "It is useless to waste time considering 'might have beens', I know. I keep this in mind though, to make sure I never forget my heritage."

"And boy don't you ever let us forget it," Duo muttered.

"What do you-"

"Nothing." Duo took the incense sticks and gaily colored streamers from the bag he'd prepared. They planted the sticks and streamers in the mounds, the traditional grave offerings seeming incongruous in the long-abandoned clearing and moss-covered knolls. Duo lifted a finger towards the sticks but hesitated.

"...Do you have a flint?"

"Sure." Heero understood why Duo wouldn't want to use mage-flame here of all places. He scratched his flint and lock and lit the incense with some trouble. Then the two young men stayed kneeling before the graves, thinking, while the breeze through the clearing brushed the streamers, flaring out the ribbons, and dissipated the smell of incense into the fresh forest air. In the distance, a horse stamped a hoof. Heero instinctively glanced up at the others, their escort and their friends, waiting at a respectful distance a few hundred feet away, giving the pair their privacy but, Heero noted with approval, not letting them out of their sight.

"Well... " Duo finally sighed and stood. He made a bow of respect towards the graves. Heero was about to do the same when something alien impinged on his senses.

"Do you smell burning?"

Duo glanced at him in surprise and sniffed the air.

"Yeah, a bit. Must be the stick in the incense?"

"Wind's blowing it away from us."

They turned towards the breeze and stiffened. A trail of smoke was coming from the wrecked lodge. That brought back so many bad memories, it held them paralyzed for a few precious seconds. Then Heero's mage blade sang out of the scabbard.

"Duo! Get to the horses!"

"Wha-"

"Now!"

Duo only moved closer to him to guard his back of course, and anyway it was too late.

Something burst into flames in the center of the lodge where Septim had appeared six years before. Fire shot out from the building in two arcs, running like galloping herds of red and golden horses around the clearing. Before the pair could do more than stagger away from the mounds, they were encircled in flame.

Duo started cursing a blue streak as he threw up a spell wall around them. Even Heero could tell this
wasn't a normal fire. It crackled and burned the trees around them, but didn't advance in on them, just flared like a barrier at a steady distance, twice as high as they were.

The lodge was burning brightly at that point. And something moved slowly out of the inferno.

"Oh shit." Duo didn't sound surprised. Heero found himself grabbed by the shoulder and jerked back. "Outta the way, cuz, this is my kinda fight."

"Except if it can seal your magic like last one," Heero snapped.

"Then we're toast. Quite literally," Duo muttered.

The burning man stopped a few dozen feet away. Fire ripped up the form that looked slender and humanoid under the blackened cracked skin and withered, twisting flesh. The eyes were two black empty pits, the face was a charred lump, half roasted meat, half skull. But the flesh was growing at much the same rate it was being consumed, so the fire kept making new leeway, boiling fluids and charring to the bone again and again.

"They just keep getting better and better, don't they. Or worse and worse, depending on your standards," Duo ground out, mouth on automatic while fingers flexed. Fortunately magic sprang to his hands, unimpeded. "I give this one a ten on the ick scale."

"The first one was uglier, but this one looks a lot more dangerous," Heero muttered, hoping Duo was taking this seriously.

"Should we see what it wants? Or do we -"

"You will come with me."

Flames roared and shot out of the tortured throat as the jaw flapped up and down, the ligaments crackling in the blaze. The voice was nonetheless clear, echoing strangely through the clearing, seeming to crackle up from the flames themselves.

"It forgot to add 'Or Else'. Or 'Please'. That would be a nice change." Duo started gathering up strands of power in his hands.

"You will come with me or die."

"There you go. Gotta respect the classic fiend lore, you know."

Heero could feel power coursing through his husband. He was close to Duo's back, to shelter in his wards, though that might not be enough to protect him from a direct blast from the creature. Black magic wards weren't meant for two. And as long as Duo kept those wards up full strength to protect them both, he couldn't use his full power against the fiend.

The fire crackled and hissed, a branch broke and fell, the fire consuming it without ceasing to burn any brighter. The creature just stared, while Duo flexed his powers and readied himself.

Heero, feeling pretty useless, tightened his grip on his mage-blade. Unbidden, memories of a few months back passed through his mind, riding with Duo or listening to his cousin chatter by the fire late at night. Duo had explained sorcery to him, as well as taught him a few rudiments. Heero had just listened with something like quiet contentment, even though the subject matter made him uneasy.

He'd learned that sorcerous battles were as strategic as sword fights. It wasn't just a question of 'blowing the crap out of each other' (Duo's words) at full strength. Loosing a bolt through a ward
weakened it temporarily, so it was best to wait for the opponent to strike first, or do something to surprise him or throw him off balance, make him lose his temper and attack first and unwisely. In that respect, Duo's trademark flippant one-liners had been devastating in the ranks of the overly-serious lords of Lin. Heero didn't think this creature would be affected, though.

Heero wondered briefly what the others outside were doing; Jay and G and a few of Duo's sorcerers were out there, they might think of something. But they would not be able to get close that easily. Heat waves washed over the pair of them from the cage of fire around them. Heat also rippled from the figure near them. Who was waiting with remarkable calm. Duo was grinning. Heero knew that his manic husband was hot-headed and impatient on occasion, but never when it came to matters of magic.

"If you think you can do anything with those pitiful blasts of yours, little mageling, you should do it now..."

"Oh, I've got all the time in the world. I'm not the one who's on fire, friend."

"You have very little time at all... The Noose of Flames is slowly burning up the air and increasing the heat in its embrace. Soon you will pass out and then I will drag you out of here. You will be badly burned, but alive."

The pair didn't look at each other, but the same thought was running through their minds. Oops.

"Hit him, Duo."

His husband's lips curled. It would go against his sorcerous instincts to attack an unknown quantity like this first. But if the creature was telling the truth - and from the heat and billowing smoke starting to choke them, he probably was - this was a good time to break with tradition and try something new.

Duo sent a small testing bolt shooting through the wards. It caught the creature in the chest and shoved it back a couple of feet, but didn't otherwise affect it. It didn't retaliate either.

"It wants you alive," Heero reminded him in a whisper.

"That is not quite exact."

Heero cursed himself, of course the fiend was using some magical means to hear, what with its ears being on fire, so a whisper couldn't be trusted.

"You said you were going to drag me out of here alive," Duo snapped, as he gathered more magic. Heero could see by the knot in his brow that he was thinking frantically.

"Yes. There is a portal that awaits us. All three of us. I need you both. However much I wish I could burn at least one of you to cinders instead."

There was a moment of stillness as Duo's eyebrows shot up, then he frowned dangerously.

"Neither of us are going anywhere, so why don't you go stick your ass in a bucket of water and leave us the hell alone."

"Foolish..."

"Whatever." Duo's hands flickered.
A maelstrom of force struck the fiend, punches of sheer power coming at if from different directions, trying to rip it apart. Heero stared at the amount of unleashed energy, noting the trickle of sweat running down Duo's face, the look of strain around his eyes. He was going full out.

The flames roared and screamed and so did the creature. But there was almost obscene pleasure with the shrieks of pain, as the flames curled around it, erupting under the blows, healing it as it burned and countering the worst bursts. Duo's lips curled back in an angry silent snarl and he angled his hands, trying to outmaneuver the flames. He was panting with exertion in the raw, burning air.

Heero made up his mind in an instant, drawing up the leather hood of his riding clock and tying it over his hair. "Keep it up, Duo!" He snapped, and leaped at the fiend, sword swinging. He heard Duo's loud protest behind him, and the buffets of power lapsed a bit, but Heero was already in striking range, ignoring the blazing heat and ripping winds tugging at him, singeing skin and clothes. The mage-blade swung, biting deep into the fiend's chest. It screamed in real agony, flames billowing from the wound, burning Heero's hand. Uncaring, he ripped the sword free, spinning to deliver the second blow that would sever the thing's head. The sword-

-bit nothing but hot air, and Heero staggered forward. He crouched to regain his balance, casting about for the fiend, he could still hear the crackle of its shroud of flames-

"You dare!"

Above him!

The fiend was hovering a dozen feet or so above his head, one hand clutching the ugly wound in its chest, the other lifting slowly to point directly at him.
Heero stood, mage-blade ready if useless, staring up into his death, and there was precious little he could-

Something hit him between the shoulder blades and he fell just as the fiend let loose a roaring spear of flame straight at him at point blank range.

The weight on him was of a warm, familiar body instead of an avalanche of burning death. The later recoiled off of Duo's wards as the sorcerer sheltered him with his body and cursed him thoroughly.

"-damn it you're always doing that, if this guy doesn't kill you I will, by the lords of the eleventh circle of hell, so help me if you ever-"

"I guessed it changed its mind about wanting me alive," Heero muttered, as the lance of flames slowly flickered out.

"You ass! Never believe anything a hellspawn fiend tells you! That's the first rule of summoning! The second one is, don't piss them off by poking holes in them!"

The flaming death subsided and they glanced up, Heero twisting around and squirming up onto his elbows.

The fiend was floating higher, and it seemed to be gloating.

"So little mageling, what are you going to do now?"

"That's Your Majesty to you, you bastard. I'm a lord of Lin and we eat things like you for breakfast!"

"You've never met a thing like me. You may be a Lord of Lin, boy, but I am a Lord of Hell!"

Heero saw Duo's face suddenly go blank as he watched the fiend ascend higher, stretching a leisurely hand out to blast them again. Then his cousin put a hand over his head and ducked back against Heero.

"You're also the Lord of idiots," Duo muttered.

Two, then three lances of dark power caught the fiend sideways, slewing it across the sky.

The thing screamed as fire erupted, it dodged one lance only to be caught by another. Then Duo reared up, coughing through the smoke, lifted his hands, and let loose with all he had.

The fiend, pinpointed by several sources of major power, let out one final shriek and disintegrated into a shower of flame and ash.

---

Outside the fiery barrier...

"So, G, what kind of monster is dumb enough to create a repulsive barrier like that, then floats up
above it so we can conveniently knock his ass out from under him?"

"I don't know, Jay... a hot-headed one?"

"...That was bad even for you."

"Well, I'm worried about Duo."

"You're not the only one."

The escort was frantic. The fire that had magically separated them from their charges had set the forest alight; horses were panicking, men swearing, trying to beat out flames and get near enough to help. Amon, Duo's second in command in matters of sorcery, was staring white-faced at the barrier. He'd helped the doctors nail the fiend, but this...

"If we blast that-"

"It will collapse inward, and kill them. Assuming they're still alive," Jay snapped.

"Duo is, I'd recognize his power signature anywhere, he let fly at the bastard." G rubbed his long nose and glared at the fire. "I hope he's got enough power left to rupture it from inside. He's too dodgy at teleporting to get them both out without a landmark. Any other ideas? Anything we can do?"

"I'm thinking," Jay growled, his face tense and worried, staring at Wufei who was scorching the air with swearwords from his native tongue as he tried to get near enough to the barrier to help, however futile the effort.

---

"Duo, are you okay?"

His cousin was coughing and gasping. The air was getting terribly thin and poisonous. We have to get out of here soon, Heero thought anxiously, as he glared at the barrier, which showed no signs of disintegrating along with its creator.

"Shit!" Duo gasped, following his line of thought. "I thought it would be gone! I'm tapped out."

Heero felt cold sweat trickle down his back. "Your wards?"

"Still have those, so we-" cough "-won't burn to-" gasp "-death, until we choke that is."

"Hn."

Heero felt the air singe his lungs, his voice rasped. "Is there anything you can do? Duo!" His cousin was getting a glazed look in his eyes. The exhaustion of burning up all that power combined with the lack of oxygen and the smoke were overcoming him quicker than Heero.

Heero glared around the clearing, then put an arm around Duo and helped him to the center, where some air was hopefully left. It didn't help much. Heero tensed his own powers, looking at the barrier. He grimaced and lifted a hand-
"Don't bother." Duo's voice was soft, barely heard over the flames. "You know how to seal dimensional breaches just fine, but your blasts are pitiful. You don't have the power. It will die down now that the caster is dead."

"It will? When?!"

"That's the question." Duo wheezed, a strange smile on his lips.

Heero hesitated. Duo was panting against him, coughing once in awhile. The smoke was bearable here, but the air was terribly thin, Heero felt his head spin, his hands tremble as they supported his cousin. He let them both sink to the ground, on their knees, evading some of the smoke. The heat was getting oppressive.

"Heero-

He could try it, in a minute or two, if he had nothing else to lose. If he exhausted himself, well, it would only kill him faster at that point.

"Heero, just wanted to let you know, I realized something... "

Damn it, why were the others outside not doing anything? The doctors could teleport - no, not blind, of course, and with the fire and smoke, they could misjudge... but surely they could-

"I don't love you like a friend... "

- blast their way in! His head was spinning so badly, they didn't have much time to-

"What?" Heero blinked down at Duo who was staring at him in a vague way.

"... not like a brother..."

"What are you-"

Duo grabbed him by the vest, put a hand behind his head, pulled him down and kissed him, lips gentle, slightly parted. He tasted of wood smoke and burning fire.

For someone with uncanny reflexes, Heero took a few long seconds to react, the lips a mere warm pressure against his. Unsure how to react. In that instant of hesitation and uncertainty, it was as if someone else, who was not the perfect warrior Jay had forged, was leaning in slowly, wrapping arms around Duo and- tilting his head to- parting lips gently and-

---

The explosion sent most of the remaining horses shooting away from the woods in panic, and some of the lighter guards staggered.

"That was Duo!" Wufei shouted over his shoulder as he bounded towards the clearing, which was becoming visible through hazes of smoke, the barrier around it blown away from the inside.

"How do you know?" Trowa asked reasonably, though he felt a surge of hope that his friends were still alive as he followed Wufei.
"Duo and explosions go together like your two blades."

"Oh."

The forest wildfire the barrier had started crackled and leaped around them.

"Sally, stay back!" Wufei barked.

Sally's answer to that suggestion was a tribute to her soldier's training. Behind her, Amon blushed.

"There!" Wufei leaped over a burning branch, and, gasping at the smoke searing his lungs, staggered into the clearing.

Wufei, Sally and Trowa ran towards the two prone figures near the center of the clearing who were, thankfully, beginning to stir.

"Duo! Yuy!" Wufei quickly knelt by his king. Two soot-stained faces looked up at him, they appeared unharmed but nearly unconscious from smoke inhalation.

But they had enough strength to gasp as one: "What happened?"

Wufei stared at them, then decided he didn't much care where the liberating blast had come from, in the circumstances, and he and Trowa dragged them away. Behind them, a broken down hovel was burning to ashes in the center of the clearing, closing a final chapter to its history without anyone noticing its demise.
The temple was a harmony of slender white pillars and light streaming through opaline glass, cut and leded into elegant figures. Rich red, green and blue tapestries and banners of former Peacecraft kings hung between the pillars, lending warmth to the aesthetics. The ceremony of the Second Circle was being held in the sacred heart of the white magic temple of Sanq, a very different venue from the dark and esoteric halls of Lin's inner council.

Zechs shifted to the other foot, as bored here as he had been in Lin on the previous occasion. This time anger and fear coiled at the back of the boredom as he noted the small signs of recently healed burns on Heero's face and hands, and Duo's pallor. They had to find the bastard who was attacking them and soon, or the next attempt might actually succeed.

He'd had quite a fright yesterday, when the escort came rushing into the capital of Sanq, two sick and wounded young men in tow barely staying astride their horses. Heero had been taken care of immediately, despite dire protests that he was fine. Indeed, Duo had been the worst off, his lungs damaged by smoke inhalation. Zechs had summoned the greatest mage-priest of Sanq to his bedside only to find the man had some trifling little holdup about healing the Sorcerer-King of the black mages of Lin.

The priest was the same who was leading the ceremony and reading the words of the circle, and his hands on the big book trembled as he caught Zechs glaring at him. The king of Sanq was trying hard to become the gentle peace-loving ruler he'd been so long ago. But he was still Zechs Marquise, who could command armies and destroy fiends with the same icy fury as during the war. The priest hadn't lasted very long in the face of that kind of pressure. The offer to put his principles to the test of a couple of red-hot irons was probably still fresh in his mind.

Zechs glanced back at his boys, wishing the ceremony were over already. They were holding hands, same as the ceremony of the First Circle. This time the pedestal bore two sticks, three hands-spans long, of ivory and gold, the traditional marriage gifts for the Circle of Protection, no one knew why. This bound the couple to mutually defend each other. As if they needed a stupid ceremony to do so, Zechs grumbled inwardly. No wonder Heero was scowling slightly.

He realized his heir was in fact scowling quite a lot, and glancing up occasionally to fix Duo with a quick glance. Duo was standing quite still, head bent, eyes closed, as if listening to the words of the priest. Hardly likely, thought Zechs sarcastically. He's probably snoozing. Then he saw a wince flicker across Duo's face, and a slight frown of concentration.

That's it, I'm calling a stop to this circus right now! Zechs thought, shifting forward. Duo was still much too weak to stand for an hour listening to this claptrap - a hand on his shoulder stopped him from striding forward. He glanced around sharply, to meet Jay's cold pieces of glass, reflecting the opalescent light. The master wizard shook his head ever so slightly. No.

Zechs hesitated, then turned back with a silent growl, glaring at the priest to encourage the man to finish the ceremony and get out of his presence as quickly as possible.

Once it was done, Zechs rushed up to Duo, putting an arm around his.

"You okay, son?"

Duo nodded. He didn't look so bad, up close, though he was visibly tired.
"I'm fine, Zechs, though I'm glad it's- erk!"

Heero had grabbed him by the hand and was dragging him off.

"Whoa, son, the feast isn't going anywhere." Zechs strode after them with his long legs.

"We're not going," Heero snapped. "Tell your dignitaries that we're too tired and sick." Zechs rather wished his heir hadn't said that while shoving vigorously through said dignitaries. He would really have to sit down with Heero some day and go through the whole prince thing with him.

"Very well, son. Duo is looking a little peaked. You take him back to his rooms, and maybe you can show up for a few-"

"We're going riding."

"What?! You just said-"

"We need the fresh air."

"Um-" Duo started but shrank away from a glare. He'd been quiet and subdued since the attack yesterday, which Zechs thought was normal, though maybe not that normal considering Duo's character in final.

Wufei shot before them like an arrow. "Yuy, if you think-"

"Chang, please gather up a small guard, and ask Amon to join us. Trowa?"

The tall Romany nodded, leaving Quatre behind with a wave and heading towards the courtyard.

"But-" Zechs was soon alone, bar a hundred or so puzzled guests, the clatter of hooves echoing through an empty courtyard.

---

Duo was panting a bit, still tired from the attack the day before. He had a feeling he knew what was going on; Heero was going to have some things to discuss. Duo was looking forward to that conversation as much as he was looking forward to the next fiend's attack, but he knew he wouldn't get out of it. Better to follow Heero quietly and have this in private outside, rather than in the palace.

He hadn't realized Heero would be taking him so far away, though. They'd been riding for almost an hour. They didn't need to get this far from Sanq's capital for Heero to lay into him.

Duo didn't know what his cousin was going to say. What could he say? He was probably angry, offended, maybe horrified. Duo's heart tightened.

He had only a fuzzy recollection of yesterday, well, the bit that was now about to get him into trouble. He remembered his head spinning, his lungs aching. A bitter taste in his mouth. He remembered grasping his cross as if it could be an additional barrier against the death that was reaching out for them. Thinking about truth, and silence, and regret. The rest, well... And then, just as he thought Heero was responding to the kiss, he'd found himself shoved away, violently, just as something exploded. He was still confused about that, he supposed Heero had managed a bigger blast then he'd given him credit for. Maybe the effects of anger. He'd been too woozy right then and
there, but this explanation occurred to him later. When he realized that Heero was avoiding him, almost aggressively.

Duo swallowed painfully, his throat still raw from the smoke. He was fairly confident their friendship could survive this kind of, well, complication. Heero should surely realize that Duo wasn't going to throw himself at him just for the fun of it. He'd only done it yesterday because he'd been half unconscious from lack of air, and because they were likely going to die and he'd wanted... something... he didn't even know what himself... oh hells. But when they'd gotten to Sanq, Heero had seemed withdrawn, scowling frequently, and avoiding him right until the instant they'd stepped into the Circle.

Heero spun his horse in an abrupt turn, looking around. Then he twisted back towards their two guardians. The other soldiers and Amon were a little further back, in a loose semi-circle to guard against approach and leave them some privacy. They would be present in a minute if Wufei or Trowa called for them or blew their signal horns.

"Duo and I are going to walk on alone," Heero said abruptly. "We'll leave the horses here. I'll signal if we need help. We won't be more than a few minutes away."

"You weren't more than a few minutes away yesterday and-"

"It's okay, Wuf, just stay here." Duo sighed, getting down from his horse stiffly and throwing the reins to Trowa.

"Duo!"

"We'll be back shortly." Duo hoped the conversation wouldn't be long, but he definitely didn't want witnesses.

He followed Heero as he walked forward with a quick step. They'd come to the edge of the King's forest, the tree line crumbling into bushes among dry rocks and ravines. Heero was climbing a granite outcropping that was rearing out of the edge of the woods. Duo frowned, puzzled, and followed.

They walked a good five minutes, and Duo was about to say something, not that he was in any hurry to start this, when Heero stopped and looked around. Duo did so too. They would be able to see trouble come along from a good distance from here. They were above the woods, in a circle of bare stone on the outcropping, no cover for hundreds of feet around them. Since this trip was fairly impromptu it was likely that the spy who was keeping the enemy appraised of their movements would not have been able to warn whatever sorcerer was summoning the monsters to attack them. Duo, like most sorcerers of his class, was fairly hard to scry for, so they should be okay.

"Were you casting a black magic spell earlier, while we were holding hands?"

Heero had turned around and was glaring at Duo, who blinked. That wasn't the question he'd expected. Though it was also embarrassing.

"Well, er, yeah?"

"During our wedding ceremony."

"Erm-"

"In Sanq, the capital of white magic."
"Well -"
"In front of its king, nobility and priests."

"Ah -"
"In the middle of its main temple dedicated to the arts of white magic."

Duo chuckled nervously and shrugged.

"Duo, do you even know the meaning of the words 'diplomatic incident'?"

"Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?" Duo stared.

"No, but we'll start with that before we get distracted," Heero said tartly.

Oh Hells, Duo thought, then shrugged. Might as well be honest, he always was anyway.

"I did it discreetly, no one noticed. Might as well use all that wasted time for something."

"What were you doing?"

Duo stared at the rocks around them. "Trying something. An experiment. It's something I thought of a little while back, based on the way our powers work and, well... I built a ward for you. If you concentrate, you should be able to feel it."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Heero blink and glance around, feeling inexpertly with his mind. The ward was actually a masterpiece of applied magical theory and talent that he'd spent days designing, quite unique since it was based on the bond and harmony of power between them, not that those details would mean anything to Heero.

"What -"

"Call it a wedding present." His fingers automatically brushed the cross beneath his tunic, as he often did these days. "Seemed a good occasion. What with the circle of protection and all."

"Why?"

"You're welcome," Duo muttered. "It's just... apparently the enemy want us both now, and they're not afraid to use a lot of magic, so you better be protected. It's woven from your own black magic powers, so you don't need to have me close by to have it working." Which is good seeing how you've been avoiding me.

"Oh..."

Silence settled between them. Here it comes, thought Duo, as he saw Heero start to scowl, glaring at the rock beneath his feet.

"Duo, I told you a bit about how I was raised with Jay."

Duo nodded slowly.

"I can't express myself very well. There's two things here, and I don't know how to say them. There's something I have to tell you, and I think we have a problem."

Duo straightened his back proudly, ready to take whatever his cousin would eventually spit out
without a flinch.

"And I don't know how to... " Heero's mouth twisted in frustration as he jerked at his own pendant. "Words just- I always have problems with words, emotions are hard enough to analyze without adding words to-"

"Just get it out, Yuy," Duo snapped.

Heero nodded sharply, crossed the few feet of hostile space between them, grabbed Duo by the shoulders and kissed him.
Safe Distance

Duo's mind failed to engage for a few seconds as if he were looking at an incomprehensible picture of them both etched upon a page. The awareness of the touch brought him back to the present. The lips a gentle touch on his, Heero's hair tickling his cheek, the hard grip on his shoulders... Heero's lips moved ever so slightly against his and Duo felt strong yet gentle currents pulling him under, pulling him into the depths of that sensation...

He blinked. His ears were ringing, and Heero was glancing around them, his hands still on Duo's shoulders.

Duo's lips moved once or twice before he managed to rasp: "Y-you kissed me."

Heero glanced at him with a 'well, yes' expression then turned to look at-

A few feet away, a small knee-high bush was burning merrily. Duo stared at it for ten whole seconds before he realized that his ears were ringing for another reason than, well, what had just happened.

"What... did something explode?!"

Heero's lips twitched. "Your powers of observation are impressive."

"What the Hells is going on?!"

"I was hoping you could tell me, you're the sorcerer. The blast wasn't as strong or as loud as yesterday's, though." His hands dropped from Duo's shoulders and he took a few steps towards the bush, glaring at it.

"This happened yesterday?"

"Yes, didn't you-... You must have been too much out of it. We were-" suddenly Heero flushed ever so slightly, which somehow reassured Duo that the entire world hadn't gone insane. "We were kissing and a wave of force just erupted around us. I thought we were under attack. I threw you to the ground, but nothing further happened. Except the force blew out the barrier and saved our lives. You looked as confused as I was so I didn't think you'd done anything. But it felt like our own power, both our powers working in harmony, like that time at the Gap. So I began to worry that... that something had happened so that our shared power was triggering on, ah, physical contact." Heero scrubbed the back of his head, trying to look unaffected. But the two red spots on his cheekbones were still there.

"I thought about it, and avoided you just in case it got worse. You were too sick to think about this much anyway."

Duo was slowly beginning to relax, and not just about the blast, as he understood Heero's attitude since the attack.

"I thought of canceling the ceremony, because we were going to hold hands, but that would have been a political mess. I was just careful... When I felt magical power stirring, it nearly gave me a heart attack. But nothing blew up. You were just building that ward... Thanks, by the way."

Duo made a vague 'sure' gesture, his head spinning.

"That's all I know. I wondered if it was, the... the kiss, and so I took you out here-"
"Where nothing can get blown up or catch fire!" Duo exclaimed, finally realizing the significance of their rocky barren destination.

"Yes. Hopefully we're far enough away for Wufei not to come running," Heero muttered. "I asked Trowa to distract him, sit on him if he has to, but he won't hold him back long if he really decides to get nasty."

"The explosion wasn't that loud."

"Which is strange. Yesterday we were both exhausted, choking, you had used up a lot of your magic... I thought today, with both of us rested, it would be a major cataclysm."

"Good thing you were wrong. So, that's why you kissed me, I see." Duo sighed, but his mind was running over the parameters of the magical equation that could solve this puzzle. "I guess this could be the result of."

"No."

"No what?"

"I didn't... I didn't just kiss you because of that."

Duo went very still.

Heero wasn't looking at him, he was scowling at the burning bush as if it had insulted him. Duo recognized the signs of an intense inner struggle.

"That was the thing I had to tell you. I can't-... I've been controlling and eliminating my feelings and emotions for so long now, I can't recognize them when I want to, when I do feel them, it's... frustrating. I don't know... and that means it's even more difficult to talk about, I don't have the words to describe any of this... but..." He looked thoughtful all of a sudden, then turned towards Duo and said, quietly and firmly. "But what I feel for you is not something I would feel for a friend or a brother, Duo."

The sorcerer King of Lin felt another explosion occur, this time inside his chest.

Heero scowled at him. "I'm not saying... I just know that much, I don't know what else-... anyway, it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter! How can you say-"

"I mean we can talk about this later. First we need to figure out why things blow up when we- when we get too close. That's rather more important. Or at least-" Heero added, more subdued, "it's something we should look into while we're here, in this area, without interference. The rest... we can discuss in private, but also in the safety of the palace. We're exposed here, if something makes another try at us.... No one knows we're here, but we can't be too careful."

"I guess you're right." Duo nodded. "So, why do things explode?"

"You tell me."

"Oh, right. Um... could you, er, could we- I wasn't paying attention to the effects..."

"It doesn't seem to happen if you are concentrating on something else. Both times, one of us was surprised at first, and nothing happened until we, well..."
"Got lost in it. Both of us," Duo said thoughtfully, weighing the meaning of the words.

"Hn." Heero had the look of someone who couldn't care less, but his cheeks were definitely red.

"Hmm." Duo nibbled his lip, which was still tingling a bit. In the back of his mind, his emotions were having a pillow-fight to figure out if joy, desire, surprise or embarrassment was the most appropriate reaction, but most of all he was concentrated on the puzzle. As a sorcerer, he could never resist a challenge, especially one that went boom.

"Do you think this could have anything to do with the Circle ceremonies?" Heero asked abruptly.

"No. Well, I don't think so." Duo suddenly felt doubtful. "I can't feel any stirrings of power in the circles, and Jay says they're mainly shamanistic and that only works if you believe in it, and neither of us does. What does Jay say?"

"...I didn't tell him."

"Oh? Why not?"

Heero ducked his head and scowled at the ground. "Think about it for a minute. Jay will tell G. And G is going to want to... experiment."

Duo had a blinding flash of precognition. That's interesting, see, Jay? Okay boys, what happens if you move your hands here and here and use your tongues?

"You are... so... right... ." Duo shuddered, cheeks flaming.

"I'd rather try to figure this out on our own."

"Well... " Duo's thoughts were flashing like fishes through unknown waters. "It's pretty obvious that our shared power is reacting again, like at the Gap, and I think a certain loss of control is the key, since holding hands in the Circle didn't cause it. You kissed me that time near the Gap, though... "

"I wasn't really lost in the moment, I was about to commit suicide," Heero muttered.

"And I was busy murdering my uncle, so I guess that probably doesn't count. If it's something the fiends somehow caused, it would have already dissipated. Spells don't linger when their caster dies. If it's caused by the Circles, though, it might increase... "

"Then I would expect it to be stronger today than yesterday but it was the other way around." 

"Heero, could, um... " Duo felt his cheeks flush, but he stepped up to his cousin and leaned towards him, hands resting lightly on strong shoulders.

It took longer this time because they were both concentrating on magic and not the moment, or at least Duo was until his heart suddenly did a double thump-thump and a thread of thought cut through his ability to analyze and reason - I'm kissing Heero, he's kissing me, he's got his arms around me and we're- he instinctively tilted his head, lips moving slightly, a burning feeling starting in his body that had nothing at all to do with magic-... 

Rocks scattered with a clattering sound as the wave of force blew them away across the stony surface.

"I... guess it's still happening," Duo said breathlessly.

"What?"
Duo felt a stab of joy - and something a little earthier - when he realized Heero's eyes were slightly unfocused. On impulse he hugged his husband, his head resting on the strong shoulders, his arms around the tough chest, feeling it rise and fall to the rhythm of Heero's rapid breathing. Heero hugged back, hesitant, then more firmly, his hands sliding down Duo's back a bit in a move that made the sorcerer shudder, as he breathed in the scent of leather, horses and metal that seemed to define his husband. He realized their bodies were pressed together, chest against chest, heartbeats threading together-

There was a grinding crack and a big rock split a few feet away, sending shards spitting out in all directions.

They sprang apart, wide-eyed, Heero instinctively looking around for danger, hand on hilt. The echoes died away like thunder, mocking the clear skies above them.

"Whoa, not just the kissing then," Duo muttered, and swore internally. He was going to have to figure this out, because this was sure going to put a crimp in their marriage, whatever direction they decided it was going to go. He felt an edge of frustration, and thought he caught a similar glint in Heero's eyes.

"We should be heading back," Heero said reluctantly. "Wufei is bound to come looking for us sooner or later, and he's already mad at me as it is. We answered the question at least."

Several questions, Duo thought, remembering Heero's words. Not like a friend or a brother. They'd been a deliberate echo of his own words, and now Duo realized that he himself wasn't all that sure what they meant. He loved Heero, and hell, kissing him was certainly overwhelming, but did that mean...? He'd never been attracted to another man before. Where was this going? Where did he want it to go? More questions...

A hand slipped into his, and Duo felt an immense relief to see that that caused no bad effects. It was something they'd done since they were children, he couldn't have done without that contact. They smiled at each other, somewhat shyly, but also with trust and relief, and headed back towards the horses where Wufei was, indeed, furious.

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Firelight danced on writhing flesh, and reflected, blue, gold and gray, off a sheet of crude ice.

"NN:nnnNN:n... "

*The inferno was the strongest of the ones we could use. How did they vanquish him? This doesn't look good. We have to do this soon.*

"Nnn- agreed... BuT wh0... "

*We have an opening. Our spy has told us they plan on making an interesting stop on the way back to Lin.*

"S-st0P?"

*...Maseng...*
"NnN!!"

The thing in the ice waited for the echoes of that wounded cry to fade.

"Aaah... ThE De-ead ThIngs... I seE... "

Yes. They'll be helpless, disarmed. Neither magic nor steel will avail them against the dead. We'll have them this time.

"Nn:nNn... "
"What's with those two?" Sally wondered.

Wufei glanced at her, tearing his eyes away from the ruins around them.

"Who?"

"Those two."

"What do you mean?" Wufei cast a professional eye over his king and the prince of Sanq.

"Oh please, don't you see it?" Sally gave him a condescending grin, which made Wufei bridle. Sally shook her head with a sigh. Wufei could be pretty obtuse sometimes. Well, most times. Actually, all the time...

She shared a glance with Amon, who had also noticed the odd interaction between his liege and his consort. And felt Wufei bristle slightly behind her. Well it was his fault for being so-... so-...

Up ahead, Heero gathered Duo's reins before tossing them to a page. There it was again. Something different than the easy camaraderie that had defined those two before. A slight smile - from Yuy, that spoke volumes. A shared look that lasted a bit too long. A silence - from Duo no less! - that curled into a small grin... But there was something else... Sally tried to hang the word 'shy' onto a highly proficient killer on one hand and the most powerful mage of Lin on the other and failed miserably, falling back on 'constrained'. There was a distance between them that had never been there before. Like they were making an effort to keep three feet of space constantly between them. It felt quite deliberate, and Sally wondered if they'd had a falling out, but all the other signs indicated quite the contrary... Duo was her king, but he'd been her friend first, and Sally wondered if she should be worried.

"Keep your eyes on the surroundings," Wufei said, and Sally rolled her eyes. She could tell by the slight frown that he'd instantly regretted his tone - he knew that she was a professional soldier first and foremost and had never lost sight of their surroundings - but didn't know how to tell her this. He didn't have to. Sally had endless reserves of understanding and patience, and was used to having both called upon by Wufei. Besides, she knew that he'd been sharp because she'd been sharing a moment with Amon. Charming, urbane, high-born, ambitious, handsome Amon. Yeah, right. Stupid black-eyed twit, as if that was likely to go anywhere... Amon wouldn't object, not at all, and he'd made that clear, but Sally had the wisdom to know herself. She preferred unadorned black iron to gilded gold, was the bottom line.

Unfortunately the iron wasn't only in Wufei's soul but also between his ears. Twit...

It had almost been easier when Wufei had been a hostage, paradoxically. They'd both known he had a good chance of being executed at the end of the Trials, and so their relations had been sober, clear-cut and professional, though the plain understanding was there that if things had been different... Well now things were different. But Wufei wasn't.

Sally had been raised a soldier in a family of soldiers, she'd lost her parents at the Gap of Sevring, thirteen years ago she'd grown to become a strong and respected commander of troops, and she could fight and endure and swear with the best of them.

For some reason the only thing that came to mind was: Twit...
"You okay?" Heero instinctively reached back to give Duo a hand, then frowned and took a step away instead. Hand-holding was okay, normally, but all it needed was one stumble, a moment of surprise leading to a cling, and bang. Literally.

"Yeah yeah," Duo grunted. They were climbing onto a pile of loose earth and shattered stone that used to be the Sacred Heart temple of Maseng. Duo, still exhausted by the ride and the after-effects of his damaged lungs, was panting more than normal. He really should have had more than two days to rest before heading back to Lin, but there just wasn't the time. They had to prepare for the next Circle ceremony two weeks from now. It was being held in the small town of Peaknought, which was on the border between Sanq and Lin and as near Kespar and Sansbury as could be, which would allow a ceremony attended by all the local royalty. The town of Peaknought had an old amphitheater that would do, but it was pretty ancient and since its heyday, the town had dwindled to a few thousand souls, counting the goats, so there would be a lot of work making it ready for the third wedding Circle.

This stop... it was a detour, but in some ways it was much more important to the peace between Sanq and Lin than the wedding.

To both sides of the conflict, the town of Maseng had become a symbol of the extremes of war. Treize had captured the town early on in his invasion of Sanq, twenty odd years ago, and its population had been subdued and integrated into the new borders of Lin. It had been a sleepy border town before the invasion, but afterwards quite a few people had moved from the mountainous country of Lin to live there, and, far from the front, a fragile truce had sprung up between the two sides, born of normal people just trying to live their lives.

Those were the ones who had died when the tide of war had turned and Treize had had to retreat back to Sevring. To give his army time to maneuver past the Gap, he'd laid a trap for Zechs in the town. As soon as the first unit had moved in, the place had become a heaving hell of poisonous gas and mage-flame, catching both Zechs' army but also the population, from both Lin and Sanq, in the miasma. No one knew if this had been deliberate or not, but it had been a bloodbath. In the end, they couldn't even bury the dead, and Sanq’s sorcerers had sent shockwaves and tremors over the town to knock over buildings and put the fallen to rest where they lay, in dirt, stone and ashes. Maseng had been burned from the map.

Duo and Heero looked at each other grimly and then turned towards the assembly below them. They were both visible on top of the temple's remains to the hundred or so people that had ridden with them here, a mixture of Sanq and Lin nobles and dignitaries, as well as their guards. People were looking at them soberly. They had a speech prepared by Zechs' ministers and the Lin council, but really, the only thing that mattered was their presence here side by side, a silent pledge. This will never happen again.

Heero sighed under his breath and took a step forward. He'd rather fight a fiend than make a speech, but this was what was required of him. If he went first, Duo would have some time to catch his breath.

The debris-ridden ground shifted beneath his feet. And shifted.

Heero shouted as something erupted out of the broken stone and packed dirt and grabbed his ankle. Behind him he heard Duo yelp and then the sorcerer stumbled against him, throwing them both to the ground. Fortunately the contact was only fleeting and caught them by surprise, so nothing blew
Heero's blade was in his hand in a flash of light, swinging down to his leg, but whatever it was that had grabbed him had disappeared - and it had been a grab, he could still feel the bruising fingers against his ankle. Duo, on his rump by his side, was staring at his feet in amazement. A shout echoed out from the people assembled a distance away.

"What-"

Several grinding crunches nearby. Heero looked around wildly. Something was worming its way up through the stone and debris, several somethings.

A dozen feet away from them, a flat piece of broken mural was shoved out of the way, and a hand, withered and yellow like old parchment, grasped the ground and heaved. Dust and dirt fell away, and the thing pulled and wrenched itself from the ground which groaned reluctantly as it relinquished it.

Heero heard screams from the group nearby and realized the same thing was happening all around them. He stared at the humanoid figure staggering to its feet before them. Dry empty orbs blindly quested for them, wrinkled, desiccated skin flaked over withered twisted limbs, barely covered by the torn and stained robes of a temple priest.

The dead of Maseng were rising.

Heero scrambled to his feet, weapon ready, keeping an eye on the four other figures that had ripped themselves from their graves.

"Heero?"

"What?"

"Is your magic working?"

Heero cast a wild glance at his husband, who had a hand pointing at one of the dead things staggering to its feet nearby. A hand empty of any kind of power. Heero extended his own hand, trembling slightly in anticipated pain, and let loose a bolt of magic at-

It felt as if the magic that normally wrenched through his veins as if it were pulling itself out of his very flesh was immobile, frozen.

"No!"

"Well that's interesting... I think we're screwed."

"Hn."

---

There were two hundred people in a shallow dip below the promontory, in a rough circle rapidly surrounded by the dead of Maseng.

If their attackers had been hoping to create a panic, they'd succeeded. But if they were hoping for a
bloodbath, then they'd not considered the make-up of the crowd. There were a dozen or so nobles of Lin in the group. And you can only be a noble of Lin if you are very good at offensive magic.

Three corpses were sent rocketing back into a tumbled-down pillar. G sneered. "This is easy enough, like a game of skittles."

"And how long can you keep bowling?" Jay asked tightly.

The dead things were picking themselves up, apparently unharmed, and moving forward again, staggering blind, withered arms groping out towards them.

Behind them something screamed, a terrible sound. One of the horses had tried to bolt, and several dead things had latched onto it as it fled. As the doctors watched, the creatures gripped it and, still holding the struggling animal, dug into the loose debris like moles, dragging it down with them. The horse disappeared in a trash of limbs, the ground closing over it like a sealed grave.

"...as long as I bloody well can," G muttered. A dozen feet away, a young page was saved from the same fate by a Sanq guard and a Lin sorcerer who blew and bowled his attackers away. The young man, pale as death, was already buried halfway to his waist and whimpered as several hands dug him out, headless of his broken leg. Resistance was organizing against the dead in a tattered ring. No one could tell how many people had already been pulled down into the ruined stones of Maseng by the vengeful dead.

G sent another burst of power at the three dead things nearest them. They went down again, but soon picked themselves up. He'd put enough power in it to rip a normal man limb from limb.

"They're tough. Impervious to magic, maybe," he muttered.

Jay grunted. "Have you tried fire?"

"Of course, my brain hasn't been turned to mush by old age yet, that's the first thing I tried. It flickered over them, then just went out like they were made of stone."

"They were murdered by mage-flame, magic and poison. Maybe they're impervious to that now."

"Or maybe the gods hate us."

"That's always a possibility. Do you see the boys?"

"They're up on the temple mound still." A sharp voice rang out behind them. "Do either of you have any saltpeter?"

The two doctors turned to stare at the intense young man behind them.

"Chang? Have you lost you mind? What-"

"Yes or no!"

"No, I don't carry my lab around with me."

"Saltpeter?" Sally had approached behind Wufei. He spun on her with a snarl.

"I told you to stay near Amon! He can keep them away with his magic blasts!"

"Twit!"
"What?!"

"I said I'd watch your back and you run off! Why do you need saltpeter for?" Sally yelled at him using the same tone for both sentences, which was confusing to say the least.

"You two are really very cute together," G ground out, sending another wave of force at a group of undead things creeping towards them. "But this is really not the time or place-"

"Shut up, you old goat!" Sally barked at him. "Now, I have saltpeter, I keep it in my medical bag. It's on my horse. Which is somewhere over there." She pointed at a smaller group of people in the luggage train, separated from the main circle of defenders by several dozen creatures. "It's going to be hard to get so- Wufei!"

"Stay here!" Wufei shouted over his shoulder as he ran towards the edge of the defensive circle.

"No!" Sally shouted grimly as she followed him. "I'm going with you, damn you for a -"

"I can't curse as well as the pretty lady, but I'll go with you too," Jay said smoothly, appearing next to Wufei and listening appreciatively as Sally scorched the air. He sent a wave of force sweeping ahead of them, blasting away a few of the undead in their path to the smaller circle of defenders around the panicking horses. "Saltpeter, hm?" He smiled coldly at Wufei's startled expression. "I think I know what you have in mind, boy. You think it will actually work?"

"I'll know when I try it."

"Even if you have to fight your way through a wall of dead to do it?"

"Yes!"

"I can see why you and Heero don't get along." Jay said enigmatically. "I can take care of some of these things, but we'll have to punch through the final lines around the baggage train the hard way or we might injure one of our guys."

Two swords sung out of scabbards. Wufei glared at Sally who glared back.

"Okay, lovebirds, let's go." Jay chuckled dryly.

---

Up on the mound, things weren't going smoothly.

"I can't cut them with my sword." Heero scowled. The blade twanged and bounced off of dead limbs like it was hitting dry ropy cordwood.

"My dagger is even more useless," Duo muttered, pressed against his back as he stared at the circle around them, slowly growing smaller. They shoved the creatures back with blade and hurled masonry, but the dead things picked themselves up and came back again, twenty or so strong, relentless. They were pressing more on one side of the circle than the other, and the pair had taken quite a few steps away from their previous position until they realized they were being herded towards a small dip in the ruins... where the flickering blue fire of a portal glowed.

The two young men dug in their heels, but it was clear they were moments away from being
overwhelmed.
Circle of Hell

Heero's sword swung and struck, sending another dead thing stumbling back, mouth open in a soundless scream of rage and a stink of humid cellars. He shoved and lashed out with a kick at something leathery that grasped at his waist. Then he spun and thwacked at a hand like a withered root that was reaching towards a struggling Duo.

Duo was cursing, but that was about all he could do, his small dagger didn't have the weight or heft to help him keep the dead at a distance, and there were no weapons anywhere in the ruins that could help.

Heero spun as his husband shouted. He swore and dived into the press of dead bodies trying to drag Duo away. He couldn't swing wide with his sword anymore without risking a hit on the sorcerer. Duo braced himself, but was dragged a few more feet away by dead hands.

A powerful buffet sent two of the creatures flailing, and Heero latched his arm around Duo’s waist. "Hang on!"

Duo grasped Heero's shoulders. Withered hands slowly wrapped around their limbs, their bodies and tried to pull them away with the slow relentless tug of roots wrenching through rock. But Heero had dropped his sword and anchored his now free arm around a stone pillar rearing up through the debris. His unnatural strength clasped both the pillar and Duo like steel bands. But this was only a temporary solution at best.

Hands gripped and tore, though careful not to wound them seriously. Obviously they were still wanted alive. Heero put all his strength and concentration into his grip on Duo’s waist and the pillar. Despite their closeness, nothing went bang, but then again this was hardly a romantic embrace he was likely to lose himself in; it felt like he was being slowly pulled apart. He gritted his teeth. At one point he would have to let go, or lose his arm. If he were seriously wounded he would lose his hold on Duo. There was no way his husband was going through that portal alone.

Duo groaned against him as his arm crushed his ribs.

"Heero- let go... maybe- if they drag me through my- magic will come back-"

Heero didn't have the breath to answer but his glare made the ends of Duo's bangs crinkle, so the sorcerer gritted his teeth and held fast. They wanted Heero too, anyway, they wouldn't be happy with him alone, so-

Slowly, unexpectedly, the relentless pull on them weakened, then stopped.

Heero gasped and collapsed against the pillar at the sudden slack. He glanced around, eyes wide.

The dead were standing still around them. As the pair watched, first one then another staggered away to their right. Others were streaming towards something they couldn't see. The corpses seemed to stop some distance off, as if listening. And slowly fell one by one, with a soft dry noise like driftwood, motionless and at peace again. As more and more of the dead approached, listened and returned to their interrupted rest, a small group of the living became visible, slowly advancing towards the pair.

The spouses gaped. G and Jay were in the lot, ready to fire away bolts, and Sally and Amon and a
few guards were there as well, but the one at the forefront of the group, and apparently responsible for the fall of their enemies, was Wufei.

Duo muttered, "What the..."

Wufei held a bowl before him with a frown of concentration. It was smoking and sputtering. He appeared to be reciting something to himself beneath his breath, his eyes almost closed as he advanced slowly.

"They're okay!" Sally beamed at them. A sleeve of her leather uniform had been ripped off and the arm beneath it was badly bruised. Wufei and Jay also had welts and torn clothing, they'd obviously been through an intense fight.

A dead body crumpled like paper and huddled near Heero who stared at it blindly as he tried to shake some feeling back into his numbed arms. Then he glanced at Wufei.

"What's he doing?"

"Something no self-respecting sorcerer would think of doing," Jay grunted as he stalked over to them, shooting an almost offended look at Wufei over his shoulder. The warrior glared back at him without breaking the string of words he was reciting in his native tongue.

"And that is...?"

"Oh it's some shamanistic claptrap." Jay snorted. "All alchemy and hoodoo and useless prayers to long-dead ancestors. Superstitious nonsense."

Heero glared pointedly at the corpses that were finally still around them. Jay had the decency to look embarrassed.

"I thought you said shamanism only worked if you believed in it," Heero ground out.

"What can I say, the dead must be gullible," his mentor retaliated. Heero snorted.

"My people have no dealings with magic of either kind, but we do have a certain understanding with our departed ancestors," Wufei said in his precise tone, finally interrupting his low chant as the last corpse huddled into a bone-dry heap. "And when the understanding breaks down, we do have other methods of... negotiation." He waved some of the smoke away from his face. Duo sniffed. He recognized saltpeter, wormwood and citronella, and the tang of burning parchment, but nothing he would qualify as offensive magic. He'd have to have a long conversation with his friend, maybe there was something to learn here. The living dead had been insensitive to magic and not very impressed by swordplay either; he'd like to learn the ritual that could make them curl up and go back to sleep so easily.

The sorcerer rubbed his bruises and groaned. Then his eyes narrowed. He flicked his fingers quickly.

"Still no juice."

"That means the caster is still alive?" Heero gathered.

"Yeah, and I know where. Something grabbed my ankle before everything went crazy."

"Same."

"The only other time I lost my magic was when the creepy critter touched me. When I kept them at a
distance, I was fine. So—" G yelped as his charge surged up and grabbed him by the arm, dragging
him off towards the mound where he and Heero had first stood, not glancing at the withered bodies
he was sidestepping. "Wufee, take care of Heero!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"I can take care of myself," Heero muttered, getting his feet under him awkwardly without using his
aching arms. He blinked at a hand that appeared before him. He glanced at Wufei in suspicion, but
the man was looking at him steadily.

"Looks like Duo owes you his life again, Yuy." Wufei still held his hand out, ignoring Heero's
scowl.

"Yeah... " Heero reached out and painfully grabbed the offered hand. "Wufei, my name is Heero."

"... Fine. Heero. Let's go see what Duo's up to." He jerked the prince of Sanq unceremoniously to
his feet. Heero grunted; it might have been thanks. Behind them, Sally rolled her eyes with an
expression that clearly stated, ‘Men!’

---

Duo had dragged G to the spot where the trouble had started. Jay had trailed after them curiously.

"Right, my magic is on the blink, so I need you to send a power bolt here. Loosen and get rid of
some of this dirt. Not too much and no fire though."

G looked at him strangely but complied. A soft whoomph echoed through the ruins of Maseng, and
the three backed away to avoid getting showered with grit and gravel.

"Again," Duo said tightly. He could smell something lurking behind the scent of dust and dirt. A hint
of rot.

G made another gesture, more debris scattered, a hole was beginning to form.

With something squirming at the bottom.

It wasn't the same as the dead of Maseng, which had been cured to the consistency of leather by the
mage-flame and poison vapors, and a long stint beneath dirt and stone. The thing writhing before
them, still partially covered in dirt, was a maggot-ridden infestation of rotting flesh and suppurating
fluids. It twisted beneath their repulsed gazes and a toothless mouth opened in a silent scream full of
worms.

Even Duo was speechless for once.

"Now what?" G finally said, a hand over his long nose. The smell wafting up from the thing was
putrid beyond belief. "Want to take it fishing and use it as bait?"

"No, I want to know how it annulled our powers by touching us," Duo ground out, eyes fixed on the
thing with distaste.

"I don't think it can talk."

"We'll find a way to communicate- damn!"
The thing had been squirming faster and faster, and they realized suddenly that it was sinking into the ground. G lifted his hands again, sending a blast down to clear the dirt that was covering it. And realized-

"By the ninth circle of Hell! It's melting!"

"What did you say?" Jay barked, staring at his colleague.

"It's melting! Look at it!" The abomination was actually decomposing, shreds of flesh and maggots falling to the earth and sinking into it. But Jay was staring at G with a strange light in his eyes.

"It's escaping, I think... " Duo muttered. He didn't think the thing was disintegrating like the first fiend they'd seen. This felt deliberate somehow. He growled and flexed his fingers. Nothing, no power. The creature was definitely not destroyed. Duo's power would come back eventually, when the one who had cast the spell got far enough away from him, but he wouldn't have the answer to his questions.

The three sorcerers glanced at each other, but nobody offered to jump into the pit and try to stop the creature from escaping. Despite the consequences, that was one they were rather happy to let go.

"Did you find any- what's that smell?!" Heero, still rubbing his arms, approached from behind.

"If you want to keep your breakfast, stay back. Otherwise there's not much we can do." Duo turned away from the nearly empty pit with an unpleasant roil to his stomach, partly due to frustration.
"Come on, let's go see the damage. Did we lose anybody?"

"There's still counting heads, I think," Jay said. "A few might have gotten pulled under before we could get ourselves organized."

"Pulled under?"

"Don't ask. Come on, let's go down, Zechs must be... what's all the shouting about?"

"I'm not under your command, Wufei! I'm in the Lin militia, not Duo's personal guard! You had no right to order me to stay hiding behind Amon! You are not my superior officer!"

"That's no excuse for putting yourself at risk, Lieutenant!"

"That's plenty of excuse! Let's get one thing straight, Chang! I'm not your dead wife! I can take care of myself or I will accept the consequences of that!"

"S-Sally!"

"I'm sorry but it's true. You have to let the past go, Wufei. Locking me away won't keep me safe, especially since I won't allow it."

"I-... just don't want to see you get hurt."

"I don't want to see you hurt either! Did you ever think of that? Listen to me and listen good, Chang! You will never order me about like that again!"

"But-"

"Especially when the order is 'stay back and let me take all the risks'! I don't know how it is in your country, Wufei, but in Lin, marriages are between equal partners, and nobody orders-"
“M-ma- what?!”

“What, you think I was going to wait around for ever?!”

"...I-..."

"Let's leave them be," Duo said, smiling like a cat who'd caught a flock of canaries. "I think they have some stuff to sort out."

---

"You okay?"

"For the dozenth time, Duo-"

"There's no such word."

"-I'm fine."

Duo hung back, sitting on a camp chair, watching Heero try to settle comfortably at the low command table in their tent, attempting to get his arms into a comfortable position while reviewing the damage report. Duo had... he wasn't sure he fully understood why but he had an unbelievably strong urge to hop over and rub those strong aching shoulders. His fingers were actually twitching. He kept repeating like a mantra, ‘the tent is combustible, the tent is combustible, the tent-’

Since the age of twelve, he was used to things bursting into flames or exploding around him whenever he lost his temper, but when Heero was added to the equation, the effect was catastrophic. His guards would ignore a little explosion from force of habit, but if the whole tent collapsed or caught fire... Duo groaned internally. He'd not had the time to think about their little problem-

"Relax boys, we have the solution!" G barked, throwing the tent's flap aside.

Glory be! Oh wait, G didn't know-

"That's good, what's the problem?" Heero ground out, nodding a greeting at Jay who followed his smaller comrade, Trowa and Quatre on his heels.

"What's the problem?" G stared at him over his long nose. "What, you actually enjoy being jumped on by fiends every time you travel?"


"Humph, charming. I can see you went to Jay's finishing school for the socially inept. My naturally brilliant mind-"

"He accidentally said something that made me think," Jay intervened.

"Excuse me, I only said it because subconsciously I'd figured out-"

"Explain." Heero's voice had an edge to it, his aching arms were putting him in a tetchy mood. Duo felt the urge again, but ignored it more easily now they had an audience. He glanced up and found Quatre looking at him oddly, though the blonde smiled at him gently when he returned the look.
"G took one look at wormfood back there and swore by the *ninth* circle of Hell." Jay ground out. "Now I can see Duo has already figured out what we were talking about." the King of Lin had shot out of the chair, gaping. "Unfortunately I neglected the arcane education of my boys, so maybe his majesty can explain it. Better than hearing this short annoyance here smarm on about it."

"Oh go back to the desert and dry up, you fossil."

"Duo?" Heero asked him -a lot more nicely he noticed happily.

"Well... you all know about the circles of Hell, right?"

"Yes, we're not that ignorant."

"What you may not know is that these are sort of worlds in their own right. They are very different from ours, and have their own logic. Er, very insane, twisted, evil logic, but nonetheless- the souls of the dead end up in the first circle, Limbo, where they stand around reflecting on their past crimes and mistakes until they've paid their dues and can reincarnate. Unless they've been very very very bad in their previous life, in which case they get to visit aspects of the other circles. Not the circles themselves though, because nothing human can survive there, it's too alien. But they fall asleep in Limbo and their dreams take them there and I hear that's bad enough."

"I always assumed that was something the priests said to make us behave," Heero muttered.

"Well there's debate about that, especially in Lin. We're not very respectful of religion. You see, the Lin sorcerers can conjure fiends from the circles into a magical ring, to enslave them or get them to tell them magical secrets. It makes 'em a bit blasé about the whole thing."

"And then they send them to attack us."

Duo waved his arms about. "No, you see, that's what's been puzzling us from the start. The fiends that have attacked us are very different from conjurations and- look it's simple. Humans cannot exist in the circles of hell and real fiends cannot exist in the human world. We're just all too different. They need to be contained, protected almost, if you want. Either within a conjuration circle, or within a conjured body. Otherwise poof."

"If only it had been that simple the last four times we were attacked," Heero muttered. "Okay, so no poof. Wait, the fiends that were attacking us before we closed the Gap didn't go poof." Heero frowned, remembering the chittering black menaces, half hard bodies half smoke, that had invaded the kingdoms, escaping from the weakened breach Septim was trying to open.

G intervened. "They weren't fiends, they were phantasms, dredges living on the edge of one of the circles of hell, not in it. That was why they were so... shapeless."

"So these are the same?" Heero asked, trying to reign in his impatience.

"No, that's just the point." G said. "We were operating under the illusion they were, that or they were some random Lin monster, because we couldn't imagine what else they could be. But these are actual denizens of the circles of Hell. All of the circles. They're appearing in our world with characteristics that are the physical translation of the logic of their worlds. Their shape here is... it's like a metaphor for what the dimension is really like. Their appearance is a sort of illusion, though they feel real enough to us creatures of clay. So far we've seen some from the third, fourth, ninth and tenth circle, as far as we can figure."

Duo's eyes narrowed. "The circles of Flesh is the third circle. That would be the one in my room? Then the fourth circle is Hunger -yeah I can see that. Decay, the ninth circle you mentioned -"
definitely - and Fire, the tenth. It certainly matches."

"Yes, that's what's so interesting."

"I'd call it mind-grippingly terrifying myself," Jay muttered. "It means there's a breach open and active."

Heero turned a blazing look at him. "I thought you said an open breach would lead to the invasion by fiends from - you lead me to believe it would be more impressive than this!"

"It's supposed to be! That's the other thing that's so interesting!" G shouted, waving his arms enthusiastically. "We can't figure it out! If a breach is open, then that creates a link between the Circles and our world that allows fiends to survive here on earth, and then all hell breaks loose, very, very literally. We should be hip-deep in worse fiends than those! But if a breach is not open, then these creatures cannot exist in our world. So it's a mystery. We're still working on that."

"Work faster," Heero suggested with a definite edge in his tone.

"What would really speed things up is a live specimen of one of these things to study. And that-" Jay smiled like razor blades, "is where you two come in."

Heero and Duo exchanged suddenly worried glances.
The night was kept out of the amphitheater by two blazing pyres on either side of the arena. Banners and flames shook and swayed in the stiff breeze the night had brought on its coattails as it chased away a long day of greeting nobles from all around the scattered kingdoms.

Heero and Duo were holding hands in a circle of white stones. The pedestal bore two gilded daggers. Which, for the ceremony of ties, was just a bit too strange, Heero reflected.

Duo shifted, catching Heero's attention. He looked bored, and his legs were probably sore. Heero could ride a horse or run all day, so he could stand around and look decorative for a few hours while simpering scheming nobility paraded before them to give their calculated congratulations.

The Lin noble of small lineage in charge of Peaknought had been pressed into performing the ceremony. There were probably more appropriate choices, but the elderly sorceress had looked bored with the whole proceedings before they'd even really started, and they had a tacit agreement that she would do the honors as quickly as possible and with the less fuss manageable. Heero was quite grateful. At least this part of the long day wouldn't be too difficult.

The feast was just about what they expected. Too many rich foods being toyed with by chattering royalty. The spouses stayed the minimum time required -still way too long but Zechs had had a talk with them after their last stunt- and eclipsed themselves discreetly.

They walked in silence back to their rooms, a few feet apart, as was becoming usual. Way too usual. Heero tried to think of something to say. They should probably talk about it. They'd been so busy the last two weeks, preparing for the ceremony as well as researching the whole aspect of a potentially open breach; Heero thought the priorities were definitely out of sync with reality, but found himself carried along by Duo's energy, his husband seemed to have no problem handling both issues at once. Or maybe that wasn't true. There was a slight slump to the black-clad shoulders. He was probably exhausted.

Heero felt it again, that surge of annoying emotion that just wouldn't get caught by his usual control. It was a strangely contradictory tangle of feeling, and not entirely pleasant, yet somehow it felt like it was the only thing that kept his heart beating sometimes.

"So, how long will you be in Sanq?"

Duo's voice sounded dull. A new spike of emotion twisted in Heero's chest, and he frowned, annoyed. Jay was right, it was ridiculous to be easy prey to such confusion...

"A few days, a week at most. I'll be in Kespar as soon as I can, we have-" Heero glanced around, "-something to take care of."

"Yeah, hope that works."

"Jay's schemes usually do."

"They usually involve someone getting killed, too. In fact that someone is usually you, if I recall."

"Only the once."
Duo snorted, then stiffened, hands rising slightly. Heero had already spotted and identified the two figures waiting for them near Duo's bedroom door and waved.

"You guys lasted longer than we thought you would." Quatre grinned at them as Trowa straightened away from the wall. "We've been waiting for you almost an hour."

"Er, why?" Duo glanced at him, but Heero was as puzzled as his husband. He hadn't expected to see the pair before he and Trowa left tomorrow morning for Sanq.

"Let us in and we'll show you!" Quatre turned expectantly towards the door, which Duo had locked with a spell out of old habit, developed in the School of Lin where paranoia was part of the curriculum.

Heero followed the three into the room. Trowa was wearing a new set of leather armor that Zechs had insisted on getting him, tired that his son's man-at-arms looked like something dragged in from a battlefield. Heero had been able to intervene in the design, so the armor was a simple brown, practical and tough.

Next to him, Quatre was a startling vision; it was the first time Heero had seen him dressed like the Saoun royalty that he was, in deference to the envoys his country had sent to the wedding. Heero knew that Quatre's relation to his family was strained, to say the least, mainly because he refused to return and resume the duties of a prince, preferring to hang about with a soldier and acting as if he were one of Jay's guards. Heero felt sympathetic, but if Quatre was uncomfortable in his finery and the role that went with it, he didn't show it. The green and blue silk robes floated as much as they could, trapped under the pinpoints of brocade, and the knotted golden rope, twined and looped about his fair head, could not compete with the soft locks it held and paled in comparison. Heero had caught several looks from Trowa during the long boring afternoon of greeting guests. He wasn't any better at reading emotions in others than identifying his own, but it had been pretty obvious what the tall man was feeling. Whatever they wanted to say to him and Duo had to be pretty important if they were willing to wait around for an hour outside his room rather than disappear off to their own.

"So, what's up?" Duo tossed his heavy black cloak over a chair and loosened the velvet tunic with a jerk at the thongs. The council still hadn't had any luck getting him into a robe.

"We have a wedding gift for you. We thought we'd give it to you now, since we're all leaving in different directions tomorrow morning early," Quatre said, twisting the gold cord dangling from his head with a small finger.

"You didn't have to-" Duo started, then frowned. "I thought you guys were coming with me and Heero tomorrow. Tro was going back to Sanq and you were coming to Lin."

"Change of plans." A thread of tension slipped through his tones as he glanced back at his lover. "I know you wanted us to be with each of you to relay messages in case of problems, but... Jay wants us to go with him to Kespar. Well, he wants Trowa, and I-... " Blue eyes dropped. Trowa was looking at the ground, and there was something slightly ominous in his usually unreadable expression.

"Jay is going to try to scry the future again? With you?" Heero asked his tall friend. Slowly, Trowa nodded and Quatre ducked his head. "Of course you should go with him, Quatre. Duo doesn't need his hand held," Heero said, brusquely, "and you're useless if Trowa isn't with me."

He saw Duo look at him with incomprehension and slight disapproval for his harsh tones. He'd explain to his husband later; explain the toll the scrying would take on Trowa, whose ability to see the future had dimmed more and more since adulthood, and why Quatre wanted to be with him, and
ease the strain as much as possible. But Quatre would always feel guilty about putting his own feelings before that of others. He just needed a shove. Heero caught a muted look of gratitude from Trowa.

Quatre looked up, eyes thankful, though he still seemed guilty. Then he shook himself, the golden cord ends swaying.

"Anyway, your present!" He walked up to Duo and extended his hands. Duo held his own out expectantly and was surprised when Quatre merely took them in his own instead of putting anything in them. On the other side of the room, Trowa walked over to Heero and held out his hand for a shake. Heero, puzzled, returned the gesture firmly. Trowa didn't relinquish his hand, though, merely put his other hand over his.

"Thank you, Duo, for helping me get Trowa back from those bandits," Quatre said softly, blue eyes deep and sincere. "I haven't known you long but I think of you as a friend, and I was glad to see that day that I was right, you came through like only the best friends would."

"Ah, well, thanks, short stuff, I, ah-" Duo glanced, embarrassed, at Heero. He and Trowa had merely exchanged a quiet look, the only thing they needed.

They stood there for a few more seconds, until Duo began to shift nervously, eyebrows arching, and tried to gently disengage his hand. After a few gentle tugs, Quatre let go. Trowa pressed Heero's hand and dropped it, and turned in silence to walk to the door.

"Er, thanks, Quatre. I mean, I think of you as a friend too. Er... thanks." Heero caught a puzzled glance in his direction but didn't know what to make of this either. He watched Quatre walk towards his lover in a rustle of silk. Quatre turned at the door, which Trowa held open, and grinned at them.

"I hope you enjoy your presents."

"Er, what was it exactly?" Duo asked.

"Maybe nothing. Maybe a lot. It depends on you. On you both, I should say."

"Explain," Heero said, eyes narrowing suddenly, as he remembered that Trowa was not the only gifted one in Jay's entourage.

"I did some research with Jay on the Circles ceremony, while we were trying to figure out what effects the ceremonies actually have. We're still not sure, but one thing I do know. The circle of Ties is one of the most important, next to the circle of Bonds. They sound similar, but where the circle of Bonds links your fates, the circle of Ties is merely a promise. A promise to communicate, to keep in touch with your own feelings and those of the other person." Quatre's eyes rested heavily on Heero.

"A promise to keep talking, and reaching out. It can be a lot harder than it sounds, especially for you two. Your duties will often keep you apart, in different countries, like it will this next week."

Quatre looked at them both solemnly, Trowa echoing the look over his head as he held the door.

"We gave you the seed of what Trowa and I share. The ability to communicate your feelings, even over a distance, even your thoughts if you can connect enough. You will only send what you want to," he added quickly as both spouses stiffened in alarm. "It's not an invasion of privacy or anything, it's a gift to use, or not, as you wish. If you can use it."

Once more the eyes were direct as they met first one then the other gaze. "We gave you the seed but it can't grow unless you develop it yourselves. It takes time, patience, understanding... love, from the mind, the heart, even the body." Duo went red and gaped slightly at the young man, whose solemn
expression trembled on the edge of impish. "I don't know how far it will develop. But I hope it will be strong enough already to allow you to feel that the other is all right while you're apart. Make up for our absence."

Trowa put a gentle arm around his shoulder and nodded at them. Quatre waved. "Have a safe trip. We'll see you both in Kespar in a week or so." The door closed quietly behind them.

Heero and Duo glanced covertly at each other, which, since they both did it at the same time, resulted in an embarrassed flinch away. Then they glanced at each other again, steadily this time.

"Talk about a two-edge gift. What am I going to have to do to thank the little pipsqueak, drag him over hot coals?" Duo said, obviously talking out of uncertainty. Heero's hand was caressing his charm under his heavy green tunic. He saw Duo's eyes catch his movement. Two-edged gift. He headed towards the door.

"I have to get up early tomorrow. I'll see you in Kespar in a week or less," he said over his shoulder.

"...Yeah, sure." Duo sounded distant, thoughtful, staring into a corner of the room without seeing it.

He started as Heero, breaking silently from his path to the door, lay a gentle hand on his and brushed his cheek with his lips, quickly.

"I wouldn't mind," he said gruffly, and left before Duo could ask him what he wouldn't mind exactly. He wasn't sure himself.

*Well we're fast running out of choices... *

"YeS."

I think we'll have to manage the tortured one ourselves. We only have his keeper to use now. He's waiting outside.

"Nn! Have hiM coMe In."

Something rattled and clinked as it slithered forward, glinting in the trembling light.

Now you know what you have to do?

"Yes."

Good. You will be in the Wastes of Kespar. They'll have very few guards there, but you'll be in the domain of the Master of Crossroads, so be careful. We will warn you when you have a good opportunity. Do not fail us.

"I k!-know the price of failure."

Yes... Can you try to come back alive, though? We're running out of minions.

"I will su-k!-ceed."

"ApProacH."
The slithering coils neared the writhing majestic thing at the far end of the grotto almost hesitantly, recognizing something that was greater and more terrible than it was... and something further, an echo of a distant memory that made it flinch.

The frenzied thing's writhing suddenly amplified and it screamed as one of its dark twisted extrusions ruptured with a crack and belch of fluids, sprinkling the other's coils. A few harsh whispered words and it was done.

"...NnNnn:nnnn..."

Go. Return with them. You must not fail...

A clink and a slither and the thing was gone towards the flickering blue light of a portal.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to skip this bit if you don't need to know that much about the fantasy/magical background of Two Halves. But if you are curious about some of the stuff I based my ideas on, read on!

The idea of Hell in this fic is more related to that of ancient religions (very early Greek and such) than the Christian concept. Everybody, good or bad, ends up in the underworld (Limbo here), and wanders around getting cold and bored, until they've reflected enough on their past mistakes and get to reincarnate (the better people they were the quicker it happens). Except if you were amazingly, and I mean REAL bad, in which case you get a special punishment to help you realize just how badly you screwed up. In Two Halves, this punishment still takes place in Limbo though, the sinners in this world do not reside in the circles of Hell. They just get postcards... nasty postcards.

The other circles of Hell are actually more similar to a concept of different dimensions, which is not something I can have one of the protagonist in a non-sci—fi fantasy explain so I'm doing it here. They are worlds completely alien to what we know as normal, with different physics and logic. The force known as magic is much more common there, for one.

While I'm on the subject, note that the use of the terms black and white magic do not denote good and evil. It's more along the lines of defensive and healing magic, versus destructive magic. The terms black and white were coined by the Sanq priests who wanted to be sure everyone understood that Lin sorcerers were the bad guys (the countries and their philosophies have been at odds for many generations). The Lords of Lin were probably amused. And they do like to wear black a lot. But in actuality, Lin magic is not evil, it's how you use it that can be, like any powerful weapon. As for summoning fiends from the circles of Hell, this is not in fact demonology, since they're not servants of evil, they're simply inhabitants of other worlds. Not NICE inhabitants, but then you know how rude tourists can be...

A big thanks to TKMaxwell777 (way back when) for pointing out the possible black/white connotations which I'd not fully appreciated. Hope this makes things a bit clearer!

And since I'm boring you anyway... the symbols from the fortune sticks that make up
Duo and Heero's pendants, and the gifts that go with each wedding circle, are taken from the Tarot symbology, which I do not believe in, but it seemed appropriate for divination sticks and forgotten shamanistic symbols. The full significance of the Bolt, the Heart, the Circle, the Oak, as well as cups, crowns, wands and swords can be found online, if you are curious.

As for Wufei's spell in the last chapter: Wormwood and citronella are part of some magical potion called Chinese Wash (seemed appropriate) to protect you and to rid your house of dead spirits, and saltpeter is a protective agent and a combustible. The paper Wufei was burning for his shamanistic spell is the kind they use in Asia, where they write prayers and spells on paper and burn them to get them over to the next world.
"Lemme see. Cheese, fruit, bread, water... Sure, Jay, don't spoil us."

"Keep the basket near the fire, Duo."

"Yeah I know, but I'm hungry. Man, how old is this cheese? Heero, relax, you're so tense you're about to start vibrating."

Heero scowled, but unfolded his legs out of the edgy coil they were caught in and sat fully on the blanket. Then he stretched out one leg, keeping the other bent, and leaned back against his hands, one of them a few inches from the mage-blade in its scabbard; he'd removed the weapon from his belt before setting out the blanket. His movement was one of tense unconscious grace, and it lifted the edge of his unlaced jerkin to let moonlight play on the pendant glittering on a hard chest... Duo realized he'd been holding a piece of bread and none-too-fresh cheese an inch from his mouth for the last five seconds and swallowed, putting it down hastily before Heero could notice.

But then again...

He'd had time to think in the past week. Oh sure, he'd been busy getting the next blasted Circles ceremony ready, and also studying the more important fiend problem with G. But in the small cell of Jay's compound which he'd been graciously allotted - Jay held little truck with nobility, he'd had at least two princes at his beck and call for too long - Duo had had plenty of time to think, especially when sleep had been illusive. He found himself trying to reach out with a tentative mind, feeling along unfamiliar ties that Quatre said linked him and Heero together. He thought he could tell when his husband was sleeping, and he felt he would know if he'd been attacked. It'd still been a relief to see him show up two nights ago, with Zechs and a few guards in tow, a few days after Duo arrived.

Tomorrow they would finish preparing the Circles, and... there might be some development on the fiend front. Things would get busy again. So now was definitely the time.

"Heero?"

"Hn."

"... Nice picnic."

Duo glanced around nervously, trying to gather his thoughts. It wasn't easy, he was feeling some of Heero's tension, out here and exposed as they were. Wufei had protested to all that would be willing to listen that the circumstances were not right for a moonlight picnic, just the two of them, without any kind of guard or protection. But Quatre had argued just as loudly that the Wastes were quite safe, being Jay's domain, and that the two newly-weds should really have an opportunity to be alone. A romantic picnic was just the ticket. He'd actually said that. Romantic. Duo thought he was going to die and it'd been an hour before he could bear to look his husband in the face. Talk about avoiding the issues...

Duo let his eyes roam as he flinched in recollected embarrassment. The dramatic, rocky scenery looked particularly surrealistic under the moonlight. The ocher rocks were painted with silver and umber shadows, mica glistened like small earth-bound stars. The fire they'd built brought life and color to the closest of the peaks and crags around them, a flickering ghost of existence.
"Heero... since it's just the two of us here... maybe we should talk about a few things."

Cobalt blue eyes, nearly black in the darkness, flicked at him quickly before returning to the rocks. "Like what?"

"Well... us."

Eyes on him again, narrowed slightly, weighing him, with a slight sign of surprise. "We have to take care of the problem first, otherwise-

"No. I mean, sure, we have to figure out why things blow up whenever we get too close and, er, involved, but that's just a side-effect and I want to know just what the hell is going to happen if ever we get rid of it." Duo swallowed, realizing his voice had gotten a bit loud at the end, echoing against hard jagged rock around them.

He immediately realized that the obvious repartee would be, 'well, what do you think will happen?' and he would have been hard put to answer that. But Heero didn't say it; he gathered himself up, arms clasping his knees, the fire sparking a few dashes of deep indigo in the darkness under his bangs as he watched it dance and flicker.

"Duo... before you say anything, or... I... have to... "

Duo rolled his eyes. "Heero, I'm not going to curl up and die or start screaming like a girl if you say something wrong, or odd. I'll just ask you to explain, and I'll give you all the time you need, so please stop acting like talking is a newly discovered art form?"

Heero scowled at him before turning the glare back at the fire. "That's easy for you to say."

"Fine, I'll take up that challenge!"

"What?"

"You were about to say something about how stunted your emotions are after all your training with Jay."

Heero failed to immediately contradict him.

"You were going to say that you don't know what you want, though you're sure that you don't want to hurt my feelings, this has nothing to do with me, and so on."

Heero had turned his face towards him and his eyes were wide in the moonlight. Duo snorted and reached into the basket for the flask of water.

"You were probably going to add something about being willing to try anything I felt like -you were going to suggest that if you know what's good for you - but that I have to understand that you may not be able to respond fully to my wishes and something lame to finish, before asking me what I had in mind exactly. How'm I doing so far?" He took a swig from the flask.

Heero stared at him in amazement from behind the rampart of his knees, then shrugged. "Pretty good except you forgot about your mistress."

The fire hissed under a small shower of water as Duo coughed and spluttered.

"My - cough - my what?!"

"Your mistress. I may never be able to respond- well, in fact you may not want to-"
"My what?!"

The fire flared and roared and Heero leaned back in alarm. Duo snarled under his breath and hauled in his temper before he caused any damage.

"Okay, this I got to hear. What do you mean my mistress?! I don't have a mistress!"

"Maybe you should."

"What?" Duo gaped.

"It's a fairly accepted practice in a political marriage. Especially between two men. We're not expected to... I don't expect you to be celibate, you shouldn't have to-

"I can't believe I'm hearing this! Are you saying you're going to have a girl on the side?"

Heero scowled. "No, but I do not require it."

"And I do?!!"

"If we're having this conversation now, Duo, it's because it appears you have normal desires for - we were talking about sex, right?"

Duo felt he was the one to combust this time, but it was only an impression, his clothes weren't smoking. "Er, yeah, maybe, eventually, I mean, that's sort of where kissing like that leads to..."

"I have very few desires for any kind of physical intimacy, anymore than I have desires for anything else. It's one more fall-out from Jay's war over my control, my emotions." Heero stared blankly at the fire. "I can't even tell you if I prefer men or women... The former I think, but I might be influenced by living with Trowa and Quatre for so long. But whatever my problems are, there's no reason to stop you from enjoying a physical relation."

"But what makes you think I'd want a mistress?!!"

"You've already had several."

Duo's jaw hit the ground hard. He gaped in silence for a few seconds.

"There's no reason to be embarrassed about it," Heero said gently and his eyes on Duo were straightforward. "I understand-"

"I had a tumble with the kitchen maid when I was fifteen, that hardly constitutes a harem!" Duo snapped, confusion and annoyance allowing honesty a clear path through the embarrassment.

Heero stared at him. "That's all?"

"Well excuse me if I was a bit too busy surviving the trials and plotting the downfall of Septim to chase any skirt that-"

"I thought... " And suddenly Heero ducked his head against his arms. Duo stared, wondering if his husband was mortified at his assumption. But then the blue eyes lifted, dancing in the light of the fire with the closest expression to amusement Duo'd ever seen in them.

Heero was visibly trying to control a smile. "All those enthusiastic, blue-blooded Lin ladies throwing themselves at you left and right, and... the kitchen maid?"
Duo couldn't stop himself from grinning, the unique look of merriment in Heero's eyes was making him tingle all over and brightening the night more than the moon ever could. "Hey, she was nicer and had more class then all those others put together."

"I believe you. Hearing them go on about it, though, it sounded like you were going to marry one or the other any day. I felt pretty sure there was some exaggeration, but I assumed you'd been with some of them at least."

"Oh please, those over-bred dolls? Very much not interested!"

"Oh... " Heero's eyes became serious, though the half-smile lingered on his mouth. Duo thought it looked good on him. "You... the concubine doesn't have to be female of course, you know that."

That brought Duo back down to earth with a crash. "What? What's with you! I don't want anything on the side, thank you very much."

"But Duo... we--... our marriage may never go beyond--"

"Love, respect and friendship, I know that. Doesn't mean I need to chase any men or women besides that. I do have some self-control, you know." Other than accidentally blowing things up. "I never chased anybody since I was fifteen anyway. Man, I spent so much time trying to stay alive in my youth, I, to be honest, I don't even know if I prefer men or women myself, I mean, the kitchen maid was nice, sure, and I've never really-"

"You... don't know." Heero was looking at him with sudden intensity, as if understanding something else behind those words.

"I'm just saying I've not had that much experience, really, no shame there, I was too busy with more important-"

"Has this anything to do with magic?"

Oh gods!

Duo shot to his feet and took a few steps away from the fire, mind screaming. "Wh-what?"

"Duo, come back here."

"What kind of- what-what could any of this have to do with magic?" Duo knew his voice was unnaturally high, but he couldn't bring it under control.

"Duo, come back to the fire," Heero said, the urgency of his tone cutting through Duo's rising horrified hysteria. Duo staggered back, eyes fixed on the flickering light. When Heero patted the ground invitingly besides him, the sorcerer's legs almost buckled beneath him and he sat down with a thump.

"I... how... how do you know about...?"

"Oh Duo." At the gentleness and kindness in the normally abrupt voice, Duo felt his gaze reluctantly meet his husband's. Heero wasn't smiling and his eyes were steady and understanding. "You forget that I spent six months serving you as captain Yuy, and Trowa and I lived in the servant's quarters all that time."

"What?" Duo stared in confusion, trying to understand what that had to do with-
"It's... don't take this wrong, it's something of a joke. What's the most boring job in Lin? Being the concubine of a powerful mage. Their masters will always be more interested in magic than they'll ever be in sex."

Duo's emotions crashed into shards of confusion. Embarrassment - a joke in the servant's quarters, oh that was just great! But mingled with relief; so he wasn't the only one.

Heero seemed to be following his thoughts. He was frowning slightly, but his eyes were still warm and kind. "You hadn't... you didn't realize this was a general problem? Why do you think most of the greatest sorcerers are single, even though Lin is so concerned about having powerful children in the next generation? The king has to be the exception, of course, I'm pretty sure your council will be throwing a few girls your way sooner or later, but they won't be surprised if you, uh, don't have many heirs."

Duo sank his head into his hands. "It's not... it's not the same thing! I mean, I liked the kitchen maid. We had a good time!" Yeah, twice. "It was... I was just too busy after that to..."

Then his fundamental honesty kicked in. "Look, it's not the same thing, but yeah, after you've used the kind of magical powers I have, most physical pleasures seem a bit tame. That's all. Hell, the only reason I'm not a runt like G and Septim is because Wufei spent our entire adolescence forcing me to eat properly and take some time out to exercise and such."

"I know. I don't have that particular problem since magic feels like its tearing itself out of my every fiber," Heero said grimly. "But I think I can see what it would be like."

Heero leaned back, arms still around his knees, eyes lost in the fire. "To tell you the truth, I... wouldn't have suggested a mistress if you hadn't said anything first. I assumed we'd have ample time to figure out our problem without it becoming much of an issue. I'm even surprised you raised the subject."

"I raised the subject because you are constantly on my mind, day and night, and because kissing you is like magic."

Heero froze, body caught on the frontier between fire and moonlight. He raised his head cautiously, expression bewildered, almost apprehensive. Duo stared back without flinching or hiding.

"I don't know where this might lead," Duo said, slowly and carefully. "I don't know if either of us want to go anywhere with this. You may not even feel... but I do. And I want to know what it's like to... to be with you, to hold you, to... I want to find out. I know you don't have any desires on the subject either way, but I'm hoping that when we can actually get together and at least kiss one another without causing major disasters, maybe, well, maybe you'll find you feel the same."

Heero dropped his eyes, visibly confused and torn, unable to promise, wishing he could.

"Duo... I just don't want you to get any... expectations. Your experience so far was with women. One woman. You may not like... Men do things a bit differently."

Duo noted with interest the faint crimson stain on his husband's cheeks that had nothing to do with the firelight. Heero's eyes were serious and his expression grim though.

"Been doing a lot of eavesdropping on Trowa and Quatre, have you?" Duo quipped, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

"No." Heero scowled. Then he ducked his head, and glared at the fire above his arms still clasping his knees. "I... I was thinking about these things after we... after that time in Sanq. I thought it would
be a good idea for at least one of us to have the appropriate information." Heero's tone was practical, though his cheeks were still red and he was scowling. "So I took it upon myself to gather that information in case... in case it was needed. So I... " The scowl turned downright sour. "I had a long conversation with Quatre," he muttered.

Duo, who'd been leaning forward to catch the low words with aching curiosity, nearly tumbled into the fire.

"You-you talked to Quatre? About sex?!"

"Hn." Heero's expression could have turned milk into cheese, but he seemed to need to elaborate. "I didn't think Trowa would be... quite so informative."

"Heero... " Duo's voice was faint as he stared at his husband. "You... you really do love me... "

Heero ducked his head again and buried the scowl into his arms. "Apparently I do," he grumbled.

"Man... " Duo's heart was doing somersaults. "Well, at least that way we can compare notes."

A cobalt eye twitched in his direction above the rampart of a leather pauldron. "Notes?"

"Yeah. It's good you got a, er, first-hand account, it's probably more exact than what I read in the books."

Two blue lances pinned him to the rock. "Books?" Heero whispered.

"Oh yeah." Duo shrugged. "We have books on every subject you can imagine, and quite a few you can't, in the Royal Library." He'd spent a very entertaining and informative afternoon there on his return from Peaknsnought, for pretty much the same reason as Heero; the desire for more information, just in case. "Some of it was a bit, well-" He'd stuck to the primers on the subject after taking a panicked look through the more advanced volumes - and why was Heero looking at him like that?

"There's a book on this subject?" Heero's words were a hiss.

"Er, yeah, several-"

"There's a book!?"

Duo swallowed and nodded convulsively.

"I spent four excruciating hours talking to Quatre about this and there's a book!?" Heero's voice struck echoes from the surrounding rocks.

Duo had never seen the ice-cold Heero this upset. The chuckle erupted from behind the hand that was trying to restrain it. Heero's eyes and anger suddenly focused on him which was about as comfortable as being put on the rack but he couldn't help himself, the vexed expression just fueled his laughter until he was shaking helplessly. Heero growled and that only added to it. Duo shook, powerless to stop, trying to wave a trembling hand in apology.

Then Heero's scowl crumbled into chagrin, then into a rueful smile which, seeing Duo roll backwards clutching his sides in despair, broke into a rare smile.

"Okay, laugh it up," Heero muttered, grabbing a flailing hand and hauling the sorcerer forward to sit again. Duo gasped and tried to stop, tears beading at the corner of his eyes.

Duo leaned against the hand in his, panting and still unable to speak, and gave it an apologetic tug.
Heero gave him a rueful tug in return which, due to his strength, tumbled Duo nearly against his side. They grinned at each other for a few seconds, faces inches apart.

He was thinking about this, Duo reflected, as their smiles began to fade, their eyes caught in a web of moonlight.

He cared enough about it to talk to Quatre, Duo thought as he traced every drop of lunar silver in his husband's irises.

Whatever he says, he's obviously not that indifferent to this... Duo found himself tilting his head as he focused on Heero's lips, rougher and firmer than any woman's...

He said he thought he rather preferred men... Their linked hands were pulling them closer though neither could tell who was responsible... Did Duo prefer men? He'd never felt attracted to one before, but he didn't particularly feel interested in women either...

They were close enough now that they could feel the caress of each other's rapid breaths on their lips...

In fact, he'd never felt like this for anybody...

"We shouldn't... " Heero breathed, mouth barely moving. His breath tickled Duo's lips and tongue.

"No... " Duo tried to lean back and no muscle responded. It certainly wasn't a conscious decision on his part to lean forward half an inch more.

"We'd put out the fire... if we... " Heero tilted his head a bit, eyes half-closed, lips still slightly parted.

Duo felt something almost like panic, but he didn't know if it was because Heero was, any second now, going to lean back, or because the kiss was now inevitable...

Their lips were almost touching, Duo's heartbeat was a pounding of surf in his ears and his entire body but-

- Heero's hand tightened on his, his breath stilled, cobalt eyes flew wide in alarm-

- but he still heard the sound nearby, alien, out of place...

A clink of metal on rock.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, yeah, I know, I'm cruel...
Chains

The pair were as still as the stones around them for a split second. Then Duo sensed more than saw something hurtling at him out of the dark, a slash of silver.

He's barely registered the object; he was shoved out of the way and a blur of moonlight ripped the air a few inches from his face. He blinked. Heero's mage blade had transfixed whatever it was right in front of Duo.

"Get the basket!" Heero snapped, standing in one fluid movement, wrenching his sword from out of the ground with a metallic clink as a broken object fell from the blade.

Duo didn't have time to think, something was hissing through the air. Heero's blade flashed again, and the object clinked and went flying against a rock to one side.

Duo shouted. Something had grabbed his arm. He stared down in horror and barely had time to flinch as Heero spun and sliced him free, before turning in the same fluid movement and parrying a flash of silver that had been headed towards his throat.

Chains! Duo stared in amazement at the broken thing wrapped around his arm, glinting dully in the moonlight. It was a fairly thin chain, only a finger in width with widely spaced links. It appeared to be splattered with some dark substance, dried and flaking in the light of the fire. Duo dropped it, grabbed the basket and upended it into the flames.

The bread and some fruit rolled into the embers, and a small packet at the bottom of the basket fell into the heart of the flames, its thin gauze covering immediately blackening and turning cherry red at the edges of the burn.

Duo felt something jerk him back and he swore in a very un-kingly manner as he tried to wrench the thin chain from around his chest. His knife, broader and longer than his usual one, since the Maseng incident, cleared his belt scabbard and caught in one of the rings. He tugged viciously and the chain broke after tightening on his chest.

Duo rolled to his feet and his hands shot out towards the shadowy figure that was slowly moving towards them through the rocks. He wasn't surprised when nothing happened.

"Power's out."

"It's touched me too," Heero grunted, not even bothering to try his magic. "Fire?"

"Done." Behind him, the gauze had disappeared in a flash of flame and its contents were starting to combust. The fire suddenly roared, flared and smoked, a belching burst of acrid white fumes.

Duo stared at the figure that had finally stepped into a pool of moonlight, silver dripping off the coils and slithering... chains. It was all chains!

No, there was a figure under there, he realized, as he dodged another, thicker chain that surged at him from the coiling mass as if hurled by a ballista. He could barely see it, except for the occasional glimpse of an eye or mouth behind the chains.

"K! K! I suppose you will not surrender k!gracefully."

Oh good, this one talked. And it was a lot more house-friendly than the ninth circle wormbait fiend.
Duo tensed as the thing rattled chains in what might have been laughter.

"This time there is no one here to get you out of our trap!"

"We can get ourselves out," Heero stated.

"No, no, you can't." The thing's coiling became more frenzied. "This time you will not escape. You will come with me and you will serve him and then you will be the first to die at the clutches of our masters."

The chains jangled and shook together. "A pity... you were so cute together..."

"Are you sure we need it alive?" Duo whispered in sudden fury.

"Yes."

"Damn."

"Now you will come..."

Chains shot out from the writhing pillar of metal, hurtling towards Heero.

"Watch my back." Heero sounded almost bored.

And then the mage-blade exploded into motion.

Duo, dagger at the ready, stood to protect Heero's blind side, but he couldn't help but stare in stunned amazement. The blade was like distilled moonlight lancing up and down, shattering chains, spinning, splitting others, each movement claiming several hits against the flying, crawling, clinking creature grasping at them.

The blade flew up - a thick chain was struck out of the way, hurtling back a few feet. Heero spun into the movement, slicing two more chains, turned and sent his boot crushing down on a thin flat-linked shackle snaking along the ground towards his legs. The sword shot straight up to bash away a strike aimed at his face, as he dodged and simultaneously caught another chain heading for Duo in an iron fist, snapping it with a sharp tug, steely arms tightening beneath the light leather armor.

The creature made an angry rattling noise and the chains started coming out faster and thicker, some coiling far above their heads or off to one side to catch them off guard. Duo shook himself from the trance the flickering blade had put him in and started batting and cutting away at the few chains that made it past the glittering wall of steel and muscle before him.

Heero didn't even flinch as one thick chain with curled barbs managed to half wrap itself around his chest, ripping his armor; he leaned back in one fluid movement, lifting his sword in both hands and sliced it straight down between the links. Then the blade windmilled around and two more chains hit the rocks, which were fast becoming covered in metal. The fiend seemed to have an endless supply, however. They weren't real chains, after all, though they were real in all ways that mattered to a human. They were being generated from one of the circles of Hell - the fifth, the analytical part of Duo informed him- and being phased into existence through the intermediary of the fiend. They wouldn't stop coming until the spouses were caught.

The creature bellowed and the chains dropped back a bit. And something else uncoiled from among the slithering links. It looked like a chain, but it was black like a hole in the world and its shape flickered in and out of reality. It poised like a snake waiting to strike and then hurled itself at Heero's chest.
Heero’s mage blade flickered up to intercept and his eyes widened as the object that wasn’t one went straight through the steel... and shattered like glass as it crashed into Heero’s ward, shards fading into oblivion.

"Hah! Take that!" Duo screamed, a manic grin on his face, proud that his gift to Heero had stood the test of fire. He caught a fierce smile of thanks from his husband that was much brighter in his night than the smoking, sputtering fire.

Then the world erupted into a metal hail of deadly intent.

The creature howled and clattered as it threw chain after chain at them. The mage-blade started to loose ground, and Duo found himself caught in several strands, nearly immobilizing him. He could only stare, helpless, as Heero and the chains danced to a final refrain.

Heero was bleeding now, several chains had slipped his guard and had ripped leather, cloth and skin, but he appeared oblivious, his sword still dancing, light and deadly in the dying firelight. Duo felt his heart catch in his throat. Heero dodged as he struck, each movement neat and graceful in its simplicity, a step out of harm putting him in place for the next strike even as he finished the previous one. He staved off two more coils with his fist and boots. He turned, carving, dodged, brought the sword up, over, spinning-

"Duck."

- slicing the air like silk an inch above Duo's hastily lowered head as he cleaved the chains around the sorcerer's shoulder and right arm in one graceful movement, then, still spinning, the sword flickered up through the night air to block and parry a chain as thick as a cudgel aimed at his head.

Duo managed to free himself from the other restraints, the creature was concentrating on Heero now. This couldn't go on! Where were they?!

Four flashes of blue light ripped the night air.

"Finally, what took you so long?!" Duo yelled.

"For someone who stinks so much at teleporting, that's almost funny. Almost," G huffed, hands weaving as quickly as Heero's blade. He was to the north of the creature, a few feet from Heero. To the south stood Jay, silent and menacing, hands ramming through the gestures of entrapment. Amon and one of Jay's disciples stood at the west and east, blocking the last cardinal points.

The creature screamed and darted chains forward, but they crashed into the walls of the prison of magic the sorcerers were weaving around it.

"Whoa, the bondage special, I see." G's voice sounded lazy, though a trickle of sweat ran down his thin face. "Fifth circle, the Circle of Chains, I take it... "

"You can save your time," Jay ground out from the other side, as he watched the creature writhe and spin and clatter. "The boys kept you busy long enough, we cast half the spell before we even 'ported. You can't break out now. This is my spell, my domain, and you are going nowhere."

"Duo, are you alright?"

Heero had turned towards him. Duo had staggered back a bit under the effect of the adrenaline surge which he was unable to burn off with his usual magical release. He hoped the creature's spell would fade now that it was trapped; if he didn't blow up something soon he was going to have a-
His heart rammed twice against his chest.

Heero was standing a few feet away, his back to the creature, his eyes only on Duo. His leather armor had been completely shredded from him and he was struggling out of the remains one-handed, still not letting go of his blade. Underneath, his shirt had been ripped and pulled to strips, falling from smooth shoulders by itself. Duo followed the few bloody welts that had marked his husband's skin but then lost sight of that and pretty much everything... gods, Heero was beautiful. His skin was brushed silver in the moonlight and the flickering blue light of portal fire danced across well-defined muscles and hard features. Duo could still see it; could see in the hard, lithe muscles of arms and shoulders the poetry of destruction that had been weaving its own spell of blade and moonlight a few feet away from him, protecting him from the metal grasp of the fiend.

Duo felt as if every cell in his body was harboring a tiny speck of the light that had flashed from the dancing blade, warming him and making him glow... He vaguely remembered someone mention the fact he might not like men, some time ago, in another lifetime... well, he didn't know if he liked men but he liked what he saw. A lot. He tore his eyes away reluctantly before he embarrassed himself further; he'd been staring for a minute and Heero had come forward to put a concerned hand on his shoulder. Duo started as if the touch had torched the air between them.

"I'm fine! Let's go see what we caught!"

Heero was looking at him strangely and he couldn't blame him, he was going as red as Quatre as he staggered forward, kicking away a loose chain caught around his boot. Heero followed him closely, too close for comfort right now. Duo had the nasty feeling that if he regained his powers any time soon, he wouldn't need any physical contact for an explosion to occur. His heart seemed to be beating wildly, and he couldn't stop from staring straight ahead, even though Heero was now behind him, his presence a burning brand in his mind.

Duo concentrated on their catch with something like desperation. Later. When things were quieter and he'd sorted out the other problem...

The creature was a huddled mass of metal in the center of the trap which was nearly complete.

"Can we get it to talk? Is this similar to a summoning circle?" Duo asked G.

"Well, it's a special custom piece, but it will do. It's not like we can tie it up anymore than it already is, right? Of course it will be stubborn to start with, but sooner or later it will have to obey the spell--"

"Fools."

"Yeah, they always say that. I wonder what it is about fiends that make them so pathetic at cussing?" G remarked wisely.

"I may have failed, but you are only delaying the inevitable. We will su-k!ceed. My masters will ta-k!ke revenge for my death on your bloodied bodies and tortured souls."

"Death?" G seemed puzzled. Duo frowned as well. Fiends had no concept of the word, except where it applied to mortals. Destroying a fiend's physical aspect only sent it back to its original circle. He assumed it was the same for these ones, though they were so different from anything they knew of...

"Damn!" G suddenly snarled, and Jay swore like a soldier.

The thing had started twisting and writhing, and the chains shot out again, but this time they stopped short of the spell wall. More and more sprang out...
And they began to pull.

A creak of strained metal and slowly tearing bone became louder than the cries of the sorcerers.

"Shit! It's trying to kill itself! Or disintegrate or whatever!" Duo shouted. "Do something!"

"I'm open to suggestions!" G stared wildly. "It doesn't seem to be obeying the summoning spells we wove into the prison! They should control any fiend that- What is this critter?!

"We won't find out if it's dead!" Duo yelled.

The creature screamed, a rattling agonizing cry. The chains pulling it apart had left it nearly visible, a splayed humanoid form, the links sprouting from its bones through torn skin, flashes of ivory glinting as the skeleton slowly bent in and out depending on the direction of the ripping forces.

"My... masters... k!... will-"

Duo could see its eyes, almost all iris and the color of metal shards.

"M-masters!" It seemed to be writhing in obscene obeisance, unafraid of its own destruction. Until...

Duo and G were facing the creature and so saw it clearly. For a few seconds, the chains hit the last resistance of the skeletal frame they were wrenching. They strained, the form seemed to bend and twist under a different force, as if something was squirming away from it. And the huge gray orbs suddenly blinked and became two pupils in wide eyes. The face slackened beneath the smaller chains pulling the flesh away from bone, and it looked... almost... human...

The man blinked several times, a look of pain way beyond what was happening to his body invading his eyes. A horrified dawning realization.

The chains buckled and ripped.

"Gods... I-I-... s-sorry-"

And just before the body became a splatter of blood and flesh and metal, the man threw back his head and changed everything with his scream of agony.

"Treeize!"
"...binding yourselves to finding solutions together, working together for the common goal, and never leaving the other with an unsolved problem."

Jay's voice was stolid as he read the sentences quickly and efficiently out of the book he held. Besides him, G was nodding off again. Heero couldn't blame him. The small sorcerer hadn't slept much in the last three days.

Heero glanced down at the traditional gifts on the pedestal beneath his and Duo's joined hands. The two crowns glinted in the harsh desert sunlight breaking through the thin windows near the ceiling. Heero was glad that they had chosen Kespar for one of the wedding Circles. It signified the importance the king of Lin and the prince of Sanq accorded the wizards of the order of Crossroads, a debt that they intended to never forget for the vigilant men and women who guarded the breaches to the circles of Hell with their lives.

Also, since Jay was de facto master of ceremony, there was a lot less crap to put up with. The procedure was short, sweet and sober, Heero found it soothing.

Heero and Duo were standing in a simple circle of white sand at the center of the whitewashed room, and there were only a dozen people present. The meal afterwards would be unostentatious and probably more enjoyable than the last few occasions. The spouses would be sitting with Quatre, a recently recovered Trowa, Wufei, Sally and Zechs, as well as the two wizards and only a few others. Heero found himself looking forward to it.

"...and so your are bound by this circle. Wake up, you senile old crow, your snoring is hardly part of the ceremony," Jay snapped, nudging G awake.

The small wizard opened a bleary eye and glared. "And yet I warrant it's more pleasant than hearing you rabbit on about this superstitious load of crap."

"I'm sorry you feel that way about this solemn ceremony," Jay hissed. "Particularly since it's your turn to read the next bit, you loudmouthed lunatic."

"Oh hell."

They shuffled their respective positions and G squinted at the words of the ancient ritual that Jay handed him.

"Damn this is written small," he muttered in what might have been a discreet whisper if the room wasn't so small. "Do I really have to-"

"Yes. Stop talking, start preaching," Jay hissed again.

"Don't blame me if I only make sense one word out of three."

"Don't worry, we're used to it."

"'By this covenant you both- say what?"

"Read!"

Duo and Heero studiously avoided each others eyes to avoid spoiling the 'solemn ceremony' even
further. Gold and jade glinted beneath joined hands, catching Heero's glance. Duo had stepped in
and intercepted the gaudy designs for the crowns that both countries had thought appropriate.
Instead, the crowns were two simple gold circlets. Heero's had a rectangular piece of upright jade
inset into the gold, and Duo's had two thin pieces of slanted ebony. Heero grudgingly decided he
might even be able to wear his.

G stumbled over the simple words and stifled a yawn. Duo grinned at him in sympathy. Heero
remembered the conversation with the exhausted sorcerer a few hours before the ceremony...

---

"Well, we've done our best," G grumbled, eyes small and red in a sallow, shrunken face, from which
his nose seem to rear out as if trying to escape. He was standing at the center of Jay's rarely used lab,
leaning bonelessly against a rough stone altar. On it lay a broken chain, the one that had first touched
Duo. It was dark gray with black streaks of dried liquid on it.

"Good, tell us and get to bed," Duo ordered, looking at his mentor worriedly. Heero thought Duo
looked just as exhausted, he'd been assisting the man almost continuously, but he had the energy of
youth to allow him to bounce back. Heero was still going to insist he take a few hours nap before the
Circle.


"Treize is alive," Heero ground out. "I got that much."

"Well, 'alive' is a very relative term." G picked up the broken chain spattered with a dark substance.
"If he were alive, this would be his dried blood on the links. As it is it's barely recognizable as
human. He's apparently been through considerable... changes."

"But it's still effective in a blood spell." Heero glowered at the coils of chain. "That's how he's
cutting off our power, by giving a blood spell talisman to his fiends. When we come into contact
with it, it-... Shouldn't it only affect-" He caught himself quickly.

Jay glanced around. "I'm sorry, could I ask you to leave, Quatre? And the honorable shaman?" he
added with a grin and a mock bow.

"Don't call me that!" Wufei snapped. "And I'm not leaving Duo! I was forced to agree to this 'picnic'
insanity-"

"And you played your role very well," Duo said soothingly. "You screamed so loudly about it I'm
sure they heard you all the way to Linheights. The spy certainly heard about our solitary midnight
picnic."

"So we went ahead and used you as bait, but we didn't even manage to capture a fiend, and we still
haven't figured out who the spy is yet," Wufei ground out. "That means you're still in danger."

"Well, as for the spy, we now know we need to check the wizards of Treize's acquaintance. Amon is
compiling a list of Kushrenada's old allies, we just need to decide the best way to tackle them. Do
you think you could check with Amon about that for me?" Duo smiled kindly as Wufei glared. "I'm
perfectly safe here, Wuffee, don't worry."
“Wufei.” Onyx eyes glared at him, then rested briefly on Heero as the warrior spun and left. Heero felt that he'd been put in charge of security. Someone else would have laughed at the intent, but he took it seriously.

"Right." Jay closed the door after the pair. Quatre was already gone, eager to get back to his lover's bedside. Trowa was still resting after the reading into the future, which had exhausted and strained him without showing much as a result. Under the influence of Jay’s magic, he had said something strange, about a child's shield and the joining in darkness. But mainly, the result was just that something big and nasty was likely to occur in the near future.

They'd all guessed that much.

"So, Heero, your question was going to be, why is Duo affected by contact with the blood spell when you are Treize's son?" Two hard pieces of glass measured Heero once the door was closed and the spouses and the two wizards were alone.

"Hn."

"We're not sure. But I find it hard to be surprised. Duo's dark magic is entirely inherited from Treize through you. Granted, a blood spell shouldn't follow that kind of logic by the books, but what you two share is outside of any book I've ever read, so we're making it up as we go along anyway."

"Great. So there's no way to counter the effect."

"Not without getting rid of the source of the blood." G grinned ghoulishly.

"And what have you learned about that?" Heero's eyes flicked between the two mages and Duo, impatient for information. The prince of Sanq had taken over the search for the spy and finishing the preparation for the circles to let his husband work with G; he didn't have much to contribute to the arcane side of things anyway.

"Well... " G sighed, and suddenly looked his age. He'd known Treize, and though he'd not approved of the man's militarism, he'd admitted to grudgingly admiring his courage, his perseverance and his power. "It's not good, I'm afraid. And we still don't know just how bad it is. But in a nutshell... Thirteen years ago, when Treize tried to rip open the breach, and the spell backfired... it didn't just kill a lot of people, it apparently pulled Treize and anyone near him into the various circles of Hell."

"I thought nothing human could live there."

"We're still not sure how they survived. If you can call it that. It's as if Treize and his fellow sorcerers became... integrated into the circles. But they remain partly human as well. Which allows them to survive in our world, and escape spells that can control fiends. And use human magic like teleportation and blood spells and such. It's a pretty powerful package. I'm really not liking what we're up against."

G stared blankly at the bare stone wall, rich with dust that had crept in from the wastes around Jay's compound for the many decades he'd been there. It speckled the light coming in from the small windows high up the wall. The scene was too bright, too clean and simple for the subject they were discussing. In the corners, the shadows seemed to crawl.

"The thing is," G continued in a low voice, as if he didn't want to hear his own words. "There's something here we don't understand. For Treize and his followers to escape into our world, and survive with their fiendish powers intact, there has to be a breach open. Somewhere. I know you sent guards to double-check the Gap of Sevring, Heero, and it seems a very likely candidate, but I'm
pretty sure it's not there." G's eyes were unfocused, and he was talking almost to himself. "I went there several times myself since we got rid of Septim's wards and sealed the breach, to check it and to honor Hess."

"Who?" Duo glanced up from the small stool he'd been occupying, to stop himself from pacing around like a cat looking for its kittens.

"Master Hess... He was the guardian of crossroads at the Gap of Sevring when Treize arrived there. Treize murdered him to get to the breach and tear it open. He was... a friend of ours, as well as a colleague." Jay nodded minutely. "Several members of our order have visited the place he died in the past few months, to pay their respects. None of them reported any signs of activity of the breach, and they would have noticed. It's definitely sealed. Treize and the breach are somewhere else. I don't know where though. I don't know why it's not allowing other fiends in, and how Treize is involved in all this. I'm afraid we came up a bit short." G showed his fatigue by the dull edge to his voice and the way his shoulders slumped.

"But we can guess why Treize wants us." Heero felt an ache in his shoulders, the tension of the last few days eating into him. His father, his father all along... As if living with the heritage alone wasn't bad enough. "Since the world hasn't gone to hell yet, we can assume something is wrong with the breach, it's not fully open or something. So Treize wants Duo and me for the same reason Septim did, to use our powers to rip it fully open. As the last fiend said, 'you will serve him and then you will be the first to die at the clutches of our masters'. Can... can Treize force our cooperation through the blood spell?"

"No." Jay's voice was categorical. "What a trip to hell has done to him is anyone's guess, but blood spells obey human laws. He can influence you subtly, he can block the power in your blood, he can bring you more bad luck than a sackful of black cats, but he cannot rule your fully aware will. He can try to break it though... I don't need to go into details about that, do I?"

"Hn."

Which translated loosely as: We need to find that spy, we need to learn where Treize is, and we need to kill him. Badly.

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"fs' ...walk along the path, side by side, until fate itself ends'. Okay, let's go eat." G closed the book with a clap. Heero and Duo smiled at each other as they let their hands drop, and turned towards the exit where people were already starting to stream towards the dining hall.


Heero nodded and turned towards Duo to apologize, only to see his spouse being dragged away by G.

"Did something else come up?" Something to make it even worse, if that was imaginable?

"No, I just thought this would be a good occasion to have a chat," Jay ground out the last word and Heero glanced at him in surprise. Jay had been known to go for a whole week without saying a single word; a 'chat' was very unlike him.
"The runt has a theory." Jay's graying mustache twitched in direction of G. Heero saw him and Duo talking earnestly off to one corner, well, G was talking with a smirk on his tired face and Duo was listening with a look of... utter embarrassment, Heero realized with surprise.

"What theory?"

"He's been studying the bond between the two of you, trying to figure out why the blood spell affects Duo. He came up with something else instead. He could be wrong, and I don't care either way," Jay said with his usual charm, before getting to the point.

"He thinks the wedding circles might have some effect on you and Duo after all. It's not supposed to, but he thinks it's combining with the particular bond between you two. G thinks it might have a rather strange effect on the way your magic behaves. When you are using it together that is."

"We don't use it together. We haven't since that time at the Gap."

"Which, considering the level of force you unleashed, is a wise decision. G was thinking more along the lines of accidental leakage, slips of control. Not... entirely conscious, due to... the heat of the moment." Jay looked like he was chewing glass.

Heero realized what the Lin wizard might have been referring to. "Ah." He glanced back at G and Duo. The king of Lin's cheeks were still flaming, but he was now listening attentively to the leering mage.

"If it's the wedding Circles that are causing the problem, why is it not getting worse?" Heero decided not to deny or dodge the statement. Maybe the masters could help.

"It's not? That's a relief. The Circles are only amplifying the problem."

"Yes, this bloody bond between myself and Duo," Heero ground out, thinking how many times his involuntary abuse of the link forced in their earliest childhood had cursed him and Duo.

"That's the motor of the problem, I grant you, but it's not actually the cause either." Jay was glaring at the graceful clepsydra against the far wall as if he could boil the water with a glance. "The root of the problem is in your two characters, part of which I am to- the cause of."

"Characters?"

"The link between you doesn't have to be any more destructive than the bond between Quatre and Trowa. The extreme polarity of your characters is what's causing problems- and I'm not asking what kind of problems or in what circumstances, I'm not that interested. You see, Duo can barely control his magic at the best of times, as we both know. While you... you're very good at suppressing and controlling your emotions and instincts, including your magical ones. I'm... very proud of the work you put into that, Heero, and it allowed you to drag the world back from the brink of Hell. But now I think it may be harming you."

"Going insane will harm me a lot more," Heero said tightly. Why were they talking about this, about something that couldn't be changed...?

"Agreed. But maybe that doesn't need to happen."

Jay stared at Duo through the thick glass of his specs, face unreadable. "Duo has a strong soul and a stronger heart. I think he can help you, if you let him. Perfection is a cold thing, Heero, an image etched in glass, frozen in time. It's not meant for anything human. I thought you would die at the Gap so I made no effort to think of how it would affect you in the long term. Neither did you."
"I can keep it up," Heero said sturdily, though he feared the implications, particularly in his relations to Duo.

"You might be able to. Whether you should is another question." Jay's voice had dropped to barely a whisper. "You're a living, evolving human being, and a young one at that. You are bound to run into situations that you cannot predict, that your control cannot anticipate. And when you let your control slip... that's when things happen. Your control fails completely, over your emotions, but also your magic, and this crashes into Duo's natural lack of restraint, and sparks fly. Or worse. You need to learn to follow your emotions, get familiar with them, and let them run without losing the reins on them. Then your control over your power will remain. That should take care of the problem."

"But the madness-"

"Is mainly linked to the use of magic, so as long as you avoid that... trust Duo's strength for the rest. Trust your own for that matter. It's considerable."

"But... the risk..."

"Is part of what living is all about. Don't make us both regret you didn't die at the Gap, boy. You deserve better. Now come on, let's go get something to eat and then I am going to collapse and sleep until tomorrow."

"Wait, what about the-... the accidental magic problem."

Jay glanced back at him, scowling. "No idea, not really my domain. G's not sure either. But... I'll say one thing. If it seems to be getting better, then maybe you're already adapting to these new emotions by yourself. Seems reasonable, you are a quick learner after all, and so is Duo. So the more you... ah, put yourselves in the circumstances where you can become familiar with the feelings, with the unexpected reactions, the better it will slowly get."

"Really?" Heero's mouth had gone dry and his heart rate had unexplainably increased.

"That's the theory. Ah, do me a favor and don't try it out around here? I don't want to have to rebuild my compound because you two decided to practice -whatever."

"... Right."

Jay stomped off, muttering about 'sentimental hogwash' and 'consider that a wedding gift because I'm damned if it becomes a habit' under his breath as he followed G and a flame-faced Duo who'd already headed off to the feast. Heero lagged behind.

Follow your emotions? Oh right, after years of suppressing them, that was going to be a breeze. Not. And what was that about... practice? Heero felt his own cheeks flush a bit. How the hell were they supposed to do that? He didn't know about Duo, but personally having things blow up around him didn't put him in the mood for flirting.

Later. They'd have time to think about... experimenting with these new feelings and sensations later, hopefully without destroying anything too important in the process. There were too many other things to worry about first.

And 'later' also went for him learn to follow his emotions. Because right now they were trying to tell him that in putting this off indefinitely, he was robbing Duo and himself of something so precious as to be unquantifiable, and his heart ached with feelings he couldn't explain or ignore.
The chaotic creature writhed and flailed, screams ripping from the various gaps and openings that served as mouths whenever they appeared in the constantly changing flesh. Anguish rang through the howls.

*It's definite. Chain is gone. I'm sorry.*

The voice of ice was as compassionate as it could be, which was very little indeed.

*It seems we've underestimated them again. Your son is quite resourceful. Him and... Zechs' child. I still can't get over that. Fate has an irony worthy of the deepest circle of hell.*

"NnnnNN:nnn..."

*We can't send the tortured one, I can barely restrain him here. Hunger won't stand a chance. Decay can't do anything without a supply of corpses... If only we could have found the last two... or if Fire had survived. What do we do now?*

"NnnNN!!Nnnn... we wait."

*Wait? What for?*

"For my son and the other To find Us."
Wufei’s sword made a sound like brushed velvet as it flickered out of the lacquered scabbard and towards Heero’s throat.

"Yuy!" Wufei barked, momentarily forgetting his agreement to use Heero’s given name. "Don’t sneak up on me like that! Do you want to get your head chopped off?"

"Hn." Heero shrugged an apology. He had been sneaking a little, trying out Wufei’s guard, and he was grateful to see the man was taking it more than seriously, even here, in the middle of the Linheight’s council compound.

"Is Duo in? He sent me a message."

"Yes, he's waiting for you down in the lab." Wufei nodded curtly at Trowa who had appeared behind Heero. "He said he wanted to see you alone, and that I was to kill anyone else who came near the place, though I don't think he was serious about that last part."

"He's been under a lot of stress," Heero said a bit defensively. They'd both been, the pressure of finding Treize, of stopping the breach opening, of everything. "I'm okay, Trowa, I'll-

"-find me waiting right here when you're ready to leave," Trowa said, in his usual calm tones, though his gaze was firm.

"I can walk back to my room by myself."

"I wasn't suggesting I carry you, but I will wait for you and watch your back."

Heero glowered, then shrugged, pushed open the door to Duo's tower and took the steps down to the lab.

Duo was a fairly unconventional king for Lin. He preferred the comfortable quarters in the palace, he scorned robes, and he didn't have much use for his tower. In fact Heero had been surprised to learn he had one, though every high ranking sorcerer did. It was a place attuned to their magic where they could keep their more secret books, sleep safely, conduct their research, and isolate themselves from Lin politics when they wanted to. And it always held their lab, safely tucked away in the basement.

Duo didn’t use the lab much. Most of his magic was explosive in nature and his studies were conducted on a firing range. Heero had seen the lab once. It had been inherited from Treize, the former king, and the lab was... Heero had seen more pleasant torture chambers. He was puzzled Duo had asked him to come to this of all places. Maybe he had something to show him, something that could lead them to Treize.

Heero stared as he entered the lab. "What have you done to the place?"

Duo glanced up from a scriptern where he was leafing through a thick text while consulting a smaller book. "Oh, jollied it up a bit, it was giving me the creeps."

All of Treize's grim equipment had been removed, the vaulted room was almost empty. The dark and ominous altar in the center had been replaced by a thick red rug and a very wide low couch with
decorated cushions and covers. The colors glowed under the light of candles. A fire warmed the air a few feet away in the firepit, formerly used to heat hot irons. A few books were piled up in the corners, instead of the instruments that had previously lurked there. The most ominous thing there now was a straw dummy hanging from a noose in one corner which Duo used for target practice with his spring-loaded dagger.

"Are you actually going to use this place?" Heero asked curiously, looking at his spouse who was poring over his books.

"Sure." Duo nodded without looking up. "Grab a seat - there's just the one so far, I'm afraid, not much in the way of furniture yet. Get yourself something to drink, I'll be there in a sec."

Heero walked towards the couch, glancing curiously at the paint marking the floor in obscure geometric shapes. He hated magic with as much passion as he could wrench from the iron jaws of his control, but he should probably learn a bit more about it. Duo could teach him.

A large tray with wine, fruit and cheeses rested on the carpet near the deep couch. Heero wondered how long Duo had been here, studying. Heero had been busy, but now that he thought of it, Quatre had said he'd not seen Duo in the last two days. The couch was very wide, deep enough to comfortably use as a bed, and the cheese looked like it had been picked at. Heero shook his head. If Duo had been here all this time, he'd make it his duty to drag him out into the sunlight sometime tomorrow for a proper meal and some exercise.

"Right." Duo slammed the big book shut firmly and turned with his usual energy. Heero put the glass of wine back on the tray and looked up expectantly as the sorcerer bounced over and flopped into the couch, the smaller book still in his hand.

"What did you want to see me for?" Heero scowled inwardly, that hadn't come out right. He shouldn't need a summons to want to see Duo. He'd been so busy these last few days, hunting for the spy, putting troops around possible breaches, investigating old acquaintances of Treize... He was tired, and that made him even more abrupt than usual. He turned towards Duo, trying to formulate some kind of apology.

Warm lips pressed the corner of his mouth, then parted gently-

"M-whoa!" Heero caught Duo by the shoulders and pried him away. Fortunately nothing had blown up, though he had felt his heart skip a beat or two, which normally lead to something noisy happening.

"What are you trying to do?" Heero barked, feeling Duo lean into his grasp.

"Just trying to see if the boom thing is still happening." Duo said in a reasonable voice, then grabbed Heero by the back of the neck and squirmed through his hold to press in for another kiss.

Heero's heart rammed against his chest when he felt Duo's lips part and a sensual tongue flick over his lower lip. Fingers were tangled in his hair making his skin tingle and Duo's chest pressed against his. Oh gods I hope nothing catches fire, was the last thing like reasonable thought that crossed his mind.

He was struggling in Duo's hold. He had been for the last minute. Considering how much stronger he was than the sorcerer, he'd visibly not put enough effort into. He'd been a bit distracted... He gasped as he finally managed to separate them without hurting his spouse.

The room was completely innocent of ringing echoes of explosions, or smoke, or any other sign of
"Huh, would you look at that." Duo glanced around. "Seems like that didn't have much of an effect." At least as far as the room was concerned... Duo's cheeks were quite red.

"I- I'm sorry, Duo." Heero's heart twisted in his chest. "We've been looking non-stop for the spy for two days, I'm exhausted." Duo was looking at him now with wide, violet eyes. "I wasn't concentrating. I mean, not concentrating. I mean, I-" It certainly felt like he'd lost himself in the kiss, but since nothing had blown up... Now Duo was going to think his husband didn't enjoy, truly enjoy whatever closeness-

"Ye gods, it's always your fault, isn't it?" Duo rolled his eyes. "So you're saying that little smooch wasn't enough to get your blood flowing?"

"Duo, I'm sor-

"We'll just have to take it up a notch. Tell me when we're getting somewhere."

"Wha-mf!"

Heero had instinctively scooted back a few inches on the smooth material of the couch, trying to put their usual distance between them. Duo used the space available to practically throw himself on the prince of Sanq, and three seconds of breathless squirming later he had a knee on either side of Heero's lap, arms fastened around his neck, and lips and tongue playing percussions across the helpless man's senses.

Heero realized, a faint lingering alarm flashing a fin from a very long distance away, that his arms were around Duo's waist and he was pressing Duo's body against his own, as he twisted his head and parted his lips to claim more of that touch, that primal contact. A moan echoed across his sanity, he couldn't tell which one of them had- all senses belonged to the man in his arms, the warmth of the hard body against his own, the smell and taste of his skin and the sound of blood crashing in his ears.

The room could be on fire and he wouldn't notice. Gods, don't let the roof cave in, he prayed as he felt himself sink beyond thought.

Duo was leaning against his chest, gasping for air in his ear. Heero felt every muscle turn to water as he slowly came back from whatever place he'd been wandering in.

The room persisted in its complete absence of explosions or burning material.

"What the hell is going on here? Why is nothing-"

"Oh," Duo purred against his neck, sending shudders along Heero's frame. "So you're willing to admit that that was kinda exhilarating. I'm glad I can still elicit a spark. So to speak."

Heero struggled -not too hard actually- to disentangle himself from the form half-curled up on his lap, and felt something sharp and awkward dig into his shoulder. It had been doing so for, well, how long had the kiss lasted anyway? Heero growled and twisted his hand around his back to grab the thing. Duo's book. Heero caught himself in the act of throwing it away as the title caught his attention.

"What?! 'Of The Summoning Of Fiends From-'?! You don't think we've got enough problems with these guys already, you want to conjure more?" He struggled to lower his voice as Duo leaned back - the sorcerer's body shifting against his in a new and very distracting position- to give him a long steady gaze.

"You know I don't practice that kind of magic."
"So why-" Heero waved the book around, unable to complete his sentence. His cheeks were burning, his body was aching for something he couldn't even define, his control seemed to be completely shot. He suddenly remembered Jay's words; it wasn't necessarily a bad thing, to slacken the control over his emotions, to follow his feelings. As long as he remembered not to strangle his husband.

"I only read the first chapter," Duo said. He sounded subdued, but Heero noticed a curl of feral smile on the corner of those lips. Tempting... lips...

"What, you only summon small ones?" he snapped, bringing his attention back to where it belonged.

"No, dummy. The first chapter is how to create a summoning circle, to protect the conjurer from a fiend's natural magic." A small kiss landed lightly on Heero's mouth.

"Why are we even talking about summon-" Another kiss interrupted him, a gentle brush of lips on lips with the slightest caress of tongue that made him forget what he was about to say.

"It's a spell to create a small enclave in the caster's lab where magic doesn't work." A third kiss like a feather falling from a dove's wing.

"A..."

"Ah, he understands."

"It... it doesn't work at all?" Heero cast an incredulous eye at the paint marking the floor and the ring of candles in their tall holders, all centering, he now realized, on the circle containing the couch.

"Not a squib. Which is why nothing is burning right now. Well, nearly." Duo lifted his braid from the back of his head and flicked the collar away from his flushed skin. Heero had a close-up view of the picture and felt his mouth go dry and his heart rate double.

"Wh-why? I mean, why now? And this isn't a solution, it's just a-... " Heero felt like a miserable bastard, thinking and finding problems at this point. But the violet eyes on his were steady.

"I know you will find the spy soon, Heero, and you'll choke Treize's location from him, and then it's going to be like that time at the Gap. It went okay last time, apart from the bit where we almost both died, but we're up against Treize now. And he can apparently block our magic. I'm not stupid. I know it doesn't look good.

"So yes. We should wait until we deal with the immediate threat. And then we should wait until the last wedding Circle, until we're properly married. And maybe at that point we'll actually get around to finding out if you're interested in... me. And if you are, then we could look for a permanent solution and sort it all out calmly. I know all that. But... " His eyes filled with pain as they dropped to look at his fingers playing with Heero's collar. "But then I thought what might happen... I... I thought it might be nice to know what we have t-together now, in case... in case we-... well, we can just smooch, that's already a novelty for us, I- hey!"

Duo gasped and blinked up at Heero who'd pitched him onto his back on the couch and was leaning a few inches from him.

"Someone recently told me to follow my feelings," Heero whispered, a finger brushing Duo's face, lingering over his lips. "I have no idea where they're leading me, but I know one thing. We're not going to do anything here tonight because of Treize or my problems with control or the fact that magic won't work here or because we could both be dead before we're fully married, or because of whatever else might happen tomorrow. Whatever happens right now is because I want to know just
as much as you do what we have together when nothing is attacking us or blowing up around us. No
distractions, no interference. Just you and me and what we share. Let's find out what that is. Is that...
what you want?"

Duo nodded slowly, eyes incandescent in Heero's shadow, hands sliding up his husband's chest to
curl around his neck in a sensual move that made him shiver.

"Good. Don't get in the habit of hearing me talk that much." Heero muttered, and let surprisingly
strong arms pull him down again.

---

Wufei's blade sang out again. He started as Trowa put a hand on his arm.

"It's Quatre," Trowa murmured reassuringly. Sure enough, his young companion strode through the
shadows, a package in his arms.

"Hi guys." The two guards stared at pink cheeks and sparkling eyes. "I just thought I'd come and tell
you... well, I was passing nearby a few minutes ago and I think you can both go to bed now, they're
not going anywhere tonight."

"What?" Wufei asked, completely confused. He glanced at Trowa and caught a small, happy smile
flicker on the stoic features.

"That's good," Trowa said calmly. "But I think Wufei will be staying here anyway, and I'll keep
watch too, just in case. We don't want any... interruptions."

"Yes, I figured you'd say that." Quatre hoisted the package, there was also a basket hanging from
one arm. "I brought blankets and cushions and some food and a flask of hot coffee from the kitchens.
Can I stay with you guys for awhile?"

"Sure. Thank, Winner," Wufei grunted as he reached for a cushion and blanket. He turned down the
offer of food and drink, hoping he wouldn't offend them, but mindful of his duties as guard. Neither
of the others seemed to mind. Quatre snuggled against Trowa's side as he took a sip of coffee.

A pleasant, companionable silence settled over the three. Then Wufei tensed and looked down at his
scabbard, tilting it left and right and catching the glow of torches on the lacquer.

"Hm, Barton?"

"Yes? Call me Trowa, Wufei, if you can manage it." The green eyes gleamed, he was in a very good
mood for someone who'd just been handed an unexpected night watch, Wufei noted. He cleared his
throat.

"We've known each other for well over a year now, B- Trowa, and I... I consider you something of
a, well, a respectable and knowledgeable fighter, with considerable talents, you are a very honorable-
"

"He means a friend," Quatre muttered into his mug. He ignored the glare that got him, hiding his grin
in a sip of coffee.
Anyway." Wufei gathered his thoughts. "It seems that in Lin they have a much simpler... marriage tradition than in my country or this stupid circles business. It's neat and sober and much preferable to-
besides, if my clan learns about this they'll find ways of-"

"Wufei, are you getting married?!" Quatre shouted, surging from the blanket and Trowa's arms.

"Apparently," Wufei muttered, glowering at the lacquer.

"Congratulations!"

"Fine. But anyway, Sally says I need someone to stand by me during the ceremony and I was hoping you'd do me the honor of being my, whatever they call it, sword-bearer or something."

"Sorry, no," Trowa said calmly. He smiled slightly at Wufei's surprise. "I'm glad you'd trust me with this," he added, his calm voice making the words ring truer than any long protestations. "And I'll do it, but only if Duo refuses, and that's not going to happen."

"Duo?" Wufei ducked his head again. "Duo is my king, he can't perform that kind of duty for a mere guard-"

"Good grief, man." Quatre stared at him. "Don't even think of finishing that sentence anywhere within a mile of Duo. If you don't ask him, you'll be at the wrong end of a mage-bolt and Sally will be a widow before she's even married."

Wufei grunted and stared out into the night. He looked cross and contrary, but besides him Quatre suddenly grinned and leaned against Trowa, looking completely content.

---

Most of the cushions had fallen from the couch. The blanket was tangled around two entwined forms.

"I... hope that wasn't too... boring compared to magic," Heero hazarded, whispering breathlessly into loose chestnut hair that seemed to have spread everywhere.

"Magic?" The sorcerer-king of Lin answered in a voice that suggested he'd be looking the word up in a dictionary as soon as he could be bothered.

Heero smiled, brushing a wandering bang from dazed violet eyes. He curled up under the smooth material of the blanket, drawing it over his lover's shoulder; held him close, and watched spellbound as eyelids fluttered and closed sleepily over beautiful eyes.

This following his feelings thing might not be quite as hard as he'd thought it would be...

Chapter End Notes

So traditionally tales like this wait for the end, for a final victory, or the complete wedding or other Final Moments in order to get the protags in bed, but I decided that
Duo was probably not the kind to sit on his hands and wait for convention to catch up.
"Egads, that's so sweet I could almost swear off sugar for the rest of my natural lifespan."

There had to be better ways to wake up than that sneer.

Duo cracked open an eyelid, then another. G wasn't usually the one to wake him up. What was he doing in Duo's room? No, he wasn't in his -

Duo stiffened as the entire picture slammed into his waking mind.

G - halfway between the door and the summoning circle- staring- Heero behind Duo- on his elbow, glaring at G - an arm wrapped around Duo's waist- which was completely bare apart from a thin silken blanket and a lot of hair-

"Get the hell out of here NOW!"

"Whoa, someone's not a morning person."

"Wufei!? Where-"

"Sorry, Duo." Wufei's voice came from the doorway. Duo stared at the man's hastily turned back - and flushed neck. "It's morning, and he has important information. Um, you should probably get up. You and, er."

"Did you find anything?" Heero asked, sitting up, the silken blanket sliding from a hard chest. Duo whimpered and grabbed the blanket as it slid from him too.

"Out! Now! Or I'll-"

"You'll what?" The long nose quivered with amusement. "Interesting use of a summoning circle, by the way, quite new in the history of sorcery if I'm not mistaken."

"I can be out of this circle in about three seconds," Duo snarled.

"And you should be, too. We found the spy." G nodded at the sudden serious silence in the lab. "We were finally able to divine his position magically, though it wasn't easy. He's not going anywhere, though, so take the time to get dressed. I know it's nearly the honeymoon, but that's no excuse. People are going to talk if you run around like-"

Heero was already standing, completely unembarrassed, but glaring daggers on Duo's behalf. "Out!" they shouted together.

"Man, it's almost as if they were married," G snickered to a pewter-red Wufei and a grinning Trowa - who had prudently hung back in the stairwell- as he left the two for a few moments of privacy.

---

"So, Heero, a quiz." G grinned as the prince of Sanq straightened his leather armor and glared at him. "Who's left in our line-up?"
"What?" Heero snapped. They were striding quickly across a courtyard to one of the lower buildings in the council compound.

"For some reason, we've seen one and one fiend only from every circle so far, so who's missing? Who'd you think we'll be running into-"

"It's one of those fiends?"

"Yes, apparently they can communicate together over distance, so it makes sense the spy was one of them. So which one-"

"I don't care!"

"Really, Duo." G cast a look back at his former pupil who was following them, trying to fasten his cloak on the run. "How can you stand a man with so little intellectual curiosity?"

"He has other assets," Duo growled, referring to Heero's mage-blade he was gripping as he glared at G... then the braided sorcerer went brick-red as he realized how his words could be interpreted.

"Please spare me the details-" G started.

"We've seen fiends from the third, fifth, ninth and tenth, oh and fourth circle," Duo said, quickly and loudly. Gods, even Trowa was chuckling. "So that leaves darkness, void -oh gods don't tell me-"

"No, apparently the enemy wasn't able to send those two. They could not find the fiend of the Void in his own Circle- rationally. As for Darkness, maybe his nature is too antithetical to a world where light can exist? I don’t know and either do the fiends, but I'll remember to burn a year's rent in candles to the deity of your choice after all this is done. Those were not two I wanted to meet."

"How do you know all this?"

"Oh, our spy has been talking. A bit. It goes off on tangents quite a lot but Jay is much more patient with it than I could think possible. So, care to guess?"

"Well if it was Ice or Chaos, you'd be running around in circles screaming and the palace would be down around our ears, so that leaves... pain and sorrow?"

"Right. Pain may be this 'tortured one' the spy keeps carrying on about. If it is, I'm in the strange position of feeling sorry for a hellspawn fiend... As for the spy, he's not formally introduced himself, but we know who he is and who he was. Meet the representative of the second circle, the circle of Sorrow."

The last was said with a fancy wave of his hand as G entered the well-appointed house in the lower complex. Duo and Heero followed and looked around.

The house was a typical Lin residence, all harsh stone and hard lines, softened by a few touches of beauty and delicacy like an alpine flower on a rocky crag. They were in the reception room, which most people in Lin used to live in as well as receive guests. It was full of books and paintings and old pain.

The old man was crumpled on a chair. Duo ignored Jay, Quatre and Amon gathered around the spy; he headed towards the white-haired, broken figure alone in a corner and stared down at him.

"Why?" Duo asked simply.
The old man didn't look up at his king, his gaze fixed on the last occupant of the room, the spy that Duo had only glanced at.

"Don't bother, your majesty." Jay's voice was subdued. Behind him, Quatre's face was pinched and miserable. Trowa walked over and slipped a comforting arm around his shoulders.

Duo looked down at Chamberlain. That was his function and, traditionally, his name. The one who organized Duo's day to day life, the man the king trusted with his food, his sleeping arrangements, his travel plans... The man had been Chamberlain to the previous king before Treize, twenty five years ago. He was a dedicated, efficient and loyal servant, and Treize had offered him the same place at his side, an honorable office for a non-sorcerer in Lin. But the man had refused, despite the consequences to himself and his position in Lin society; he'd not approved of Treize and, feeling that he couldn't give him the complete loyalty his office required, had turned him down.

So when Duo had acceded to Treize's throne and happily fired the slimy worm that was Chamberlain under Treize and Septim, he'd been overjoyed when the old man had accepted to return to the office as Duo's Chamberlain. Duo had taken it as a sign he was doing something right. He'd been honored the man would give him his hard-won loyalty.

"Why...?" Duo found Heero's hand in his, and realized that there was a feeling of comfort coming from his husband. He wondered if the link thing Quatre had given them was activating after last night. If it was, he'd probably been swamping Heero with his sense of hurt and betrayal. They'd been so busy investigating old allies of Treize and Septim, people who had cause to hate Duo. They never would have thought to look at someone standing so close to him. Why...?

The old man didn't glance at him. His health had gone dramatically downhill in the past few months, Duo remembered. He was very old after all. The king had tried to lighten his burden and leave him behind in his travels. But Chamberlain had always insisted on coming with them... The old man's rheumy eyes were fixed on the last figure in the room as if Duo didn't exist.

Duo and Heero followed the gaze. What appeared to be a young man sat on the edge of a decorative rock garden at the center of the room. He was pale and slender, dressed in a robe that seemed to shimmer between ivory and gray without ever being completely definable. His face was turned towards the rockery. His eyes were dark and immense in the wan face, and filled with muted, exhausted anguish.

"This is Sorrow, is it?" Duo said briskly, trying to regain his equilibrium.

Jay turned towards him slowly. "Yes. But before that, it was Chamberlain's son."

Duo and Heero stared in silence at Sorrow, then glanced in dawning understanding and pity at Chamberlain, who could have been alone in the room with the quiet figure for all the awareness he showed.

"Son? I didn't know... I didn't think Chambers had kids." Duo said softly.

"He used to, obviously. But-"

"But his son died at the Gap of Sevring with Treize. Or so it was thought," Heero concluded quietly. Jay nodded. "He was the first generation in Chamberlain's family to show magical aptitude. Since he was his only child, it was his hope in the future. His son followed Treize against Chamberlain's wishes..."

"Can he tell us where Treize is?" Heero asked brusquely, though he squeezed Duo's hand gently as
his husband stared, pained, at Chamberlain.

"He doesn't even know who Treize is," Jay started, but was interrupted.

"Alone. Masters, why are we alone..." The voice was quiet, soft, and rang with the emptiness of someone who had never been able to cry, crushed as he was by sorrows too big for tears.

"Yeah, he does that a lot," Jay said, to the chilled couple. Behind them, Chamberlain sunk a little further in his chair.

"The Tortured one howls, but no one listens. It would only make it worse," Sorrow whispered. He must have been young when he died at Sevring, Duo thought, aching. He looked to be eighteen, if that.

"Tortured one? That is the one from the circle of Pain?" Heero asked.

"Yes, apparently he's quite berserk. Can't blame him." Jay sniffed. "Sorrow'll answer any question about the circles and the other fiends-"

"Couldn't find Darkness. Where is she? We wanted her with us, but she never came." The pale young man seemed to flicker before their eyes, like a streak of white had run through the already pale face, blond hair and light robe, then was gone. His eyes were really too big to be human... Duo almost felt like screaming at the lack of tears in those eyes. Was that part of the tortures of Hell, perpetually tormented by sorrow and unable to cry?

"Okay, let me give you the short of it, because I've been at it for the last four hours and if I have to hear him whine on about this much longer, I am going to hang myself," Jay snarled, rubbing tired eyes. "He doesn't know who he is, as such. He doesn't remember Chamberlain. But someone did, because they sent him to the old guy, who, as far as I can tell, immediately lost whatever marbles he had and bent around his finger like toffee. He continued to act like a devoted retainer and fed the spy any information he required about you and your movements." Jay's voice was harsh, but they could tell the brusqueness masked a slight tinge of pity.

"Apparently none of these people remember who they are. They all think they're fiends from Hell, like the others. The fact that they shouldn't be able to survive on our world doesn't seem to faze them."

"Well, fiends have little use for logic at the best of times." G said, scratching his pointy chin. "They tend to use it as a target when they practice their mag ebolts."

"Whatever. He doesn't know who Treize is, but they are apparently led by something they call Chaos, and I'm willing to bet-"

"Chaos, from the thirteenth circle of Hell." Duo's eyes hardened.

"Yes, the toughest of the bunch, so probably the former King of Lin himself. He's apparently keeping a breach open, somewhere."

"Where?" Heero snapped.

"That, unfortunately, our spy doesn't know." Jay said glumly. "No, don't bother," he added as Heero took a step towards Sorrow, cracking his knuckles. "Trust me, there is little we could do to him that would register. He thinks he's a fiend after all, incapable of pain and emotions, and even dying. Besides, he has no willpower. He's just a limp rag. Probably why they sent him as a spy and not an assassin. He told me all he knows without any difficulties, except for the tiresome one of not being
able to stay on the same subject for more than a minute at a time. He was ported here and he doesn't know from where, so-"

"We need to know where Treize is!" Heero snapped.

"Let me tell you what we know. Treize, as I said, is sitting on a breach, and holding it open on the commands of the masters of Hells, according to the spy. All of the masters. They're all in on this, and each sent one representative -apart from Void and Darkness, who are contrary sons of bitches even by fiend standards. The representative is, each time, one of the sorcerers who was caught in the Gap, since they wouldn't survive otherwise. The gap Treize is holding open is not big enough for normal fiends to use as a link to live in this world. It took considerable effort on the masters' behalf to thrust each of their representatives through it, apparently.

"So Sorrow and the others have been trying to get you to come and help Treize rip the thing open. Although I'm surprised Treize doesn't have enough power to do this by himself. It must be a very weak breach-"

"Which is why we can't find the thing," G chimed in.

"Now, what is Treize doing here in the first place? That's interesting. The spy said something about a bridge. He doesn't know that Chaos is Treize, so he can't give us any more information on that subject. But I have a theory that Treize had some sort of link with the world, a connection that allowed him to worm his way into a breach - maybe quite some time ago - and stick there. Apparently he can't move away from the thing either, so when I say he's stuck, I mean it. He's holding the breach open and will probably defend it with his life."

"Why are we wasting our time with all this theory? We already know we need to find this Chaos and kill him and seal the breach," Heero ground out.

"Can't... " Sorrow suddenly spoke and his eyes grew even wider, devouring his face. "Can't... never-ending, always changing, always suffering, never ceasing... lord Chaos... everlasting." He shuddered and curled up a bit on himself.

"Hm, Heero, before you get too enthusiastic, there's something you should know about the fiends of the thirteenth circle of Hell." G said dryly.

"If it's not their weak spot, I'm not interested."

"That's just it, they don't have any. They're unkillable."

Everyone in the room - except for Jay and a glum Duo, who already knew this - stared at the small sorcerer.

"Unkillable? What do you mean?" Heero asked sharply.

"Immortal. Ultra-tough. Ever mutable. Stick a sword in its heart and it'll grow three new ones before you can even say 'gotcha'. Get the picture?"

"But-but then how are we going to-

"Well that," said Jay slowly, staring at Sorrow, "is the big question all right."
They found him...

"N:Nnn?"

They found Sorrow.

"NaGGhnNA!"

I'm sorry... I know... I'm sorry. Well, does that mean we can expect the children then?

"N... I tHink s0 yes... "

Pain and decay will try to capture them. No, actually, Decay will try to capture them. Pain will try to skin them alive, slowly. Where is he anyway?

"Hns>nnn, hUnger is waTchiNg him."

You mean, following him around at a safe distance... Can't blame her. Okay, so what do we do when your son and his - whatever, shows up on our doorstep?

"...h0pE paIn doesN't teaR them t2 shRedssss... "

...please tell me we have a better plan than that...

"TruSt tHe blO0d... "

Trust... Trust your blood, Treize? I'm sorry, I find that worse than no plan at all.

"If yU hAve anY otHer sug-nnn-suggestIon... "

There was a moment of icy silence.

"ThAt's whaT I thOugh... "

---

"So tell us about this link," Heero said, leaning against the altar in G's lab, a coiled spring of dangerous tension. Unlike Duo, who was wearing a hole in G's floor with his nervous pacing. Trowa and Quatre were running ahead of the king each time he changed direction, moving anything flammable out of the way. The exhaustion of the past few days was making the Duo's control even dodgier than usual. One small fire had already been quickly put out by a prosaic Wufei, who was quite used to this by now.

"The link is what allowed Treize, or Chaos, to stick himself into this world, or partly. Unfortunately, we don't know what it is," G shrugged. "If we did:-"

"We'd know where the bastard is!" Duo spun towards him, braid flying. "Since he can't move away from the breach, and that will be wherever this bridge was created."

"What can it be?" Heero asked impatiently.
"We don't know... if someone was crazy enough to summon Treize, it would be a summoning circle somewhere." G scratched his nose. "But summoning a chaos fiend is just about the hardest thing a mage can do. Only a few sorcerers in the world can do it. I can, for one," he added proudly.

"Who else?" Heero asked, with the air of someone who was about to take down names and then ask some serious and very painful questions.

"Amon is hunting them down and checking them out - hard - but I don't think anybody is crazy enough to do it. I did this summoning once in my youth and it almost killed me. The only one I knew who made a practice of it was Treize. He was very good at summoning, which is probably why he tried that stunt at the Gap in the first place... He always got along well with fiends, and look! The irony!"

"Take this seriously!" Duo snapped. Behind him, a glass vial on the altar exploded with a sharp crack. Heero absently moved away from the transparent blue liquid that started running towards him to drip on the floor.

"I am, I am... " G frowned. "I don't think it's a summoning circle, because then Treize would be severed from his power and very obviously he's got it. Both the fiendish powers, his former human power - if he can hold a breach open, and teleport people around - and the power of his blood, to hex you two. So I doubt that's the answer."

"Say that again?" Jay was suddenly staring at G, a few inches from the long nose.

"What, 'So I doubt that's the answer'? Listen, Jay, you really should look into getting a hearing aid. I understand they make good ones in Sanq. Only the size of your hand, look like a trumpet, you stick it in-

"Not that." Heero could hear Jay's knuckles creak all the way across the room. "Just before."

"He's got his fiendish powers, his human powers and the power of his blood," G said slowly. He frowned. "... fiendish powers, human powers, power of blood... okay I give up, I'm too smart even for myself. What did I say that was so interesting?"

"I know what the link could be."

"Well don't keep us in suspense or young Maxwell here is gonna blow up my entire lab! Spit it out!"

Duo glowered. He had some restraint after all, he was only blowing up small stuff. Anyway he was king of Lin, he was allowed to make bits of it explode when he was feeling very worried and cross...

"Think. The fiendish power we can forget about, that belongs to the other side, but what could link him to this side? His mage's signature? An echo of him?"

"Power and - oh shit."

"His power and his blood," Jay said softly.

"Hn," Heero said suddenly. His eyes betrayed nothing, but Duo spun and ran towards him and, disregarding the risk and anybody else in the room, gave him a quick hug then grabbed his hand with knuckles whitening.

"Okay, that's an interesting lead. Possibly." G stared thoughtfully at the two. "But where would it be?"
"The place where his heir first manifested the power he inherited from Treize, would be my guess," Jay grunted.

Duo frowned. "But that was at the lodge, when we were twelve. We were there last month -and we totaled it, by the way. There wasn't a breach-

"It wasn't the lodge," Heero said quietly. "That's where you manifested your magic for the first time, Duo. But remember... you have his power; I have his blood."

"And that," Jay said quietly, turning towards a startled Quatre, Trowa and Wufei "-does not leave this room, understood? I hate political headaches."

"But-... " Duo stared at his husband. "But then where-

"We already checked the Gap of Sevring," G muttered. "That's where Yuy here first let loose. But the Gap is clear, Treize is not."

"That's not where I used my powers the first time," Heero said softly.

"Uh?" Both Jay and G stared at him. "Then where-"

"Where Trowa told you," Heero said unexpectedly. "During his reading of the future. The child's shield, the joining in darkness."

"Oh shit." Duo’s eyes flew open wide.

"The first time I used my powers was when Duo and I were children. When I created the bond between us, blurred our identity. In the convent where her Ladyship raised us."

"If you can call it that," Duo snarled, hand jerking his cross.

"And that's where my father is," Heero said quietly, eyes turned inwards.
"Are you sure?" Zechs sounded puzzled, as his eyes swept the ruined outer walls of the long-abandoned convent.

Jay started to answer, but G was more practical. With a minimal twitch of his finger, he sent a mage bolt twisting towards the ruins. It impacted with a solid 'whoomph', taking a wall and part of a building with it.

In the ruins, something stirred.

The fallen bricks and masonry were catapulted aside and several creatures rose from the dusty remains; skeletal corpses, rags of flesh and winding cloth still clinging to withered muscle and apparent bone.

"I was rather afraid of that when you told us that both sides buried many of their soldiers in the convent grounds during the war," G commented, trying to sound flippant and not being very successful at it.

"Yes, the fiend from the circle of Decay is still alive and well, although neither term really applies to him." Jay nibbled the tip of his mustache. The creatures had lined up in the hole formed by G's blast. A quick glance over the ruins showed other signs of movement. The fiends knew they'd been discovered. The forces of the dead, animated by Decay to make a rampart against the living, were no longer trying to hide.

Zechs turned towards his lieutenants and gave a few curt orders. They'd made plans for what they might be facing. The forces circling the abandoned convent were small in number but hand-picked and well-trained, and commanded by grizzled officers from Zechs's first campaign to regain Sanq from the forces of Lin; they knew how to face down demonic hordes and keep men together in the face of the supernatural. The difference this time was that Lin sorcerers were interspersed in their ranks, readying bolts of force and spell wards, facing the common enemy.

"They shouldn't attack," G said, watching the ruins with gleaming eyes. "They're here to defend the location of the breach."

"But if that changes, we can rely on our honorable shaman," Jay snorted.

If the dead charged, the men were to fall back in good order, defended by the blasts of the sorcerers, to group around the command center where Zechs was currently giving his final orders. In the middle of the organized chaos of incipient battle, Wufei stood before a tripod on which rested a huge metal basin filled with various ingredients. He was concentrating, eyes closed and face tight as he tried to gather himself for the unaccustomed task ahead. Sally stood close behind him, with a torch ready to toss into the basin to light the saltpeter; her other hand was on her sword, and she shot a nasty glare at anyone who looked like they were approaching Wufei. People were giving them both a very wide and prudent berth after one look at her face.

"We're ready," Zechs said as he came back to the two wizards. His face was set, his eyes were as hard and cold as blue crystal. The warrior-king had his sword unsheathed, and he carried himself like a much younger man, and someone you wouldn't want to meet in battle. He wasn't enjoying himself though. He'd never wanted his peaceful kingdom to ever see war again. And now a battle was beginning in his backyard, only thirty minutes away from the capital. And what was worse...
"Are the boys...?" He didn't finish his sentence. Jay nodded minutely. Zechs scowled at the walls ahead of him.

"Right, men!" he shouted, his voice the confident clarion of battle. "Apparently we have unexpected guests. Let's show them the welcome Sanq reserves for fiends who drop by uninvited."

The men near them roared in approval, swords and bows lifted in salute to their king. Then archers pressed around the firepits, carefully maintained by squires. At a signal from Zechs' sword, a hail of flaming arrows hammered down into the edge of the ruins. Here and there a winding cloth caught fire and a corpse writhed as dried tendons contracted under the heat.

"We'll keep this up for a few minutes, then we'll get you sorcerers to knock down the remaining walls on this side," Zechs told G tightly, eyes on the forces ahead of him. "We'll hammer them until nothing moves in there or until they attack. Then we'll move in a bit and start again."

"Right." G rubbed his fists and flexed his fingers, magefire crackling over them. "That should keep them nice and distracted. It'll be up to the boys to do the rest."

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The blue light of the teleport portal flickered nervously.

Duo glanced around carefully, giving Heero and his drawn sword room to swing as the prince followed him. Nothing.

"Okay, leave," he told Kelna crisply. She scowled at him and took a hasty step back into the portal. It wasn't customary to have the teleporting mage accompany his or her charges, but Duo still didn't trust his old rival's sister completely. He decided to use her despite that because she was one of the best 'porters in the kingdom. And besides, if things had gone badly wrong at this end, he wouldn't have lost too much sleep if something nasty had happened to her.

"Good luck your majesty," Kelna muttered not entirely insincerely, before the portal blinked out around her, leaving them alone.

Duo stared at his surroundings. I can't believe we're here again...

"Sounds like they've started," Heero said, his mind as usual firmly where it belonged as he picked up the sounds of the fight in the distance. For once Duo envied this blighted control Jay had inflicted upon him.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from the room they were in. The convent had been abandoned shortly after her ladyship's death many years ago; the sisters had left for newly built temples around the kingdom painfully recovering after nearly a decade of war. It had always seemed strange that the huge grounds and convent buildings had remained both undisturbed and uninhabited... but there was a faint miasma of evil around the place that Duo, a magic user, could sense. Even a non-sorcerer would probably avoid the place on instinct. As such it had remained remarkably undisturbed.

They were in the drawing room of the old, elegant house in the center of the huge grounds, surrounded by a small private park and its own inner walls. They were safely distant from the battle that had started at the convent gates, even if Zech's forces were to advance. And hopefully the enemy at their door would draw out Treize's forces, away from this house.
Duo knew they had to hurry; they couldn't be seen here, they were relying on the element of surprise. Heero knew how to close breaches, and Duo would be there to help him, harmonize their powers if the breach proved too big to deal with alone, and counter anything Treize might throw at him. Or at least that was the plan. They were hoping to get the drop on the demonic ex-king of Lin, close the breach and lock him back into hell before he could react. Speed was of the essence, but both of them hesitated in the center of the room.

A few things had been removed, but most of it was as it was, covered in dust and cobwebs and beaten in by the passage of years. The heavy black wooden chair she used to sit in as she stared out into space for hours at a time. The rich furnishings, elegant in their antiquity, which her Ladyship had brought with her from her distant land. The low bench against one wall, away from any window or distractions, where two very young children had been forced to sit without moving or making any noise while her ladyship pondered her revenge against Zechs and fate.

I am the sorcerer-king of Lin, Duo thought. I can blow this whole house up with a flick of my finger. I could kill that old hag with less than a thought and with considerable pleasure.

The very young child inside the man was still shuddering and refused to be comforted. Until a familiar hand slid into his.

"Come on, Duo." Heero was also looking around the room, his face hard, eyes gleaming as he scoured the darkness. He glared at the chair as if she were still there, sitting and not bothering to glance their way even once, even though she was the closest they had to family the first five years of their lives.

Duo squeezed the hand in his. He hadn't needed her affection. He had Heero. Always Heero.

"How we gonna find the place?" he whispered, glancing around carefully. "We were lost that time."

"Let's go down to the basement and take it from there. I think once we're near the breach, we can just follow the nasty feeling of having our skin crawl off our bones until we find the source," Heero muttered.

"Why down there?" Duo whispered. He knew they needed to be quiet, but he couldn't help it, he had to hear the sound of his voice shivering the silence in this mausoleum or the memories would rise up and choke him. Everything was haunted with the withered flowers of their childhood. The hallway that led to the study where their simple-minded nurse would take them to get their assigned duties or reprimands on the very few occasions they'd disobeyed her Ladyship. The stairs leading to the small room containing only a cot on which they slept together and spent most of their days in solitude. The kitchen, in which they had some limited form of interaction with their nurse as she cooked for all of them, and babbled nearly meaningless stories about fairies and dragons and mothers and fathers and other mythical creatures.

Heero's hand was on the door to the basement, another room pregnant with unpleasant memories. He glanced back with a quizzical look, not understanding Duo's question.

"Why did you create the bond down there, and not... " not in the study where hard eyes barely looked at them as she told them how they would suffer for talking, or making noise, or not doing their chores, or just because. Why not in the cupboard where she locked them up on a few occasions. Why not in the basement itself where she would make a crying nurse lash their hands with a thin rod, the tears and whimpering of the one person who was kind to them making their own redundant until finally they took all their corrections in silence.

"Don't you remember?" Heero whispered reluctantly as he eased the door open and glanced down.
The house had been deserted, except for a few very nasty ghosts from their past, and so was the basement.

Duo tried. The four or five times in the basement, where they were lashed and then left to 'reflect', melded into a blur. All he could remember was that once, when they were what, gods, three? Four? Once it had been different.

Heero moved towards the corner where at the time a wooden panel had gaped as one of them had leaned against it. Now the wood was completely rotten away and they didn't need to struggle against it as they had then. It fell away easily to show the hole in which they'd crawled at the time, the one that led down to the convent catacombs.

Heero moved forward prudently, sword ready. Then he moved back out again.

"Dark," he muttered, frustrated.

"I'll go first." A mage could sense his way in the dark.

"No," Heero ground out.

"We can't show a light," Duo hissed back and, before Heero could argue, he'd grabbed his husband's hand and ducked into the hole. And remembered.

"Duo?" Heero tried to keep his alarmed voice quiet.

"It was me... I dragged us down here." Duo tried to get his legs to move, but the memory was overwhelming him. He'd been the one to restlessly wander around the room - he still had his own personality at the time and it was just starting to burgeon. He'd found the hole in the wall. He'd been the one to drag a reluctant Heero through. He...

"I was afraid she'd blame you." Heero's voice was barely a whisper, hand squeezing Duo's. "I thought she would punish you."

It was one of the first things that they remembered; they were always treated the same, never cared for individually, never differentiated. Even when disciplined, it didn't matter which one of them did the wrong thing, they would both be punished as one, as if they were one and the same 'boy', like she always addressed them. But this had been a transgression of the highest order; trying to escape her, trying to run away. Duo remembered ending up lost in a dead-end, huddling near Heero, knowing they wouldn't be able to get out and that she'd find them - they never doubted she would, death by starvation hadn't been considered a possibility by the very young children.

He remembered clutching Heero to him as if they could mash themselves into one boy, someone strong enough to resist her.

"I thought she might separate us. That was the worse thing she could have done. I thought... " Heero's hand squeezed his again, the cobalt blue eyes were full of pain as they caught his. "I didn't want to lose you... "

Of course, if she had realized what an atrocious punishment separation was, she probably would have used it once she had found them. She had been very angry... but she didn't know them well enough, didn't care for them enough to even realize what a potent weapon that would be. So she'd just dragged them back up to the surface and locked them in their room for a day. But by then... Duo couldn't remember much about what happened after that. Because Heero, in his panic, had unwittingly used a subtle but strong pulse of power to set up a bond of steel between them that would only grow and strengthen the longer they remained with her.
The rest was a blur. Empty days full of quiet and brooding, with only each other's presence as haven. And then Zechs, and the first few months with him, fighting instinctively against the separation he was trying to impose on them, even as they started to believe in the love and the life he was offering them.

And then she came back. And undid some of the damage she'd caused. Duo found himself grasping his pendant and for the first time in his life he wondered why... Remorse? It hardly seemed possible. But even more impossible to believe that she might have cared for them a bit after all.

He shook himself. He could feel the love and comfort flowing from Heero's touch, and it dragged him back to the present. Forget the old witch. And, once this last little mess was cleaned up, they could put their past behind them too and start looking at the future which, if he had anything to say about it, would also be spent together, but in much more pleasant circumstances.

Heero must have felt his resolve through their growing bond; a new one, and much healthier than the one that had nearly ruined them in the past. He smiled and pressed Duo's hand, caressing the back with his thumb, then tilted his chin at the hole.

"Let's do this," Duo muttered. "I can feel the breach from here," he added. As memories were set to rest, he realized that not all the feelings of horror were coming from them. There was a familiar tinge of hate and evil in the air, one he remembered from the Gap of Sevring. "Let's go kick Treize back into Hell, close this godsdamned breach, and then burn this place to the ground. It's giving me the creeps."

"I'll let you toss the match. Or mage bolt. Lead on," Heero whispered behind him as they moved forward into darkness.

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Duo's voice was barely a breath in the darkness. Heero didn't shush him, knowing his husband needed to break the hold of the cloying gloom around them.

"Remind me again why we're doing this, just the two of us, alone like a couple of idiots?"

"Surprise is our best weapon, if we can do this while the others distract -"

"Yes but why us?" Duo muttered, although he knew.

"Because I'm the only sorcerer who can close an open breach who's not over the age of sixty. Remind me why you're here with me?"

"Because I threatened you until you agreed."

"Hn."

"I wouldn't have let you go alone anyway. Closing the breach at the Gap of Sevring almost killed you, moron."

"This will hopefully be easier. For me, that is. My magic is in tune with Treize's. The breach should be much smaller than the one at the Gap."
"Yeah and Treize will be sitting on it. You need my help. This way, right?"

"Yes."

"Whoa."

They turned a sharp corner in the forgotten passageway, faintly outlined in gray. Beyond were the catacombs. Far up, cracks in the ceiling let in trickles of distant sunlight, subjugated to a muted pearl by the darkness unwilling to fully relinquish its domain. They could see ahead a bit, they were in a series of long vaulted corridors, with openings leading to shrines and ossuaries. Heero saw Duo glance away from the pitiful remains of living, breathing, laughing, crying men and women, all wearing the same mask of death, uniform now in row upon row of bones.

"This is just so appropriate to Treize you have to just-"

"Shh."

"How did we dare come this way when we were kids?" Duo whispered as he carefully skirted a half-broken skull that had rolled into the catacomb's corridor from a bulging ossuary.

"We didn't know what these were. Shh."

The few slashes of light were heavy and dull with the dust of centuries. Some of the vaulting of the ceiling had crumbled inward, and they glanced nervously above their heads. Heero could feel his senses prickle in the motionless air; a feeling he'd not had since the Gap. A faint stirring of evil, of malice beyond anything a human could achieve; something that hated their world, hated life itself and also longed for both with a passion that chilled him. There was definitely a breach around here somewhere. But it wasn't as bad as Sevring, so probably it wasn't too big, they'd have a chance to-

The faint scrabbling sound was loud in the dusty silence, but the echoes off the walls of the catacombs fooled Heero for that precious extra second-

"Duo!"

Something dropped from the vaulted ceiling straight onto his husband. Heero's sword darted forward, stabbing, but only cut cloth as the thin form leaped from Duo, thrown to his knees by the impact. A scrabble of bony limbs and skittering rock and it darted away into darkness.

Duo, face white and furious, lifted his hand to blast. Nothing happened.

"Shit!"

Heero started to run after the thin form of the fiend Hunger but Duo caught him in passing.

"Let me- if I kill it-" Heero tried to pull from the grasp.

"She's too fast! You'll never catch her!"

"But if I don't kill her you won't get your powers back!"

"Unless we get far enough away to-"

"No! We'll lose the advantage of surprise! You go back and I'll -"

"I'm not letting you go alone, Yuy!"
Duo's words smashed the darkness. Violet eyes blazed into Heero's.

Alone... Heero had been trained to throw away his life to close the breach of Sevring. He nearly had, but Duo hadn't let him. Now he had to do it again. The world was at stake. But...

Follow your feelings.

The world was huge, but it started with this man here. Because Heero loved him, and couldn't leave him alone, ever again.

"Okay," he said, and the eyes fastened on his widened in surprise, then relieved joy. Duo would probably have followed him anyway. For an instant, Heero contemplated a possible plan of action. Punch Duo out, leave him here, close the breach come what may... but his burgeoning feelings made Heero aware of just what it would feel like if it were the other way around. If he were the one to wake up, sucker-punched in a cold ossuary, to discover a gaping hole where his heart used to be, a part of his soul torn away with his lover's life... he couldn't do that to Duo. Even if he tried, the knowledge of what it would do to his other half would rob him of his control, and he'd surely fail.

"Okay," he repeated. "We go back, we regroup, we think up a new plan. A frontal attack I guess. It will be costly; magic and weapons don't seem effective against Decay's forces. But it should work and it's probably the best plan now that we've lost the element of surprise. Even if your powers weren't compromised, Hunger will warn the others... Treize has not ripped open the breach yet, that means he probably can't, so we -"

A clatter of rocks behind them, and a long bubbling moan.

"Yes," Duo said dully as he turned around. "That would have been a good plan."

"Damn..."

The thing staggered into the other end of the vaulted corridor they were in. For an instant Heero thought - hoped - it was a soldier from the battle in the grounds above, wounded... Then it raised its head.

Duo was used to fiends and Heero was hardened beyond human endurance, but they both shuddered and took an instinctive step back.

The thing turned, still hunched over its inescapable pain, and stared at them with the single intact eye. The other one dangled obscenely from its socket, swaying slightly with the fiend's shuddering movements. It staggered forward, gaze fixed on them. The light gleamed stickily off of the muscles revealed by the flayed skin, coiling raw red, run through with blue veins seeping blood and fluids. The flesh was ruptured with broken bone, they could hear grinding noises as it walked. Duo made a sound in the back of his throat.

The creature's head jerked back in three painful movements. A jaw, ligaments long torn, hung open and shuddered with a bubbling howl.

The spouses turned as one and started to run down the corridor. Got to get away, find an exit, Heero thought, then his mind shattered in amazement and horror as he realized it was running after them. Of course, it thinks it's a fiend and can't feel pain. Well, no, it is Pain, but it can still function anyway.

Duo dodged down a side-corridor and immediately leaped back, almost knocking Heero over. Ahead of them, four near-skeletal corpses staggered. Heero cursed, grabbed Duo's hand and ran
away again. They had to find an exit, one that wasn't yet guarded by the dead! The catacombs were riddled with holes and passages, they couldn't be guarding them all!

"Test your powers!" he snapped. "We might get far enough away from Hunger for you to-"

"Not yet!" Duo gasped, glancing fearfully behind them. Pain was still following. Occasionally splatters of fluid and blood erupted from a broken vein on the flayed form, and the bubbling howl echoed again, drowning the repetitive crunch of bone, breaking, mending, breaking again, forever.

Heero swore as five dead creatures formed a barrier in the corridor ahead of him. His pitiful mage blasts would probably not be enough to shove them away, and his sword would be useless against that many. He knew perfectly well where they were being herded to, but he also knew that alone he couldn't get through the wall of corpses, or defeat Pain, and-

They staggered as they entered a room that tugged at a distant memory.

It had once been a wine cellar; they were probably close to one of the other buildings now. It had been where Heero and Duo had hid from her Ladyship, too exhausted to run further, all those years ago. Where Heero had first used his powers to insure that she couldn't punish Duo, couldn't in fact tell which one Duo was, couldn't separate them.

The wine cellar had appeared big to the children, but it was bigger now. The wall against which they'd crouched had been torn down and a huge cavernous space ripped from the primal rock opened in darkness instead. Two fires near the far side of the huge space glittered off of... something. Something that gleamed and slithered and writhed.

Duo groaned, and glanced desperately around for an exit. Heero hesitated, then pulled him forward. There was a pillar near the center of the space, once part of the now-vanished wall, a buttress for the vaulted ceiling. If they had to make a fight of it, they should get their backs to that. Heero didn't bother to look at the figure between the two fires at the far side of the room. He'd deal with his father when he had the chance, assuming he was still alive. Right now the priority was getting out. He didn't know what chance he had against the fiends hemming them in, but he no longer had a choice but to try.

Pain had halted just inside the door, flanked by several of the dead. Then Hunger squirmed in behind them, hanging back prudently. Heero put his back to the column, feeling Duo take a place at his side, long dagger drawn. The fiends at the door appeared to be in no hurry to advance, so Heero glanced behind them, assessing how much danger the last two hellspawn would be.

"Treize won't attack us," he whispered, a small glimmer of relief blossoming in his heart. Duo stared at him as if he'd gone mad, eyes flickering towards the writhing obscenity between the two fires. It was no longer even remotely human; it was a huge mass of bloated, mutating flesh, erupting with ichor, twitching tentacles, clattering chitinous insect legs that grew and broke off, or withered and plunged back into the seething, gaping flesh, cutting it open. The wounds suppurated black fluids, or opened wider to reveal a screaming mouth or a swimming eyeball -... it was beyond a nightmare.

"All his power and attention are on the breach," Heero explained in a whisper. His senses, more attuned to the holes in the world and his father's magic, could feel Treize's battle with the breach. It was so small, he must be constantly fighting to keep it open, Heero guessed, surprised at the massive effort it was costing Treize. Dreadful forces roiled and rippled the air and caused the fires to dance. The creature was aware of their presence, but none of the mismatched eyes swimming around the pulsating mass had fixed on them; they were huge and blank and focused inward on the struggle of mind against physics. Damn, if they'd not been found, Heero would have had a good chance of closing the breach without Treize's interference... Heero concentrated on the other fiends present.
"Keep an eye on the other one though, I don't know what he can do," Heero whispered. Duo nodded, tearing his eyes away from the obscene remains of the former king of Lin to watch the second fiend near him. One of the walls of the cavern was covered in ice, and in the grip of that extrusion from Tartarus the fiend from the twelfth circle of hell was barely visible. Humanoid, limbs twisted and broken by the ice that was probably shifting at the rate of glaciers, slowly grinding him over the years. Skin shredded by the flow. Nose, fingers, eyelids, toes eaten away by the ice. Heero didn't know what it could do, caught in ice like that, but remembering the Fire fiend, he was willing to bet it would be more dangerous than Pain. But it didn't seem to be in a hurry to attack.

Suddenly Pain screamed like someone getting his soul ripped out, and attacked.

Heero took two steps forward, sword swinging. And yelled in surprise as his muscles cramped and shuddered.

"Heero!" He could hear Duo scream behind him, as his blood started to roar in his ears. Agony ripped through him, but he still managed to bring his sword to bear, avoiding a vicious blow to his head.

_Pain! We need him alive!_ The voice echoed from the ice at the far side of the cavern, in a creak of glaciers and a tone long wrung of emotions by the continuous crush of cold.

"I... 'ow... " the thing hacked, jaw flapping as it swung at Heero again.

The fight was brief, Heero could do little with his own body racked with pain, which seemed to get worse the closer the creature got to him. When it grabbed his wrist the agony was so strong he didn't even feel his sword drop from his hand. He could hear Duo scream his name behind him, trying to get near even as he fought against one of the corpses that had come up to grab him.

I'm sorry, love... Heero could feel darkness overwhelm him. The fiend was simply holding him. Apparently the creature realized that he was needed alive. Which meant that not only were he and Duo going to die, eventually, but if Treize and his hellspawn forced him to obey him - and he might, if Pain got his hands on Duo... - it was a mistake to bring him, the whole thing a mistake... the world was going to end, and, racked with agony as he was, Heero knew he couldn't stop it.
Duo threw his full weight against the dead hand of the corpses, nearly breaking his arms to wrench from their hold, but they clapsed him to them, twining around him like a winding sheet. Ten feet away Heero collapsed to his knees, eyes blind and face twisted with pain; the clang of the mage blade hitting rock rang like a death tocsin.

No no no... Duo saved his breath, but his screams were still ringing inside as waves of agony washed up from Heero through the link they shared.

*Don't kill him!*  

"He won't." Hunger had approached, thin bloodless lips pulled back over a ravenous grin. "He may be insane, but he's not crazy enough to go against the wishes of the Lord of the Circle of Pain... He knows what his masters will do to him if he kills their chance of conquest." She grinned at Duo, then at Heero, who had slumped forward, white as death, still held up by Pain.

Duo felt magical senses brush him. He turned his head - his body now firmly caught by the dead things- towards the creature in the ice who was examining him.

"I can't do it alone!" he screamed. "Heero's the one you want! Get your fiend off of him!"

The creature seemed to hesitate.

"Either of you will do, as long as the other is in close proximity." Hunger approached him, bobbing her head like a praying mantis. "My master has told me so. The chaotic one can use either of you to do it, as long as you are both here."

Shit. Pain was still holding Heero but didn't seem intent on killing him. But that was only until they used Duo's raw power to rip open a hole in the world, and then, if they were very, very lucky, they would both die quickly.

"You." Hunger gestured to the dead things. "Take this -" a bony finger like a twig poked at Duo "- to Chaos. Quick."

Wait...

There was a crack in the ice, it settled and Duo could almost feel the waves of pain from the figure within as it was ground a bit more. From the state of the fiend's body, this happened frequently. This is what the world is going to be like, if I let them have their way, Duo thought. Perpetual torment. I'm sorry Heero, love, but if there's any way I can get either one of us killed in the next few minutes, I'm going to have to take it. We can't let this happen.

Yes... the thought was barely a flicker across his consciousness, but he knew where it came from, if only because of the echoes of pain that came with it.

Duo looked around with resolve. Hopefully, Zechs' attack would succeed outside and Jay would manage to close the breach without them, however difficult that would be without Heero. He wished them the best of luck. Duo wouldn't be around to see it. Once one of them was dead, the other would apparently be useless to the fiends and unlikely to survive that state of affairs. Duo, for one, would
rather have it that way, and he thought Heero would as well. Damn, looks like we are going to die together after all...

..At least we lived together first... Duo didn't know whose thought that was, bathed in pain and acceptance and a memory of happiness, and maybe it didn't matter...

Right, how could he get the fiends to kill one of them? And if there was any way he could take one of the bastards with him, well, that would be a bonus.

_Hunger, come here._

Hunger blinked her over-big eyes in the fleshless face, then skittered over to the side of the room.

_Closer._

Hunger scampered up to the wall of ice on all fours, after a quick gesture behind her. The corpses began to pull Duo towards the writhing figure at the end of the room, their bones creaking as he struggled. The sorcerer still had his dagger. If he could get an arm free-

_Are you ready, Treize?_

Hunger bobbed her head, practically touching the ice. "Yes, ready? Are we ready? Our masters will reward us! _Feed us!_" She writhed happily.

Duo gritted his teeth, tugging at the dead thing holding his arm. He didn't know how Treize planned to use his powers, but-

Wait a minute.

'Are you ready, _Treize?_ Had that chunk of ice called the gross thing 'Treize'? Hadn't the fiends lost all memory of their human pasts?

"NNnNnYeeesss." Duo shuddered at the 'words' uttered by several mouths that were mere gashes in the tortured flesh.

_I'm sorry, Hunger._

"What?" Hunger glanced away from the creature between the fires to stare, puzzled, into the sheet of ice.

_I'm... sorry._

A fracture ran up the wall of hoarfrost and a huge chunk detached itself, a jagged knife of ice the size of a man, which rammed itself down onto the thin body, crushing it to the rock with jarring force.

Duo gaped for one precious second, but then reacted with the speed and deadliness that had been ground into him during the trials of Lin. A huge burst of magic sent the dead things staggering back from the sorcerer as his powers were freed from the blood talisman the now-dead Hunger had yielded. Duo spun and sent a searing, narrow burst of black magic hammering into Pain, who reeled back, with another reason to scream as its flesh was ripped and torn from crotch to chin.

Duo ran forward, sending another pounding pulse of power into the reeling figure, getting it further away from Heero. He grabbed his husband by the waist, hauled him up, sent another round into the corpses nearby to keep them away, and dragged Heero back a few feet towards the central pillar. Pain was still between them and the door, as were a dozen dead creatures that had come in since
they’d arrived.

Pain roared, jaw flapping. A flayed hand gripped at the flesh Duo’s blast had torn, and wrenched at it further. Spurred on by the agony, the fiend charged forward - and slammed into a wall of ice that had suddenly grown out of nowhere, cordonning off the end of the room where Pain and the corpses had been shoved by Duo’s power.

"What's going on?!" Heero gasped as he hung on to the sorcerer’s shoulder. The ice was jagged and thick, panes glinting in the firelight from behind them. They could barely see shapes moving around frantically behind it.

"Damned if I know," Duo muttered. The wall kept them locked in with Treize and the other, true, but it also kept Pain and the dead things out. What the hell-

Come here, both of you.

"Not on your life." Duo ground out.

You'd rather deal with Pain again?

"Well at least I know what the hell he's trying to do!" Duo snapped, which he knew didn't make much sense, but then nothing did at this point.

Heero suddenly ground his hand into Duo’s shoulder, then shoved away from him, staggering towards- towards Treize!

"Heero are you crazy!? Get back here!" Duo shouted, reluctant to leave the slim protection of the pillar at his back.

"No, we got it wrong, I got it wrong, it's the other way around-" Heero was panting, still shaking from the bone-wrenching pain that had nearly killed him.

"Heero!" Duo took three steps after him, then spun around as he heard a creak. The chunk of ice, containing the fiend from the twelfth circle, was moving towards him with the slow, sure finality of glaciers. "Shit! Heero, get back here!"

"He's not holding it open, Duo, I can feel it."

"What are you talking about!? I don't feel anything!" Except for panic.

"He's my father, I can tell... he's not holding it open, Duo, he's trying to hold it shut."

"What?!" Duo tried to keep one eye on his husband, who had apparently cracked under pressure, and the advancing Ice.

Well, if one of them understands this, we may have a chance after all, Treize.

"Hnn>>NN... CaN yOU hoLd tHem offf, HeSs?"

I'll try. The other one can help me.

Duo's head was spinning. Heero was standing in front of the-... the thing, apparently unafraid. Must be the blood spell- no, Jay said it couldn’t rule the fully aware will. But-

Heero walked around the fires, circling the thing that was once his father, eyes unfocused. Feeling the edges of the breach, Duo realized. Treize was an obscene writhing thing of flesh, scales, erupting
boils, fluttering gills, leaking fluids... this close, the smell from the mutating carcass caught Duo in the throat. He felt like he was drowning. He wanted only one thing; to run over, rip his lover away from the obscenity, and blast until he had no more power left. Black magic crackled as his fingertips, but he hesitated.

Something important had been said, what... ?

Come on, your majesty. Pain is apparently using one of the dead things to hammer its way through my barrier. We may have a fight on our hands soon.

Duo went rigid as words flashed through his mind.

"Hess?! Did ugly there call you Hess?"

Yes... yes, he did. That... was my name. Can you cast a barrier to fortify-

"Hess, like Master Hess? The crossroads wizard who was murdered by Treize?! At the Gap?"

Who told you that?

"I... my mentor, G."

G?... G... The voice, buried in the creaking ice, sounded distant, and almost, but not quite, past caring. Yes... I remember... But to answer your question; obviously Treize did not do me the favor of killing me. He was holding me captive, and I was dragged into the twelfth circle of hell when the spell backfired and sucked us in.

"But-..."

But why am I helping him now? Your spouse just told you. I have to or the breach will open. For thirteen years, since his son used his powers and caused a link between them, Treize has been keeping this breach as small as possible. As long as our masters were concentrating on the bigger, more powerful breach at Sevring, he was ignored. When that one closed, however, they turned here, and sent their representatives to assist him, thinking he was, in fact, serving them and trying to wrench it open. The tortures of the circles of hell robbed all the other humans with us of their mind and reason, but Treize and I were made of sterner stuff... We were able to keep a part of our mind intact, hidden from them...

"F-fo0led ThEm. ga1nEd theiR Trust..."

But they have weakened us, our powers are chained to theirs. We do not have the strength to close the gap here, however much we tried-

"I don't believe you!" Duo snarled. "It was Treize who opened the bloody Gap of Sevring in the first place! Don't trust him, Heero! They've been trying to drag us here from the start!"

Yes. To help Treize close the breach. His blood, his power, his son. If that won't do it... then the world is about to become a very interesting place.

"You're lying." Duo's voice was weak. "The fiend from the circle of Chains, he-he said you would use us to open the breach!"

I told you. The others belong heart and soul to their masters now, and they can communicate with them at will. We couldn't tell the others what we planned to do. And we needed Treize's son here. Well, both of you, since the power has apparently spread to the Sanq prince as well. So we-
"You had your fiends try to kidnap us!"

Believe me, your majesty, if we thought a written invitation would do the trick, you would have gotten one of those instead, in a golden envelope and carried by three vestal virgins if I could have managed it. Don't you see that-

"How can we believe you?" Duo whispered, glancing wild-eyed from Treize, to Ice, to the barrier from which a grinding crunching noise could be heard as Pain endeavored to transform it into so much ice-cubes. "You guys were after us from the beginning to-... to-"

The fires on either side of Treize suddenly blazed like beacons. But above the monstrosity a darkness nothing could dispel was gathering. Heero suddenly choked and staggered back, hands at his head, a grimace of pain twisting his features.

And Treize screamed.

Every slobbering pit in the tortured flesh gaped wide and a multi-throated howl rendered the air. His body's writhing turned to convulsions. The darkness around him seemed to creep into his flesh, which withered and blackened, before mutating and growing back again. But the attack - Duo realized it was an attack, from the wave of pure malice that nearly knocked him to his knees - continued, warping the former King's flesh at an ever increasing rate.

Duo whimpered as the air contracted and thickened with sheer evil. He could barely breathe, his body shaking like a leaf under the waves of psychic attack which weren't even directed at him. Heero had dropped to one knee, breathing heavily. Then his training took over and he staggered to his feet again, face grim.

Now we get to the crux. Hess's voice was still cold and uncaring, as icy as his cage, but he was speaking quickly. Now you get to decide the fate of the worlds, young humans. For months Treize and I have planned and plotted and hidden ourselves from our masters, trying to maneuver his son here. He has the power to close what was opened by Treize's power and blood. But now the masters of Hell have been informed by Pain and Decay that we have betrayed them. They are attacking Treize directly. They will try to turn him, finish the job of converting him to one of their own. Or kill him and then rip-

"Rip open the breach, I got it," Duo snapped. Heero was frowning, staring at the roiling air around Treize as invisible claws of pure evil ripped at the chaotic flesh and the edge of the breach.

I can hold off Pain and the others. You can help me. Treize's son - wait a moment, which one IS his son?

"I am," Heero said quietly.

...Really? But I thought the king of... never mind. The son should be able to seal the breach, if Treize can last that long. You have minutes, young man. Make up your mind.

"Are you sure we can trust them?" Duo whispered, hoping the link between them could carry his words since his voice was muffled by the chaotic distortions in the air.

Heero stared at what remained of Treize. Duo tried to imagine... Treize had been insane, but his invasion of Sanq had been for what he saw as a good cause, to free his people from the magical mountains of Lin that were slowly killing them. His madness and despair had grown at the loss of his consort, Une, and his son. The son who was now standing in front of him. And, from the look in Heero's eyes, judging him; for the war, the dead, Maseng, all the suffering... the thing writhed under
that clear, direct gaze as much as the torture of its master. Duo thought of the way Zechs and G had talked about Treize; with something like reluctant respect. This was a man who would and could resist even the tortures of hell if he set his mind to it, and apparently he had no wish to see a breach opened and controlled from the side of Hell, leaving the world at the mercy of evil.

At least Duo hoped not... If they had time to think about it, they'd probably be able to sort out right from wrong, truth from lies, but they had no time...

Do what you think you must, Heero, trust your feelings, he silently told his husband, knowing that the emotions would reach Heero if the actual words did not. He felt the love and thankfulness in return. Then the king of Lin swung towards the fiend of the twelfth circle.

"Right, snowball, let's make sure that whatever happens here, they're not disturbed."

...Snowball?

"Pain is nearly through your barrier. Can you recast it?"

*No, I've been cut off from my source of power in the twelfth circle.*

"Your own boss just put two and two together and got a double-cross, hm? Looks like it's up to me then. How can I stop Pain?"

*Don't bother hurting it, it's pretty much impervious to anything you can think of.*

"I'll just go in for the kill, then. It's what I do best anyway," Duo said modestly. "One should always go with one's natural talents. Hey, mincemeat! Hurry up and break through that barrier so I can set you on fire! And if that doesn't work I've got a whole lot of other stuff I can try!"

...*G really was your mentor, wasn't he...*

---

Heero stared doubtfully at the breach and the monstrosity that had given birth to him. He had trained extensively to deal with this type of situation and he knew he was being asked to take a monumental risk. If he went ahead, if he released his powers this close to Treize, in these circumstances... if his father was lying, if he was only pretending to work at closing the breach and was in fact waiting for his son to try to seal it, then the former King of Lin would be able to warp the black magic Heero would use to his own purpose. Treize would have the energy needed to rip the breach fully open, wide enough that no-one could ever get it shut again. Heero would be playing right into his hands.

He came to a decision in an instant. Heero could feel the Masters of Hell rip into the flesh and the psyche of his father, and his furious, desperate resistance. His mind told him he had little reason to trust the insane, ruthless Treize or the fiend he'd become. His feelings...

"If this is a trap, Treize, it's a pretty good one," he said, raising his hands and triggering the mental sequence that would release his power and allow him to start weaving together gaping strands of reality.

"T-trap?" The creature writhed, but a part of its concentration stayed on this young man he'd never known, who shared his blood. "I'm - aAannnh! -... n0t thAT goOd an -nhn!-... Actor... "
"I must be insane to trust you." Heero's hands were shaking, his mind screaming with doubt even as he started to reach out to the breach. "This is what you were trying to do at Sevring after all. Open a link to Hell-"

"anD I have p-pAid for mY folly... " Treize's body was beginning to collapse, blacken and die, all his mind and strength taken to oppose the powers clawing at him. Only one mouth near Heero continued to whisper, a small voice suddenly more human as it tried to reach out. "I kn0w n0w that this is nOt something mere m0rtals cAn contr0l... If i let them thr0ugh-

"It will be hell on earth and no one will be able to stop them." Heero felt power burst from his inner self, echo through his body, run down his hands, start touching the edges of the gap. "But why do you care... " He could feel it now that his power was reaching for the edges of the breach; the malice of the Lords of Hell trying to rip it open, trying to turn Treize and force him to obey, or destroy him for resisting their efforts to widen the gap -... Heero knew his own limits well, he didn't think he could oppose that kind of massive pressure. "Why do you resist them? I know what this will cost you. You could have just let them-

"Even I am n0t thAt insAne... and besiDes, I -nnnnH- still have tHings in this world I wish to protect... mY... pe0ple... my coun- country... You...

Heero's mind was focused on the edges of the breach, it took a few seconds for that last word to penetrate his concentration, but when it did, sudden fury almost made him loose his grip. Connected by the power feeding into the breach and by the blood they shared, his rage made his father flinch even in the jaws of torment.

"Don't you dare," Heero managed to say. He was on the edge of losing his control... a steadying touch of love and support brushed his mind. He was barely aware of Duo in the background, launching blast after blast at dozens of corpses, and Pain screaming in its own funeral pyre, bashed by prongs of ice as Hess did what he could too. But his husband was with him here and now, as he would always be, and this helped him regain his center. Whatever Treize was fighting for, it allowed him to hold out, so that was good. As for Heero, he knew what, and who, he was fighting for. The world was a huge and intangible concept. His husband however was as real to him as his own body.

Heero gripped the lines of power breaching the gap in the world and started to apply the force needed to close it. Because Treize had been keeping it from growing, the breach was much more manageable than Sevring. Hopefully Heero wouldn't have to die to close this one... as long as his father held out. Power flared and tensed and the edges of the breach shifted.

Treize felt it, and though most of his body and mind was being consumed, a small part, the part that had held on through all those small eternities of years since he'd been pulled in to Hell, that part reached out one last time for... something.

"Can yOu forgiVe me?"

Heero had spent years crushed under Treize's legacy. His father had murdered Zech's queen, Duo's mother, he'd annihilated the town of Maseng, wrenched the peaceful kingdom of Sanq into decades of war, had nearly opened a breach to Hell to bathe all the kingdoms in blood and fire for his own ambitions, and had condemned his son to fix his mess, and live with his power and madness.

But that was in the past. Now Treize was trying to avoid causing more harm. As for Heero, well, maybe it was time to finally move out from the shadow of the legacy that he'd used to narrow, limit and control his life.

"Forgive you? No. But I think I will try to forget... " 
Heero felt the last doubt leave his mind, and with it his powers unleashed fully. The sides of the breach wrenched closer and closer, nearly shut. The things on the other side screamed and howled and tried to reach out for him, but they couldn't get past Treize, however much they ripped and tore at the creature.

The power in his body began to pulse like a heartbeat. Duo's was harmonizing with his, he realized distantly, his entire mind and body now enslaved to the energies roaring through him.

You better not die, Yuy! The thought reached him through it all, amplified by the synchronization of their magical powers. Behind him Duo was defending his back against an ever-increasing number of enemies, weaving walls of fire and force.

Won't. Got too much to live for.

Remember that! Or I'll follow you to hell and kick your ass if I have to crawl through all thirteen circles to do so!

Heero felt his face crease into a smile, his body, freed from the directives of his overstretched mind, reacting of itself.

And he closed the breach with a final wrench of power and a resonating crack that nearly brought the ceiling down on their heads.

---

Heero wondered if he was dead. He was so drained that the possibility didn't excite him that much.

There was a scrambling in the utter darkness near him. Heero remembered Pain and tried to move.

Hands gripped his thigh, then quickly moved up to his shoulders, his face. "Heero?! You okay? You alive?" Duo's voice was barely a whisper.

"I don't know," the slightly concussed prince of Sanq muttered.

"Man, you greedy bastard, you not only used up all your own juice, you took most of mine with it in that last thrust. I started tossing a fireball at Pain and ended up fanning him with hot air instead," Duo muttered, an inch from his ear. Soft hands felt his face, his pulse, then lingered over his forehead. They were trembling.

"Are you alright?" Heero tried to sit up and failed miserably.

"Yeah, I think. Pain was going to grab me, then the breach closed and the fires blew out... and nothing happened. Maybe he can't see in the dark, and he's wandering around stubbing his toes on things. Hope that hurts. Nothing else I did impressed him much, I gotta admit."

If he is wandering around, then you shouldn't be talking, Heero thought numbly, but it would take death to stop the King of Lin from venting. And his lover's voice was bringing him back from the
edge he was clinging to, giving him strength. It had to be magic.

Heero grunted and, with Duo's help, sat up, then stood on trembling legs.

"Light?" he whispered.

"Is that wise?" Duo's voice was even fainter, he could feel him turn his head trying to use his exhausted mage senses to scrutinize the darkness.

"Yes. It's okay." Still, Heero couldn't seem to raise his voice above a whisper. The darkness was cloying. "The breach closed."

"So?"

"So trust me, and give us some light." Heero was too tired to explain.

He felt Duo reach out. His straining eyes were painting little flashes of illusory light on the canvas of darkness; it took him a few seconds to realize that one of them was steadier than the others, and slowly growing brighter, stabbing at the darkness and carving the shape of Duo's hand from the shadows.

"Brighter," Heero sighed.

"Yes, your highness. How come I'm the one who always has to bust my hump with the magic- oh."

The light slowly painted in the details of the cavern around them, in pale shades of gray. The body before them seemed like a fallen statue among the rocks.

"It's-... he's-..."

"The breach closed." Heero hesitated, then walked on shaking legs towards the man lying naked on the floor where the hole in the world had been. He looked down at the body and realized for the first time that he'd had no idea what his father had looked like in life. He'd been a handsome man, tall, with patrician features and light-colored hair. His eyes were open, unseeing; Duo's mage-light washed them of their color and painted them a tint of slate.

"He is dead, right?" Duo's voice behind him oscillated between nervousness and pity.

"Yes. They were all already dead. The fiend in them kept them ali- that is, animated. When the breach closed-"

"They were cut off once and for all from their source of power and so they became fully human again."

"Fully dead too..." Heero sighed. He felt... nothing towards the body at his feet. In the growing light, Treize's face looked empty. He'd been such an intense man... But it was hard to imagine those features lit by a smile or darkened in anger.

"Duo-" Heero suddenly choked "-let's get out of here."

He felt the hand of his other half slip into his and pull him away. He followed blindly, leaning on his husband's strength. They spotted two other bodies as they made their way to the entrance. One, an unknown man with stringy gray hair and a pinched face, was lying spread-eagled where Duo had been fighting to protect Heero with all his power and his life. This would be what was left of Pain, Heero surmised. A few feet away, in the act of throwing himself at the other fiend in one last
desperate attempt to stop him, was a second body. This one was in a big puddle of sludgy water and was still marked by the crush of ice, limbs twisted, nose missing, features torn. Duo sighed, looking down at the body.

"It's a pity... but I guess they were already dead, right? G will be... do you think I should even tell him?"

"Yes. He'll want to know his friend and fellow guardian fought to do his duty to the last, and beyond, far beyond."

"Seems like cold comfort somehow," Duo said softly.

"Yes... " Heero found himself looking back towards the end of the cavern. But he scowled and wrenched his eyes forward again. Forget it, forget him. Let the dead rest in peace, it was the least the living could do for them.

"Come on." He slipped his arm around Duo's shoulders - and felt his heart quiver a little as an arm slipped around his waist in response. They crunched through the bones of the corpses that had fallen like puppets with their strings cut. The doorway was faintly illuminated by the muted light from the hallway outside. They moved towards it, leaving the darkness behind them.

Chapter End Notes

Just the epilogue to go!
The high priest of the sacred heart of Bordton smoothed down his ceremonial regalia as he lingered near the altar, waiting for the noon hour when the ceremony would start. His robe had been custom made for the occasion. Bordton was - at the moment - a fairly small town near the frontier between Sanq and Lin, in rolling heather-filled foothills. Since it was now lying in the middle of a region designated for Lin's expansion, and there was talk of making it a secondary capital for both royals who were getting married here today, the high priest had high hopes that the status of the town - and his own - would soon improve. Which was why he'd spent so much effort on his robe, to reflect what he felt would soon be his new position in the world. It was so heavy with gold inlay, semi-precious stone insets and embroidery, he was probably going to have to be helped to the altar, or possibly wheeled.

This was his moment to shine, to show King Zechs, Prince Heero and the King of Lin, who would also be his new boss shortly, that he was a man to be counted on, and had a certain weight in the temple hierarchy (twenty pounds give or take, according to his grumbling assistant who'd helped him on with the robe).

As such everything today had to go perfectly. There was no margin for error. When the royals arrived in less than an hour, the ceremony had to go like clockwork to demonstrate - what in god's name was that?!

The high priest glared in horror and fury at the - the common street creature who was leaning against the clean white cloth of the altar. Flipping through the sacred text of the ceremony. And - and sipping the sacrificial wine!!

The high priest croaked, then spun - his robes remained facing in the same direction - to look for help. He was the leader of the temple, it wasn't his duty to throw wretches out. Especially dangerous looking ones. The man was dressed head to toe in well-worn black leathers - definitely a bad character - with long hair tied back in a braid and gleaming eyes that were almost purple. Where was help when you needed it!? Ah, a guard!

"You! Get that ruffian away from the altar immediately!" he hissed at the guard, one of Zechs' soldiers, dressed in basic leather armor adorned with the Sanq symbol on the shoulder. The man had a plain sword handy at his side and a nasty no-nonsense look about him. Just the kind to kick out the creature. He was giving the high priest an unreadable look that made his eminence pause. But before he could pull rank, the guard walked towards the altar. The high priest sighed in relief.

Then stared in horror as the guard merely leaned against the altar in very much the same pose as the creature, eyes on the sacred texts.

"So, what's it look like?" A callused hand reached caressingly down the black-clad back to bring the braid around. As the high priest started to choke, the guard absently pressed the bound hair to his lips and leaned over the wretch's shoulder.

"Nothing to it," the ruffian said, tossing down the last of the wine. "It's all mumbo-jumbo. What matters is the circle, the exchange of blood, and the swapping of gifts. You bring me anything?"

The guard's eyes gleamed in the light spilling through the decorated glass windows of the temple.

"Oh, all of them," the man said, staring into the guard’s eyes.

"Greedy bastard." The hard planes of the face softened in a slight smile.

"I'll give you all of mine in exchange, is that fair?"

"Deal."

"Will you two please stop this sickening display before I lose whatever appetite I have for the nuptial feast?"

The high priest nearly fell over - which would have been a disaster unless the royals minded that he conduct the ceremony lying down where he'd fallen - as a rusty old voice snarled the words a few feet away from him. He stared at the scruffy wild-haired elderly man who was glaring at the vagrants as if personally insulted. A thin, scarred nose seemed to dip down and berate the two like an admonishing finger.

"Can you please go fetch the temple guards?" the high priest hissed at him. "I am the high priest of Bordton and I demand-"

"Are you now? Nice robe. Shiny," the man answered without even looking in his direction.

"What...? Look, I order you to go fetch the guards! We must get these creatures removed before the two royals appear!"

The long nose hesitated then swung in his direction. "...Say what?"

"Hurry, man! The guests are about to arrive!"

"They're already here." Another man drew level with the short long-nosed one, glass spectacles gleaming. "Why are the boys staring at each other like that, G? They having a fight already?"

"If only. Then the only things flying around would be harsh words and a few metaphorical fireworks. Not real ones. Duo, Heero, break it up already! This is a nice little church, let's not accidentally raze it to the ground because you two couldn't get your hormones under control."

Violet eyes blinked and twitched in the speaker's direction. "G!!"

"What?"

"I think they rather wanted to keep that little problematic detail of their private lives private, you senile old fossil." The taller man with the long mustache and strange glasses smirked, though he looked more amused than reproving.

"Ah, who's going to hear? Apart from the raving magpie in the heavy suit over there, and he's a priest, he probably didn't catch my drift anyway."

"And how about all the rest of the guests?"

The long-nosed man - and the horrified high priest - suddenly realized that the church had picked up a few additions. Men at arms for the most part. The priest stared at them in turn. There was a tall man dressed in green bearing a long-suffering air and white-gold hair fading to silver, a sword at his belt. In fact they were all armed! Behind him stood two young men, a palace guard in brown leathers with strange unruly bangs and a golden haired boy in light chain mail; a pair of wicked looking short-
swords hung on both their belts. They were holding hands. Next to them was the only person who seemed to take any notice of the high priest. A dark-haired man with a tight pony-tail, dressed in Lin guard leathers. He was glaring at the priest as if disapproving of the man's inspection of the ragtag multitude. In fact, he looked fairly dangerous - the priest managed to shuffle one step back under the ebony glare - until yet another Lin guard put a hand in his and he turned towards her with a surprised start. He stared at her for a few seconds as if planning to snatch his hand away, but instead gave the priest one last challenging glare that made his eminence swallow hard, and turned his gaze firmly towards the front of the church as if planning to look straight ahead of him for the rest of his life. The female guard smiled sardonically at him but as she glanced down at their linked hands the smile became private and gentle.

A few more people had gathered at the back, a mixture of Lin and Sanq nobility - the real guests starting to arrive! This was a disaster! An unmitigated - had that man called them 'Heero' and 'Duo'?! The tall blond man was staring at the high priest. "Well, get a move on, your eminence. I know we're early, but the boys want to bypass the pomp and cut things short, and for once I'm inclined to indulge them." His voice was regal, as was his bearing under the simple green tunic. The high priest felt the floor of the church open beneath him to plunge him into horrified confusion.

"Oh, we don't even need glitter-boy over there." The black-clad ruffian - Duo Maxwell, King of Lin!! - said. "We just need someone to say the words, spill a bit of our blood and do the honors. It can be anyone."

"Well thank the gods for that," the long-nosed man said with a huff. "He looks long-winded, and I'm starving."

"Be polite, both of you!" His bespectacled friend rasped. "This is his temple after all. He's an important member of the community. You'll have to deal with him in the future, Duo, once you and Yuy build an estate here."

The long-nosed elder and the King of Lin ignored this. But the prince of Sanq slowly turned from his contemplation of the braided man to cast a long, threatening look at the priest who'd called his husband a 'ruffian'.

The high priest took the best option available to him and quickly fainted.

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The crash of twenty pounds of robe hitting the flagstones distracted G for a few seconds. Once Sally assured them that the man was still breathing, he returned to the business at hand.

"Now that the windbag is out of the way, who does the ceremony? And don't say me, I've already gone through the stupid song and dance once."

"And the last thing anyone wants to see is you singing and dancing," Jay affirmed. "Zechs, you're the closest to them here. Do the honors."

"Me?" Zechs stared back. "But what do I have to-"

"Go up, read out the words Maxwell points to you, make a small cut in their hands with the dagger on the altar, join them together, say a few - a very few - deep and meaningful words to mark the
occasion, then we can finally call an end to all this rigmarole. Easy."

"Easy," Zechs muttered, but did as he was told. Heero and Duo stepped into the circle. Zechs read awkwardly through the arcane words in the text, cheerfully ignored the rest of the long ceremony, let them exchange ring tokens as the traditional gift, then fetched the dagger from the altar.

"Did someone think to disinfect that thing?" G's mutter echoed from the vaulted stone ceiling.

"Shh, you old fool! This is supposed to be a solemn occasion!"

"If they die of blood poisoning, their funerals will be a bundle of laughs."

"Good point. I'm not going through all this circus again. I've had to play bloody matchmaker to get peace in this forsaken region for the next few decades, I'm not putting it all back on the boiler. Zechs! Heat the dagger in that torch over there."

"Hey!" Two voices rang out at once.

"And then let it cool down a little. Wimps," Jay added under his breath.

Zechs rolled his eyes to the vaulted ceiling and did as he was told once more. It would be a relief when the two crossroad wizards went back to their respective holes and left him to rule his kingdom by himself.

He pricked the strong hands held out to him, remembering two pairs of small grubby fists reaching for his knees to hitch a ride on his legs, or tug at him for comfort. Damn, he was proud of the way his boys had grown into two fine men and rulers, but he didn't have to like it. The growing up part, that is. And of course, no grandchildren... Heero would have to adopt an heir, hopefully he'd choose a young child. The warrior-king of Sanq wouldn't mind having someone hitch a ride on his legs once again...

The two hands joined, blood mingled. Everyone looked at Zechs for a few solemn words to conclude the ceremony.

Zechs glared at his heir, a stern pillar of strength, and the king of Lin, intelligent warm eyes dancing as they caught his. Two fine men...

"Watch each other's backs. If either of you screws this up, I'll tan your hides like you were ten years old again. Now give each other a hug or whatever, and let's go eat."

"Ah-" G said suddenly.

Heero and Duo grinned at each other, eyes locking.

"Actually, Zechs-" Jay started.

Grins faded into something else, and the two spouses leaned towards each other slowly.

"That might not be a good idea-" G said quickly.

Heero's free hand reached for Duo's shoulder, tugging his husband into a firm embrace.

"Boys!" Jay barked.

Lips touched, lightly at first, a quick brush like a moment of recognition. Then Duo's hand slipped around Heero's neck and pulled the prince of Sanq into a slow sensual kiss.
"Shit! Jay, put up some shields!"

"And what good would that do if the roof caves in!"

"Break them up!"

"What are you two goats going on about?!" A scandalized Wufei barked, glaring at wizards. "Leave them alone!"

The kiss deepened, bodies meeting and melding, eyes closing.

"Fine, maybe break them up a little bit, this is getting embarrassing," Wufei muttered, putting his free fist on his hips and glaring at his boots, his face reddening. Besides him, Sally rolled her eyes, but then gave him a smile that warmed the cold stones of the temple.

Behind the guests, the tall white candles flared and melted abruptly, and the tapestries twisted in a sudden breeze that didn't come from outside but - the two embarrassed wizards concluded - that was apparently the only result of the kiss. Familiarity had taken some of the control-jarring shock from the act. But from the way the spouses were clinging to each other, the magic was still there.

"Fortunately for us, the negative effects appear to be fading," G muttered defensively, rubbing his nose and glancing around, discomfited. Jay was already half way out the door with a firm step and a sour look, intending to get away from all the smooching and back to his quiet Wastes.

Heero and Duo broke the kiss, though they remained pressed together. Duo whispered something into Heero's ear.

"Er- can you set up a- here?" Two small points of bright color appeared on Heero's cheeks.

Duo grinned and, eyes still lost in mesmerizing blue, threw over his shoulder: "Hey, G. Can I borrow your room at the inn and your magical supplies for, say, a few hours?"

"My- What?! Don't you dare.-"

"Thanks!" Duo was already pulling Heero away with a cheerful wave at the guests. "We'll see you all later. Maybe. Have fun at the feast!"

The two spouses nearly bowled over a grumbling Jay at the door and disappeared into the sunshine outside, hand in hand.

Chapter End Notes

The End

Thanks for all the lovely comments and kudos! This was my first posted fic way back in the day, but I have a fond spot in my heart for it. I'm glad you all enjoyed it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!