Virgin Sacrifice

by kracken

Summary

Duo discovers that Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned when he turns down the advances of a coworker.

Notes

Note from Dacia, the archivist: this story was originally archived at A Little Piece of Gundam Wing, which closed in 2017. With Kracken's permission, I began manually importing her works to the AO3 as part of an Open Doors-approved project after July 2017.
Outing

Duo ripped a sheet of paper down from the main bulletin board at the hub of Preventer Headquarters. In very concise, feminine script, it read;

'Duo Maxwell's virginity for sale, please call the number below. Gay men need only reply.'

"You bitch!" Duo snarled as he fist the paper and turned to the crowded room. Every eye was on him as he turned red to the roots of his long hair. Some snickered, some looked disgusted, and some looked as if they had just seen a challenge or a wet dream.

"What are you looking at, Daniels?!!" Duo snarled as he stormed past a leering agent. "You're not even gay!"

The man lifted an eyebrow and grinned. "I've never had a virgin before. I could make an exception."

"I can be your worst nightmare, asshole, so do your life a favor and don't say that again!" Duo threw back over his shoulder as he went into his office and slammed the door.

Throwing himself into a chair behind a wide, mahogany desk, Duo put his face in his hands. Why had he trusted her? He had liked and admired her. Rachel Dumous was one hell of an agent. He had liked partnering with her on tough missions. When she had made obvious advances, he hadn't wanted to lose her friendship or embarrass her. He had let her down as gently as possible during an intimate dinner. She had seemed regretful, but okay with it. They had talked late, had a few beers, and somewhere during the evening, he had... mentioned that he was still a virgin.... and gay. She had laughed, but in a nice way, and he had felt close to her.

The vid phone beeped. Duo slowly reached out and turned it on without taking his face from his hands. "Maxwell," he breathed.

"Maxwell," Milliardo Peacecraft said.

"Sir?" Duo responded.

His commanding officer sounded uncomfortable as he said, "This email that you sent... while I respect your talents and your abilities, I'm afraid... that I do not think of you as anything other than an excellent agent-"

Duo looked up, horrified. "Email? I didn't send an email to you."

Milliardo looked embarrassed. "Forgive me... it must be some sort of office humor..."

"What does it say?" Duo didn't really want to know.

Milliardo grimaced. "I will send it to you."

The screen reduced and the email popped up, so did a small image of Chang Wu Fei.

"Maxwell!" Wu Fei snarled."What is the meaning of this email? You know that I do not appreciate
"At least someone gets that it is someone's sick joke," Duo muttered as he read the email and ignored Wu Fei's ranting.

'I've decided that I'm not a heterosexual. After a long time of struggling with my attraction to men, I've decided to give in to my desires. Please email me back. Duo Maxwell.'

"Rachel Dumous sent this!" Duo shouted at Milliardo, furious. "I want something done about it!"

Milliardo made a motion of helplessness. "I don't see an email signature. Who ever sent this covered their tracks. You may know for certain that it was Dumous, but without proof, I can't bring charges. I'll send an email to everyone to ignore this, but I can only post a general warning, I'm afraid."

"Maxwell!" A familiar image popped up beside Wu Fei's still ranting one.

"Hastings?" Duo exclaimed in shock. "Aren't you in Romania? Something wrong, buddy?"

"Duo," the man chided gently and then grinned. "All you had to do was give me the sign when I was in town and we could have been doing the horizontal on the nearest flat surface."

"What the fuck?" Duo shouted. "Did you get an email too?"

Hastings looked confused. "Yeah." He looked disappointed. "Was this for someone else?"

"It wasn't for anyone!" Duo exclaimed. "I didn't send it!"

"Duo?" The tentative voice of Howard made Duo groan, turn away from the images popping up on his screen, and close his eyes with his hands fisted in his hair. "I like you a lot, shrimp," Howard continued uncertainly, "but... not like that!"

"I didn't send it! It was someone's stupid joke!" Duo shouted and then he was whipping around and turning off his computer. In the sudden, deafening silence, he heard a sound from the doorway of his office. Duo looked up and saw Heero Yuy standing there with a paper in his hands.

Heero's expression was tight. His hand on the paper was almost a fist, creasing the paper severely. His next words made it obvious that he had over heard everything. "This is a joke, then, someone paying you back for one of your practical jokes?"

"Actually, some sick assed woman getting her revenge for a bad date," Duo growled back. He tried to gauge Heero's mood, wondering if the man had come down to his office to beat the crap out of him. There was a small bit of anger in Heero's expression, but there was also disappointment and embarrassment, Duo thought, and wondered why.

"Sorry about that, Heero," Duo told him, not letting down his guard in case he was wrong about Heero's temper. "You have to know I'd never dare-"

"Is it true, though?" Heero asked abruptly, as if Duo hadn't spoken at all.

"Which part?" Duo wondered.
Heero's hand squeezed the paper tighter and Duo decided that now was not the time to lie.

"Yeah," Duo replied as he slumped in his chair. "I'm gay, I'm a virgin, and now I'm a freakin big joke. Think the rest of the day will be any better?"

Heero didn't reply. He frowned, turned away, and left.

Duo stared after him, completely confused, and then sighed. "Guess not."

"No, I didn't send it!" Duo snarled as the twentieth person appeared at his office doorway.

"Good," Sally Po sighed, "Because I'm sure you know that I only have eyes for Chang Wu Fei."

Duo looked up and found a grin. "I've told you to get a psych exam too, several times. The first step in recovery is admitting you have a problem, Sally."

She laughed as she entered the office all the way and plopped down into a chair. She swivelled, looked around at the eclectic decor that was reminiscent of a junk shop, and then gave Duo an amused eye. "Made this place your own pretty quick."

Duo blushed. "I... I was finding it hard to believe that I belonged here. I thought I'd make it more like my apartment. Now, I can just pretend I'm a squatter."

Sally raised eyebrows. "Who the hell else would belong in your chair, Maxwell? First in Preventers, five awards, sixteen commendations, two medals from the government... If there's someone better than you, let me know right now and I'll help you box your things to make way for him."

Duo shoveled papers into a stack, looking down to hide his embarrassment. "I think Heero's better, Wu Fei too."

Sally rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "Wu Fei's temper is legendary. Heero follows orders. You have something they both lack. You are inspired, flexible, and you don't lose your focus or your cool. You make an excellent team leader; a phenomenal commander. The only person who questions that is you."

Duo sighed. "I had the best training, but I'm commanding people who've been in the military their entire lives. If it were me, I'd hate a kid who blew in from the streets of L2 to tell me what to do."

"You're twenty years old," Sally scoffed. "You fought and helped win a war. You've paid your dues. You've proved yourself."

"Maybe," Duo replied skeptically and then glared at the stack of faxes in front of him. "I think my credibility has taken a big blow, though."

Sally fished one of the faxes off the stack and then frowned as she read;

I'm going to kick your ass when I see you next, Maxwell! I'm leading a dangerous operation. I do not need to be distracted by your love letters. -Captain Demetrius Brunner.
"Brunner?" Sally exclaimed. "Isn't he in the Congo?"

"My 'love letter' was sent to everyone on my contact list," Duo told her dejectedly. "It was hacked into last night."

Sally was suddenly alarmed. "Not your protected contact list?"

Duo scowled. "No, of course not. Nobody could hack into that. Our secret agents are safe. I wasn't careful enough with general contacts, though."

"Must feel like you suddenly had your pants yanked down in a big crowd, huh?" Sally sympathized.

Duo rubbed a hand across his face. "Yeah, something like that... worse, though.... I was getting credibility, especially after that big operation in Argentina."

"Wanted to lose that, 'Commander Diaper', nickname, huh?" Sally wondered.

Duo leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. "Guess I get another one. Wonder what it'll be?"

Sally decided not to speculate. Another fax spit out and Duo fished it out of its tray. He read it and then added it to the stack with a wince.

"Bad?" Sally asked.

"Hastings," Duo replied simply.

"General Hastings?" Sally winced. "So, want to tell me exactly what happened?"

"I trusted someone and they screwed me over," Duo replied bitterly. "Maybe I should have just screwed her instead and kept her happy."

"Her?" Both Sally's eyebrows went up. "I'm thinking someone hit on you and you didn't go along with it?"

"I liked her, Sally!" Duo exclaimed as he grabbed a wastebasket and used an arm to shove the stack of faxes off of his desk and into it. "I respected her. I turned her down as carefully and as gently as I could."

"How?" Sally wondered.

"Took her to dinner. Went back to my place. Had a few beers-"

"Men!" Sally exclaimed in exasperation.

Duo started. "What?"

"Don't you have a clue, Maxwell?" Sally replied. "You took a woman, who's interested in you, to dinner. You asked her back to your place. You gave her alcohol. All you left out were candles and rose petals! She thought you were romancing her. Of course she was pissed when you kicked her in the gut with your rejection!"
Duo's mouth was hanging open. He thought about it and then swore. "I really didn't-"

"Think, I know!" Sally snorted. "You should have casually told her, in a private, work related, place, namely your office or hers, that you were flattered, but no thanks. I'm surprised she didn't pull out her Smith and Wesson and unload on you stupid, thick headed-"

"She might as well have," Duo grunted and sank into his chair. "Still, what she did was way over the top. If I could prove she did it, I'd have her up on charges."

"Agreed," Sally told him. "She shouldn't be a Preventer if she can break the law, and our regulations, because of a romantic altercation."

"Altercation," Duo repeated sourly. "Sounds like a traffic accident."

"Do I get a name?" Sally prompted. "A little investigating..."

Duo almost said it, but then gritted his teeth. He finally said, "I think she did it. I don't know. Milliardo was right, without proof, there isn't a case and... it could be just coincidence."

Sally looked astonished and then she smiled as she stood up. "See why you're sitting in that chair? You keep your cool."

Duo grunted as Sally walked towards the door. "Did you have a reason, other than to reject my love letter, for coming here?"

She laughed. "I was on the same page as Chang. I thought it was a Maxwell joke. I did have a reason for coming here, though. Commander Une wants us in the operation's boiler room in one hour." She looked down at her watch. "Make that forty five minutes."

"Serious?" Duo wondered, sitting up and forgetting all about his personal troubles in an instant.

"Could be," Sally replied. "Any time she calls chief of medical in, you know she's believes there might be casualties." She waggled her id badge at him with her title. "So, grin and bear it, and let it blow over. We both know what's important here and , I think, Une's about to put us to work."

Duo grabbed his uniform jacket and slung it on as he joined her. The fax machine spit out two more faxes, exclamation marks peppering the printed sentences. "I'm coming with you," he told her. "The hell with dealing with any more of those."
"I sent the command through all channels," Milliardo told Duo as they entered the meeting room, "But I can't control which mail they open first."

"I know that," Duo grumbled as he plopped down into a leather chair at a large, oval table. Heero was already seated in the chair next to him. "Heya, Heero," Duo greeted him, trying to gauge his mood, "Ready to saddle up again?"

"Yes," Heero replied simply, eyes down as he fiddled with the computer pad in his hands. His messy chocolate bangs covered him too well for Duo to figure out his expression.

"You too, Fei?" Duo tried again, this time with Chang Wu Fei, who was sitting down across the table from him. The man scowled back at Duo and didn't reply.

Duo sighed as he sank down into his chair. This was the last thing he needed, Duo thought sourly. He would have to make the two Preventer agents understand that it hadn't been his joke. He couldn't go into an operation with his two best men angry with him.

Sally Po took a seat next to the empty chair at the head of the table. Milliardo sat on its other side. "Gang's all here," Duo said, trying to lighten the mood, "Where's boss woman?"

"Coming," Sally replied as she checked her notes.

Duo's fingers began tapping on the counter top. After a few minutes, he had a decent rhythm going and a nice backbeat. Suddenly aware of eyes on him, he stopped and looked up. Everyone was staring at him in varying stages of annoyance. "Sorry," he mumbled and then snapped, "Look, I have three operations going on right now. I don't have a lot of time to hang ar-"

"Forgive me for being late," Une apologized as she breezed into the room with an armload of briefs. She walked around the table handing them out as she explained, "This is a very intense operation, not something I can trust to anyone but the best."

Duo frowned. He didn't want to ask. He wasn't ready to face his new nemesis, not until he had managed to lock down his anger, but he knew that his personal problems had to be checked at the door in this case. He cleared his throat and then asked, "Shouldn't Rachel be here?"

Une took her seat, arranged her computer pad in front of her with meticulous care, and then replied without looking at Duo, "She is already on assignment."

"She is?" Duo blinked, taken by surprised, and then he was angry. "Why wasn't I informed? Who's coordinating her mission? What are the details?"

"Commander Maxwell," Une replied quietly. "She is not under your command. The details of her assignment do not concern you or your command at this time. Please, concentrate on the mission at hand."

Duo almost argued further, but then he saw the warning glint in Une's eyes. It was still hard to remember that he couldn't act like the hot headed pilot of Deathscythe any longer. He had to be in control. He dug a finger along the inside of the tight collar of his dress uniform jacket and then
nodded, once.

"Let's go over the maps first," Une said as she switched on a fully three dimensional map that took form at the center of the table.

Duo sighed. "Mountains in Asia. Do we get any guides?"

Une nodded with a smile. "Two natives, both with solid security clearance. They will meet you on the north side of that peek in twenty days."

She used a pointer to indicate a jagged splinter of rock topped with snow.

"I've been in those mountains before, during the war," Heero suddenly said as he narrowed eyes at the map. "I suggest not using the guides. I can lead us."

Duo eyed Heero appraisingly. The man's dark blue eyes were unflinching, sure of his knowledge and skill. "You'll brief us on the terrain, then," Duo told him, "so that we all know the way in case you're taken down."

Heero nodded, unsurprised by the order. It was logical. A verbal description wasn't as good as having walked the terrain personally, but Duo didn't want to set his men down without at least a working knowledge of the area.

"There will be supply stashes, here and here," Une told them as she pointed out the areas. "We placed them as close to the target as possible."

"That still leaves..." Duo whistled at the distance. "You have a lot of faith in us."

"I do," Une replied with a firm smile. She steepled her fingers and looked over them at her agents. "This mission is very delicate," she told them. "It's an extraction. Four civilians; three men, one woman. They're scientists. In exchange for their rescue, they're promising to come clean about a military project being headed by rebel factions."

"What sort of project?" Duo wondered sharply. "Chemical? Biological? Weaponry?"

"Genetic," Une replied as if the word left a bad taste in her mouth, "and biological."

Duo's fists clenched, remembering the plague of L2. He had survived when many hadn't, giving him first hand knowledge of just how horrific germ warfare could be. "Tell me what I need to know," He demanded icily, "So we can take these bastards down."

After the meeting, Duo met with his people in his informal office, the living room of his home. The stack of faxes and the steady beep of his computer, telling him that his mailbox was full, greeted him as he unlocked the door and led the way inside.

"First order of the evening," Duo said as he tossed his uniform coat at a chair and began turning machinery off. Sally walked past him into the kitchen and then returned with an armload of canned drinks.

"Beer," she said as she tossed one to Heero. He caught it as he sat down on the couch and loosened his tie. "Beer," she repeated as she tossed one at Duo. He caught the ice cold can without looking up from the faxes that he was shoving into the garbage and opened it one handed. "Diet soda," She
said in a teasing tone as she tossed it to Wu Fei. She winked at Wu Fei's scowl as he caught it and sat in an overstuffed chair. "Champagne peach cooler," she said with a distasteful frown and tossed it to Milliardo. He leaned against a wall, opened the can, and toasted her with it. She looked at the last drink as she settled on the couch near Heero. "And my double _mocha coffee shot." She opened it, took a drink, and then sighed happily.

"Plan on unpacking this year, Maxwell?" Sally asked as she motioned with her can at a stack of boxes. They were all open, but not emptied.

Duo shrugged as he plopped down on the couch between her and Heero. He stretched out his feet, putting them on the scratched coffee table, and draped one arm over the back of the sofa and behind Heero. "I'm still not sure I like this place," he told her.

Milliardo raised an eyebrow. "Usually someone determines that after a few weeks, not months."

"Sir," Duo corrected him.

Milliardo smiled and gave him a nod. "Sir."

Duo laughed, "I think you like taking orders."

"From certain people, yes," Milliardo replied, but then his eyes flashed. "Just remember, sir, that outside of this mission, I am your superior."

"Yes, sir," Duo smirked and then unloaded maps and disks from a leather satchel. Laptops came out of cases and everyone settled down to work out their roles in the mission.

Milliardo found a chair near Sally and everyone managed to arrange themselves around Duo. He was the center and the commander. They questioned, they found the answers together, but Duo was the final say in everything. He kept tight control, made everyone confident in their abilities and the mission, and managed to play host as well. After pizza, snacks, and more drinks, the living room was full of trash, sated and weary Preventer agents, and scattered notes, maps, and supply lists.

"Any more questions?" Duo asked as he stretched out on the couch and opened another beer. He sipped it lying prone, his head propped up on a cushion. Heero was sitting at his feet, but everyone else was taking their cue to leave.

"Just one," Wu Fei said as he put his laptop away. "Who's your second?"

There was tension. Duo pretended not to notice. This was always the hard part. Most commanders had a man or woman that they could depend on to take command if something happened to them. They chose the best on their teams. Duo's problem was, that everyone on his teams were the best. They knew it too, so this moment was always fraught with a certain rivalry.

Duo's bare feet were resting against Heero's thigh. The decision was as simple as that. Duo could have argued about ability and Heero's intimate knowledge of the area, but he had just given them a thorough mental walk through. Any one of them could have been just as competent.

"Heero, he'll be my second," Duo said and rubbed at his forehead as weariness and beer began to take their toll. "Dismissed everyone. Take tomorrow off. Do all the civilized things you love, because we're going into hard training day after tomorrow."
Wu Fei's eyes almost gleamed with anticipation. The man loved missions and loved challenging his skills. Duo hoped that Sally's presence would keep him grounded and remind him that he was supposed to come out of the mission alive. Milliardo had a look on his face that promised a day of fine wine and classical music. Sally was slipping an arm through Wu Fei's. Her smile told Duo clearly what her plans entailed. He blushed and hid it as he pretended to scratch an itch on his cheek.

Everyone was going out of the front door and saying their goodbyes. It was then that Heero finally stood up. Duo tried to divine his mood, but Heero's scowling face gave nothing away. He watched everyone leave and Duo was suddenly anxious, wondering if Heero was really going to be crazy enough to try and get even with him for embarrassing him earlier that day.

Duo waited for Heero to make the first move. Heero fiddled with his tie, tucked his laptop more securely under his arm, and then said, looking at the open door, "I would like to be removed from my post as Second, sir."

Duo sat up slowly and put the beer aside on the coffee table. "Why?" Heero and Wu Fei never called him 'sir' and Duo never insisted on it. He supposed that he badgered Milliardo for the respect, only because Milliardo so clearly outranked him and Duo needed to emphasize to the others that he was in charge, not Milliardo.

"Personal reasons," Heero replied and looked as if he would rather be facing fifty Tauruses than admit that something personal was going to effect his performance.

Duo was instantly angry. "If you're having a fight with one of the others, then I think we should clear the air right now, Heero. I know Wu Fei can be an arrogant s.o.b., but you noticed that I picked you and not him. You keep your cool better."

Heero clutched his laptop very tightly. "I can ignore Chang's insufferable arrogance. He's an excellent agent."

"So...?" Duo prompted. "Is this going to be twenty questions, Heero? I have to tell you, I had a very shitty day, and I just want to forget about the rest of it and go to bed."

Heero checked his watch. It was still early.

"Heero, get to the point, or you're going," Duo warned.

"It's you," Heero said and then gritted his teeth.

"Ah." Duo leaned back into the couch again and motioned for Heero to sit down. "Tell me all about it."

Heero sat stiffly, as if he had just sat on a spike. Duo's feet were against his thigh again and Duo refused to make more room for him. Heero went even stiffer, if that were possible, and stared down at them.

"Spit it out," Duo ordered. "You hate me. You think I'm a screw up, L2, slum baby, and you just know you should be in charge, not me... that about sum it up?"

Heero was very still and very quiet for a long moment and then he replied, "No."
Duo frowned. "No," he echoed, confused. "Then what the hell...?"

"You said..." Heero struggled and then said in a rush, "You said that you were gay."

"If you're going to tell me you're a homophobe, Heero, I'm going to call you a liar!" Duo exclaimed. "We have the same friends and I know you don't have a problem with Quatre and Trowa."

Heero clasped his hands in his lap tightly and his knuckles went white. Feeling the man's leashed tension, Duo pulled his knees up and gave Heero more room.

"Heero, talk to me," Duo insisted. "If this is about those freakin emails and faxes, I told you that I didn't send them... oh!" Duo suddenly understood. "I get it! You thought I was coming on to you and it creeped you out. Now you can't look at me without thinking I might really try something... is that it?"

Heero frowned and then stood up. He said, "Yes." but it was said as if he had meant to say something different and he was surprised by his own lie.

Duo shot to his feet as well, furious as he shouted, "That is the lamest excuse I've ever heard, Yuy! Get it together and lock whatever the fuck your problem is down, because you are going to be my Second. Got that?"

Heero looked almost shaken. "Yes, sir."

"Damn right, yes, sir," Duo snarled. "Now get the hell out of here!"

Heero left, closing the door behind him, but Duo kept glaring at the closed door for some time afterward. He hadn't been prepared for that to hurt so much. What the hell? Heero was just the ex terrorist who deigned to do missions for him, wasn't he? He was the man who was as unemotional as a rock and as serious as death about everything. Maybe they had formed a working relationship and they could talk from time to time, but he hadn't really expected... Loyalty? Respect? Friendship?

Showers, gym, last target practice... the images played themselves for Duo and he remembered teasing Heero about whether he dated guns or not, remembered sneaking a look at the muscled beauty that was Heero under a spray of hot water, joked about his ability to do so many pushups and how that would probably make someone very happy.

Duo scrubbed at his face. "Idiot!" Duo suddenly saw the attraction that he had been trying to keep locked down and bottled up. He did have a thing for that perfect killer, that top agent, that handsome man... who was totally uninterested in him and well within his rights to be totally pissed at Duo and unable to work a mission with him.

It didn't matter, Duo knew. He still needed Heero for the mission. He couldn't let their feelings get in the way of something so important. Duo would have to forget his attraction and Heero would have to forget his fear that Duo would compromise the mission and him because of it.

Duo picked up his beer, took a last drink, and then smashed the can in one hand.

"Fuck this day to hell!" Duo shouted in anguish and threw the can at the door.
"Where is he?" Duo grabbed the clock and blinked blearily at the time while he balanced his cell phone between his ear and his shoulder blade. He was strangling in a sweaty sheet and he had just been catapulted out of a nasty dream about mobile suits chasing him, shooting emails and faxes instead of pulse beams.

"Hanson's bar, thirty fifth... near the iron works," the voice told him.

"Off the record, right?" Duo said a little prayer.

"Yeah," the agent replied. "He saved my ass during the war. Time to return the favor. Better get him commander, he was in a bad way when I saw him and that isn't any place for law abiding agents."

And why were you there? Duo wondered but kept it behind his teeth."Thank you, Paul. I'm leaving right now."

Duo tossed his cell aside and kicked the sheet off of him. Scrambling to his feet, he grabbed the same clothes that he had discarded earlier that night in a long line to his bedroom door and pulled them on. Jamming a leftover piece of pizza into his mouth, he put on his shoes, grabbed his keys, and trotted out the front door.

Heero Yuy, drunk and asking for it in a titty bar in a bad section of town. A titty bar known for prostitutes, drug dealers, and 110 proof drinks made in the back. As Duo climbed into his car and raced out of the parking garage with squealing tires, he wondered if he was still having a nightmare. Heero was the straight arrow, the by the book agent, the man who always followed orders, and the yardstick everyone measured themselves by.

Duo finished his slice of pizza, wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand, and scowled at traffic. Who would know what was bugging Heero? Duo didn't like going in unprepared. If something had happened between the end of the meeting and his wake up call... Duo pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

"Fei?" Duo said as soon as someone mumbled something angry and unintelligible into the other end of the line.

"Maxwell?" Wu Fei's anger sizzled.

"Did you see Heero after the meeting?" Duo asked without giving the man time to shout at him.

"No," Wu Fei replied and his voice became more alert. "Has something happened?"

Duo wasn't about to tell Wu Fei about Heero. It was bad enough that one person beside himself was privy to the man going on a bender ."I had some new info. I wanted to touch base with him."

Preventer business was important. Wu Fei's anger had clearly subsided when he said, "It's late, but the man works off stress physically. He could be at the gym."

"I'll check," Duo told him. "Sorry I woke you up."
Wu Fei grunted and then they both hung up. Duo tapped the phone against his forehead and then speed dialed Sally.

"Talk," Sally answered in a tone of voice that told Duo that she was wide awake and working on something.

"Emergency?" Duo guessed.

"Yes, indeede," she replied. "Manx here decided that taking his medication with a shot of scotch was a peachy idea. Stupid, right, Agent Manx?" A voice muttered in the background. "So, my evening is ruined," she continued. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Heero," Duo said and then wondered how much to say. She was his personal doctor, and the doctor of many of the top agents, and she often doubled as a drinking buddy/psychologist when things were bad. If Heero was in trouble, he might have said something to her. "Did he talk to you tonight, or recently, about... any troubles he might be having?"

Sally suddenly sounded cross. "Men!" she growled. "If one of you had a leg off, probably one in a hundred of you would ever notice. Of course he has troubles, all of you do. Why? Something bad happen?"

"No," Duo replied shortly.

"Meaning, yes," Sally said in exasperation. "Look, keep your damn secrets, but don't be stupid. If Heero is in some sort of trouble, and you're trying to get him out of it, remember that he is still trigger happy, has a killer right cross, has a problem with depression and self sacrifice, and needs enough medication to take out a bull elephant to sedate him."

"Heero's strong, but I'm a match for him," Duo retorted.

"Are you expecting a fight?" Sally zeroed in on that slip like a laser beam.

Duo turned onto an off ramp and didn't reply until he had found the right road. The he said, "God, I hope not."

"Want some backup?" Sally wondered.

"No," Duo replied. "I think... we had a weird conversation after everyone left. Maybe it upset him."

"Define weird?" Sally sounded as if she were rummaging in something and then she called out to a nurse, presumably, "Get him monitored. I don't like his blood pressure or his pupils."

"Define weird," Sally asked again. "Is this about those faxes and emails? He didn't think it was serious, did he?"

"Yeah," Duo replied in a small voice. "Look, it's not important what we said, but... maybe he took what I said, harder than I thought."

Sally sighed. "So, what? Did you tell him it wasn't you, that it was all someone's sick vendetta against you? Did you tell him that you wouldn't make a serious pass at him in a million years?"
"Yeah," Duo replied tightly.

Sally asked quietly, "Did he accept that?"

"I don't know," Duo replied. "I think so."

"Idiot!" Sally exclaimed and Duo took the phone away from his ear for a moment. "You hurt his feelings. I'll bet you he wanted that email to be for real."

Duo scowled. "Number one, the man has no feelings. Number two, if he did, they wouldn't be about me. Number three, he's not gay."

"Huh?" Sally sounded confused, but then she was shouting. "Prep him, stat! His blood pressure just crashed!" The phone clattered and Duo heard people shouting and wildly running. Sally shouted orders.

Duo hung up his phone and tossed it into the seat next to him. His hands clenched on the steering wheel as he neared his destination. Sally was too much of a romantic. She wanted to paint Heero with a 'normal' brush and give him motives and reactions Duo knew the man had never experienced in his life. Heero disappointed that Duo Maxwell hadn't really wanted to lose his virginity to him? Yeah, when Hell froze over and the devil handed him the keys.

What was more likely? Something to do with the mission. Heero had been in that area before. It was very possible, that the man was experiencing some nasty memories. They all had them, and Duo had, himself, tried to drown a few in drink. Why was it so unlikely that Heero had finally found one that he wanted to drown? All rumor to the contrary, he was only human.

Duo decided to rely on that as Heero's motivation. All that was left now was to pull the man out of his drunk and get him home without anyone the wiser.

Duo pulled in next to the bar. It was dark. The iron works was closed and the streetlights were either spluttering or broken. People didn't live in that area and the bar serviced the workers and the people who catered to them. Prostitutes lounged outside the bar and shadowy figures promised darker pleasures for the right price.

"This brings back memories," Duo muttered as he checked his weapons. "Bad memories."

He left his car and cautiously entered the bar, ignoring the calls of the prostitutes. He blinked at the dim light, at the long bar, and at the tables that were old, scuffed, and nailed to the floor. A woman on a small square of stage was dancing to cheesy music, completely naked and looking bored. She looked old enough to be Duo's unknown mother and her body was beginning to answer the call of gravity.

"Wants some company?" A younger version of the dancer, clothed in strings and bits of cloth, hooked onto Duo's arm and smiled up at him hopefully. She nodded to the back of the room and a door. "Fifty credits gets you fifteen minutes."

"No thanks." Duo disengaged his arm and gave her his back.

Duo hunched into his coat and eyed the customers. He hoped that Heero was gone, that he wouldn't have to confront the man in that kind of place, but he spotted Heero in a shadowy corner, pouring the last of something from a bottle into a shot glass.
Heero's attention was on the amber liquid. He looked depressed, face set in lines of misery under a mop of messy, chocolate hair. A woman sidled up to him. He flipped her a few credits and she went away to get him another bottle. Another woman slid into his lap and wiggled, simpering at him. He hung an arm around her waist, attention completely on his drink as she said something and giggled. He shook his head at whatever she was saying and she looked sympathetic.

As Duo slowly approached he heard the girl say, "You keep paying me for nothing and I'll feel like a charity case. Come on. You need to feel good. I've never seen you drink like this."

That was something, Duo thought in relief. Maybe Heero liked to frequent titty bars, but he wasn't a drunk. He saw Heero slip the girl a few credits. She stuffed them into her ample cleavage and sighed.

"Go buy your little girl something and find a different job, Angeliqeut," Yuy slurred and then he drank the glass of alcohol in one gulp.

"But who'd be around to cheer you up, then, honey?" Angelique teased.

"Me, maybe," a man, that looked as if he lifted shuttles for a living, said and grabbed her by the arm. He stuffed credits into her cleavage as he leered at her. "Come on, baby. Let's go spread your legs in the back."

"Oh, shit!" the bartender groaned. "I'm calling the cops this time, Yuy! Don't make trouble!"

"Trouble?" Heero grunted as he shook his empty bottle and then looked for the waitress who had gone to get him another.

"She's a whore!" the bartender was lifting a vid phone receiver. "You don't want her, but other people do. You can't sit here all night and trash my place every time someone wants a go!"

"That's right," the big man said as he squeezed Angelique's breast. "She knows her job. Let's get that skirt up, baby. Come on. Tell fag boy to mind his own business."

Angelique plastered on a fake smile and winked. "Come on then. Sorry, Heero. Business is business."

Heero didn't watch her go. The waitress brought his new bottle and put it down quickly before retreating. Everyone was breathless. Duo had stopped walking, waiting along with everyone else to see what Heero would do. Heero uncapped the bottle and poured himself a drink. The tension snapped and everyone relaxed. The bartender put down the receiver and Duo began walking again.

Suddenly, Heero downed his drink in one gulp and then slung the bottle. It took the big man square in the head and shattered. He went down, sprawling, and Angelique cried out as alcohol and glass splattered her.

"He hit Harry!" another large man shouted angrily and chairs slid back as a back table full of burly iron workers stood up.

"Shit!" Duo breathed.

Heero stood up, as if he had wanted and expected this. There was an evil smirk on his face and his
blue eyes glittered. Fighting drunk, Duo thought angrily. He looked small next to the big men, but they seemed wary, so wary that Duo was sure they'd seen Heero in action before. That never stopped men who were drunk, though. They always assumed that numbers would prevail no matter how many times that theory was proved wrong. It also helped to fight dirty. Duo saw a man come out of the sidelines before Heero did, swinging a chair.

"Freeze!" Duo shouted as he pulled out his service revolver. "Preventer agent!"

Drunken men tended to be hard of hearing as well. The man with the chair bulled forward even as his fellows gave Duo a double take of shock. Heero was suddenly aware of him though. He spun and a kick took out the chair with an explosion of wood chips. Holding on to what was left, the big man was defenseless against Heero's solid punch to his jaw. He went down instantly, sprawled and unconscious. The other men took that opportunity to attack Heero, forgetting all about Duo and his gun in their immediate need for revenge.

Angelique passed by Duo on her way out of the bar, muttering, "Might as well call it a night."

Duo sighed, holstered his gun, and then waded into the fight. He kicked and punched and cleared a way to Heero.

"Yuy!" Duo shouted. "Get your ass out of this situation right now, and that's an order!"

Heero blinked blearily at him as he fended off punch after punch from the other men as if he were swatting flies. He nodded stiffly, began fighting back in earnest, and, with Duo fighting at his side, they both made the door and stumbled outside.

The door seemed to be a boundary. They weren't followed. Duo glared at Heero as he asked, "Where the hell is your car?"

Heero shrugged. "Didn't bring it," he replied sullenly as he settled his jacket on his shoulders and zipped it up.

"Then you can ride with me," Duo snapped. "Get the hell in my car."

When they were in the car and pulling away from the curb, Duo speared Heero with a hot look. "Care to explain?" he demanded.

Heero leaned against the passenger side window and glared out at the darkness.

"Explain or you're off the mission," Duo threatened. "I don't need drunken screw ups on my team."

Duo rubbed at his aching jaw. Someone had managed to get in a lucky punch. He could feel the bruise rising. Heero had stiffened at his words. He replied slowly, "I... I don't usually do that."

"They all seem to know you pretty well," Duo observed sourly. "You do know that a Preventer agent paying for prostitutes, and acting in a drunken and disorderly fashion, is automatically relieved of duty, don't you?"

"I wasn't paying for prostitutes," Heero replied tightly. "I don't need to do that."

"They give it for free, then?" Duo retorted sarcastically.
Heero glared and then turned his face back to the window. "I made a bad decision. I deserve to be put on report. I will sign the form."

"That easy?" Duo snarled."I want an explanation!" He pulled over close to the edge of the city, parked, and turned off the engine. He turned in his seat to look at Heero. "Is it about the mission?" he demanded. "Does something about it have you spooked?"

Heero seemed genuinely surprised. "No, I don't have any problem with the mission at all."

"Then..." Duo floundered, his main theory pulled out from under him. "What made you want to get drunk and flatten some iron workers? And don't say it's personal. I can't afford freakin' personal. I need to know where your head is at."

Heero smelled strongly of alcohol, sweat, and blood. He had a cut lip and it was oozing. He said uncomfortably, "Sometimes... I want to go back to the war, when I just did what I was told and didn't worry about having a life. It get's complicated and I'm not sure... I'm not sure what to do in some situations... or what to say."

He shut up then and Duo took that puzzle piece and tried to fit it into the puzzle he already had. "Is this about what happened earlier, about you thinking I was making a pass at you?" He sighed when Heero frowned and still refused to look at him. "Okay, so you don't do well with the women and you freaked when you thought a guy might want to date you instead, am I right?" Heero didn't respond, only tensed. "Heero, just because you don't know how to ask women on a date, doesn't mean you're gay. You shouldn't go drink yourself to death either, because you're afraid of it. If you didn't start wanting guys at puberty, there's a good chance you aren't gay, okay? Be secure in you heterosexuality and stop trying to solve your problems with 110 proof. Sally's good to talk to about this sort of thing. You should hook up with her. She'll set you straight... er... you know what I mean."

Heero finally looked at him, eyes dark in the light of the dashboard."Duo..."

Someone tapped on their windshield. An uncomfortable police officer signaled Duo to roll down his window. Duo complied, annoyed. He was sure that Heero had been about to confide in him.

"Yes, officer?" Duo asked.

"Son, if you want romance, take it home," the man drawled.

Duo blinked owlishly and then blushed. He almost told the man that they were Preventer agents and then shut his mouth. He nodded dumbly and turned on the engine of the car. The man waved them on and backed up as Duo pulled back onto the road.

"Guess it's better that they don't know who we are," Duo muttered.

Duo looked over at Heero and saw that he was hunched and glaring out of the window. He'd lost the moment. Heero wasn't talking.

"I'm having everyone meet at the gym in the morning," Duo decided angrily. "I want you there whether you have a hangover or not. If you can't stay out of trouble, then I'll make sure you're too busy to get into it." He glared at incoming traffic for a moment and then added, as his hands worked on the steering wheel, "Talk to Sally, Heero. She really can help you."
He glanced over at Heero when there wasn't a reply and saw that he had either fallen asleep or passed out. "What the hell happened to you?" Duo whispered to the night and wished that it could give him an answer.
Duo could hear Heero lifting weights behind him; the grunts, the clank of weights, and his labored breathing. After twenty minutes, Duo imagined that he would have a sheen of sweat and that the damp locks of his dark hair would be hanging in his dark, blue eyes.

Don't look, Duo thought to himself sternly. Keep your back turned. Don't listen to him. Don't think about-

"Maxwell! What the hell is the meaning of this fax you sent me?" A tall, dark man, in a crisp Preventer uniform, was waving the fax almost in Duo's face and he looked furious. "If you think I like these jokes of yours..."

Duo grunted as he let go of the bench press and straightened. He took the fax and growled. "At least you know it's a joke, Ramen."

"I have three kids, a wife, and an ex wife," the man snarled back. "I do think you're intelligent enough to know that I'm not a homosexual."

"Someone was playing a joke on me," Duo explained as he crumpled the fax and tossed it behind him.

Ramen's anger suddenly turned to humor. He laughed. "About time! Payback's hell, isn't it, Maxwell?"

Duo glared. "Actually, this has nothing to do with my jokes. Besides, I never went over the top like this. This person is breaking a dozen regulations and possibly compromising agents."

Ramen sobered. "That sounds serious. Any idea who's sending them?"

Duo scowled. "Yeah, by all accounts, I am. Someone hacked into my personal contact list. They were good. They rigged my computer just long enough to send and then they burned their way back out."

"I'd hang them by their balls," Ramen swore as he turned and left.

"That would be a little hard," Duo grumbled under his breath. "Rachel doesn't have any."

"Hey, commander!" Sally panted from her ski machine. "Isn't there a saying that a commander doesn't ask his troops to do what he won't?"

Duo threw her a look over his shoulder to retort, but the words he had been able to say died in his throat as he saw Heero beside her, shirtless, flex all of his upper body muscles to lift an incredible amount of weight. He remembered last night, getting Heero to his apartment, getting him down to his underwear and a shirt, and then tipping him into bed. He hadn't thought much about it. A drunken fellow agent and a duty to make sure he was all right. Now... Duo could feel his groin tighten. He dropped his sweat towel into his lap self consciously. Sally snickered, understanding very well what was making him look suddenly uncomfortable.

Heero was oblivious, a frown line between his eyebrows and his eyes looking at nothing, as he
flexed and let the weights down with a clank. If he had a hangover, he wasn't showing it.

"Point taken," Duo grumbled and turned back around to start exercising again.

Heero's apartment had been a surprise. No at all what Duo would have expected. A pale carpet, dark brown, leather furniture, and computer room with some state of the art toys. Heero had decorated with a very masculine flair; chrome and glass, pictures of the inner schematics of mechs, a display of medals and accommodations, a gun cabinet, and a bedroom that had a low bed, dark blankets, and a dresser mirror pinned all a round the frame with pictures. Duo had found himself in several of them, as well as his fellow agents.

Heero had a home and it was... human, warm, and a place Duo wouldn't have minded living in himself. The thought was strange and he felt embarrassed, knowing that he had imagined Heero in a place with four bare walls; a place he might go to sleep, but nothing else.

"Commander Maxwell?"

Duo snarled at the strange agent in front of him, "If this is about those faxes and emails...!"

The young man blinked, startled, and then replied, "No, sir, your traveling orders."

The man handed Duo a slim case and Duo took it, his mouth hanging open. In the next moment he was shouting to the others, "Saddle up, people! Marching orders!"

There were shocked exclamations, but they didn't take time to question him. Duo was already jerking his cell phone out of his duffle, speed dialing Une, and putting it to his ear.

"Une," She answered tightly.

"Maxwell," Duo bit out.

"You better be on your way to the transport, commander," Une snarled. "You have twenty minutes to lift off."

Duo jumped from his exercise machine and began running along with his team, phone still at his ear. "Explain! Why now?"

"Thing's have heated up," Une explained. "Ready or not, Maxwell, you and your team are online."

"Shit!" Duo swore.

"Exactly," Une retorted and the line went dead.

"Twenty minutes!" Duo shouted to his team and they scrambled to get their gear.

They all kept mission gear in bags in their lockers. After retrieving them, they ducked into the showers and did the bare minimum to get the sweat off. Dressing in tough, unmarked cold weather gear, they stopped to collect their personal weapons before running full tilt to the hanger and onto the Preventer airstrip. There, men were scrambling to load a transport with speed and efficiency. Duo and his team entered the cargo hold, dodging the packs that the crew were tossing from one man to another up into the ship.
"You're ten minutes late, Maxwell!" A pilot snarled from a doorway. "Get your lead butts in your seats. I'm taking off!"

They strapped in while the crew jumped down from the ship and closed the hatch with a motorized clang. The transport's engine was already revving and hot. They braced when it lurched into motion and gripped their straps when it began racing down the airstrip. Take off was at top g force.

"Asshole!" Duo gritted and felt a headache starting.

The ship leveled off and Duo sighed as he checked his teammates. Sally grinned at him as she tossed him a protein drink. He caught it deftly, popped the top, and drank it down as he sweated in his gear.

"You look green," Sally said, "You okay?"

He'd had zero sleep, because of taking care of his drunken teammate, followed by a workout, and topped off with a skipped lunch. "I'm fine," he shot back as he unbuckled from his seat. "Everyone unstrap and check your gear," he ordered. "We only have an hour until drop off and I want to make sure they packed everything."

Milliardo began checking several long range, laser sighted, rifles. They were heavy, but he had the strength of arm for them. Heero was checking their survival gear and Duo was glad of that. If the ground crew had miscalculated, or packed the gear wrong, they could easily die in the rugged mountains before they reached their target. Sally checked the medical supplies. Wu Fei was checking their guidance and communications systems. Duo began checking over their jump gear.

Duo checked Heero over with his eyes. The man was wearing a pale parka with a fur rimmed hood pushed back. Duo was certain it hid a dozen weapons. His own white parka did as well. It brought Heero's dark hair and eyes out in sharp relief and made him look very intense and very dangerous. His eyes were bright and his hands were steady. He didn't hesitate as he checked every survival item they had and Duo saw him muttering accurate calculations for food usage based on weight, energy level, and mission requirement for each team member. Duo was impressed. How a man could go from a complete, breakdown drunk to a fully functioning, in top condition, agent, in under a few hours, was phenomenal.

Could he keep it up though? Duo made some mental calculations of his own, shuffling team members in his head based on their abilities. If Heero did crash and burn later, he needed to be ready to replace him. His eyes and hands went over the drop packs as he continued to think. When Heero leaned close and said, "I am not impaired," it startled him.

"Huh?" Duo was very sure that Heero wasn't a mind reader.

Heero grimaced and looked at their other teammates. He kept his voice low, and the roaring of the engines almost drowned him out as he said, "Last night was not usual."

"Didn't look that way to me," Duo ground out as he checked the fuel level of each pack, not bothering with a gauge that might prove faulty.

"It doesn't degrade my performance," Heero sidestepped.

"Yet," Duo retorted and glared. "Look, this is not the time. I'm trusting you. Don't let me down. We'll have a visit with Sally and psych when we get back, kay?"
Heero looked angry and walked away to separate the survival packs and hand them out.

"Fuck you anyway, doing this to me," Duo grumbled under his breath, but hated himself for saying it in the next moment. They all had their moments of falling below what was required by their dangerous jobs. This time it was Heero. Duo knew that he had to stop being pissed, mop up the mess, and hand out discipline later. Heero couldn't go into a mission distracted about how he might feel towards him. That thinking had to be shut off at the cargo door.

"Maxwell? You ready, or you need more time?" the pilot called over the intercom. 'More' was said in a sarcastic tone.

"Ready when you are, Phelps!" Duo shouted back and glared at his people. They scrambled to get their gear on and strapped down before getting into their drop packs.

Duo put on his packs and couldn't help walking behind Heero's back and checking the man's gear. Sally saw him do it and smirked. Duo shot her a bird and turned away.

"Get in your happy place!" Duo warned. "Say your prayers! Kiss your good luck charms! Check your ammo!"

Duo stood facing the cargo door, flicking his hands and wrists, trying to stay loose. His teammates lined up in front of him. Duo wouldn't jump himself until he saw everyone off the ramp.

Duo tucked his braid into the back of his parka and zipped it up tight, angry at himself for forgetting. He adjusted his straps one more time. The time before a jump was always nerve wracking for him. He hated gravity, hated that fear of something malfunctioning and falling to his death. He supposed space wasn't much better. There, a person had to be afraid of a suit leak.

A red light began flashing.

Duo tried to calm his heart beat. Wu Fei looked as if he were about to fall asleep, relaxed and uncaring. Milliardo was eager, a large, confident presence at the front of the line. Sally looked matter of fact, as if she did it a hundred times a day. Heero was tense, but with a tension that wasn't fear. It was anticipation. Adrenalin junkie, Duo thought with a snort.

A yellow light flashed and the cargo hold ground gears. "Ready to jump?" The pilot called.

"Ready. All go!" Duo responded.

The cargo door swung down and they were hit with freezing cold and the sight of blue skies. The decision to use packs had been a good one. They would get down quicker than with a chute and be less noticeable.

"Jump!" The pilot ordered and a green light flashed.

"Jump!" Duo ordered.

Milliardo went out, leaping gracefully from the ship. Wu Fei followed, simply letting the drag of air pull him out. Sally was all military, perfect in her execution. Heero grinned and jumped as if he didn't care whether he died in the next instant or not as long as he could feel the rush. Duo gritted his teeth and swore, as he tucked down his chin and threw himself into a maelstrom of cold wind.
and took the long fall down to earth.

The anti grav jets were harsh and hot strapped to such small power pack and the packs were notorious for failing. Still, when the mission was important, they were the best for getting a man down quickly and under cover. Duo sweated even in the cold, feeling the metal of the distributors heating up along his back. The pack would only work at certain altitudes and it seemed an eternity to reach it, to wonder if it would work, to make peace with his god in case it didn't.

Duo counted slowly in his head to distract himself, hating the freezing cold wind against his face. He refused to watch the mountains rushing up to meet him and refused to look for his comrades. There was a very thin line, he felt, between determination and panic. He didn't want to accidentally cross it.

An alarm sounded in Duo's ear and a green light flashed along an arm of the pack. Time. "Come on, God," Duo muttered under his breath as he hit the switch. "Be nice to ole' Maxwell for once."

The anti grav kicked in and took its sweet time slowing Duo down from the bone crushing speed of his descent. He hit the sweet spot on the target area perfectly and grinned as he approached the others. They were all off their mark, except for Wu Fei, who was managing to look smug about it even as he swept the area with his instruments to pick up any sign that the enemy had noticed them. He gave the all clear sign as they hid their gear under the snow in the gap between two jagged rocks.

Heero was checking his glock. Milliardo was settling his gear on his tall frame, and Sally was checking her medical equipment.

"Good to go," Heero said impatiently.

Duo popped gum into his mouth and began chewing as he checked their position relative to their target. It settled his nerves and the butterflies in his stomach from the long drop.

"Go," Sally announced.

"Go," Milliardo echoed, strapped with their ammo and extra weapons.

"Go," Wu Fei said as he shut down the satellite feed on his instruments and nodded at Duo. "All clear."

"Okay guys," Duo drawled as he took the lead. "Fall in. Keep it down, keep it low. We don't want the target to know we're here until we're up their shorts."

Sally snickered. Wu Fei looked annoyed. "Maxwell," he grumbled, but didn't say anything more as they began walking into the mountains.

"Keep that proximity alarm red hot," Duo said to Wu Fei.

"I know my job," Wu Fei retorted.

Duo collared him and brought him into line behind him. "Then do it close to me," Duo told him. "I want to be the first to know, instantly, if they see us."

Wu Fei merely grunted and kept his eyes on his instruments as he kept in step with Duo, trusting
his commander to lead him safely.

It was a grueling walk and the cold was bone chilling. A wind picked up early on and they all tucked down their chins and zipped their parkas tight.

Duo eyed the lowering sky. "Weather report?"

Wu Fei checked a reading and then swore. "System moving in."

"Shit!" Duo swore. "How long?"

"An hour," Wu Fei estimated. "It's forming up over that peak. " He motioned to their left

"Still can't predict the weather," Sally grumbled, "Especially up here."

Duo checked his GPS. Their first cache site was still several miles away. It was taking a chance, banking on the storm not being severe enough to hurt them. It was his call.

"Heero?" Duo asked.

Heero eyed the sky. His expression was tense and thoughtful, as if he were gauging the weather by the feel in his bones. "We can make the cache," he finally said.

Heero knew the land and knew his own capabilities. Did he know theirs, though? "Can we all make it or just you?" Duo wondered bluntly.

Heero frowned at him. "Weather is unpredictable," he replied, echoing Sally.

"You're my Second," Duo snapped. "Act like it!"

Heero almost came to attention. He said in a tight voice, "Estimated chance of success, seventy five percent."

Duo nodded. "Good enough. Let's go people!"

Their mission was important and time was short. They couldn't waste it being bogged down by a storm. They had to push through to the cache and, hopefully, be able to travel again soon after that. Duo wouldn't order them into a suicide situation, but he couldn't balk if there was a chance of success either. They had all known the risks when they had signed up.

The thin air and the falling snow had everyone panting and struggling. Duo kept an eye on his team and an eye on his GPS, leading them to safety. He ignored his own discomfort, his frozen hands and feet, and the way his head ached and pounded with every step. Just a little more, he told himself, like a litany.

They scrambled across a broken stretch of rocks, jagged and slippery, and then found the sensor chip. Half blinded by the sting of the pelting snow, they searched until they found the entrance to a low cave. It was blocked by snow and small rocks, but it only took a little effort to make enough space for them to crawl inside.

Like the inside of a snow globe, Duo thought as his light shone on ice and rock all around them. The space was very small. They barely had enough room to set up their heat and light tabs and
arrange their gear to give them room to lie down.

"Check your feet and hands," Duo ordered as he sat and began pulling off his snow encrusted boots and gloves. It was awkward, his fingers were numb.

When everyone was done and checked out, Duo allowed himself to relax. Wu Fei came in after setting up perimeter alarms and they ate a warm meal, from meal packs, before settling down to catch what sleep they could.

Duo set his watch alarm for four hours. It was as much as he could allow them. The next part of the journey was even more rugged than the first and it didn't get better the closer they came to the target. As Duo rolled up in his sleeping bag, he hoped that the weather lifted and gave them clearer skies. As time wound down, they would have to travel, bad whether or not, and Duo didn't want to see any of his people suffer with frostbite, including himself.

"Hey boss man," Sally said in Duo's ear. He twitched and then turned his head to frown at her.

"You're supposed to be resting, medic," he berated her in a harsh whisper.

Sally was monitoring him with a handheld device, though, and looking worried. "Saw you struggling, commander, so shut up and let me work."

Duo shut up, face flushing hotly.

"Low level fever and some sensitivity to the thin air," Sally diagnosed at last as she shut her medical pad. "Looks like Heero gets to be First now."

"Like hell!" Duo hissed. "I'm not staying behind. I'm a colony brat and thin air does not bother me."

"Filtered, canned air, maybe, but Earth air filled with Earth crap, yes, it is bothering you, boss man," Sally told him regretfully. "This must be your first time this high up."

"No," Duo snapped back.

Sally eyed him. "Then first time carrying a heavy pack, while in a snowstorm, and suffering from a fever?"

Duo gritted his teeth and then bit out, "I'm not staying behind."

"I'll be watching you," Sally warned him. "First sign you're not competent and I'll take the decision out of your hands, got that commander?"

Stung, Duo watched her go back to her sleeping bag. It was impossible for everyone not to have heard her. He saw glittering eyes appraising him in the low light.

"I'm a Goddam Gundam Pilot," Duo growled at them as he rolled over and faced a rock wall glowing with ice. "I am not going down because of a freakin' fever."
Even with all the heaters revved up, it was still freezing. Duo slept fitfully, and when he awoke, he felt even more exhausted. The others were already up and re-packing their bedrolls and supplies. Milliardo was tossing meal packs around, protein bars and drinks that were treated to prevent them from freezing. He put Duo's meal by his knee as Duo sat up and huddled in his parka. Duo glared at him as he took them, trying to show that he wasn't weak, that the fever was an annoyance, but not debilitating.

"I told you to stay away from Mary's kid," Sally said off handedly as she crouched by Duo's side and checked him with her scanner. "He had a ten on the flu meter."

Duo recalled the brief meeting a few days ago. The woman had passed him in a hallway. She had introduced her sniffling son and Duo had bent over and said 'hi'. That was when the child had sneezed in his face. Duo grimaced at the memory. "I checked out," he complained, referring to their physical.

"For regular physical levels," Sally replied as she put her meter away. "Not for kiddie viruses. I just pinged my report to HQ, by the way, so they are aware of the situation."

"Bi-", Duo began, but then cut that off with an effort. Sally frowned, realizing what he had been about to say. He ducked his head. "Yeah, okay," he amended. She was only doing her job, making sure they that had every chance to get through the mission alive. "I feel all right," he added. "A little feverish, but not like it's really affecting me."

"The terrain up ahead is very rough," Heero said as he crouched by them. "It's a hard journey for a healthy man. It was difficult for me." Which was saying a great deal, considering Heero's strength. "I don't think I should become First, if you decide against continuing in command," he added, "Milliardo is the better choice."

Duo grunted. "He's not the most experienced in this kind of operation," Duo replied. "You are."

Heero looked uncomfortable. "I am not a leader."

"You'll follow my orders," Duo reprimanded him as he forced himself to stand. He looked down at Heero, saw concern in his _expression_ and a mixture of something else, a knowledge of his own short comings where his training was concerned. "When we get back," Duo told him. "We're going to work on your command skills, got that? I won't have weak link like that in my outfit."

Heero nodded, but then he was standing as well and facing Duo in a way that was all soldier. "Are you saying that I should take command, even thought I'm not-"

Duo sighed and rubbed at his aching forehead, wanting to hit Heero over his single minded, thick skulled, head. He throttled the impulse and said, "Being a leader, Heero, is all about making decisions, but it's also about allowing your team to do what they do best. You don't try to do it all. You know the terrain, the facility, the techniques for infiltration and extraction. Wu Fei knows how to hack you in and keep an ear on our target's movements. Milliardo is a great tactician and weapons man. Sally will keep your men in one piece and she's a crack shot. You utilize everyone."

Heero nodded a bit more confidently and Duo felt a pang of uneasiness. Heero liked being in
soldier mode and liked to implement his, 'Whatever it takes to carry out orders.', strategy. They couldn't afford that kind of thinking, though.

"Orders?" Sally wondered, trying to break the mood and remind Duo that now wasn't the time to give Heero's lessons..

"Weather?" Duo snapped at Wu Fei, angry at himself and Heero for wasting time.

Wu Fei was already checking his readouts, standing near the entrance to get a better signal. He looked concerned. "There's still some potential out there, but the weather is clear, for now." He peeked through the barrier they had set up and blinked. "Shovels are in order, I think. We've been snowed in."

"Shit!" Duo swore. "Risk the burners. We can't waste time."

There was a definite danger in that. The things overloaded easily. If they ran into trouble, if the weather turned severe, then they would be left without their primary heat source. It was one of the risks they had to take, though, Duo decided grimly. Time was too precious.

Milliardo placed the cells and turned them up to full. Shouldering their packs, they zipped up their parkas, and slowly, but steadily, moved through a wall of snow. By the time they reached a clear area, two of their heat sources had died.

The wind was up, but the snow had stopped falling. Duo shoved his hands into his pockets and hunkered down into his collar as he barked at Wu Fei, "Chatter?"

"None!" Wu Fei reported as he gathered up his perimeter alarms and packed them.

"Position?" Duo asked as Wu Fei took point with him.

Wu Fei checked his satellite. "On course. Our next cache is... eleven hours... maybe... if the weather holds."

"And?" Duo prompted, "Worse case?"

"We'll have the storm come down on us without shelter on the ice shelf two clicks away from here," Heero interjected. "If we can get past that, there's trees to break the wind and some higher rock formations that might give us cover."

"Might," Duo muttered sourly. "Move out, everyone!" He began walking and everyone fell in behind. Duo didn't let Wu Fei forget his question. "Report, Fei?"

Wu Fei mulled over his readings as they walked and then he admitted defeat. "Hard to tell. A system is gathering strength, but, if the wind keeps up, it may move past us before it dumps its load."

Duo relented, knowing how hard that admission had cost Wu Fei. The man hated not being able to do his job properly. "Good job," Duo grunted. "Since a warning isn't in the cards, keep your attention on the communication lines."

"Peacecraft?" Duo called back.
"Sir?" the man shouted back from his rear position.

"Our larger shoulder launchers are at the next cache," Duo reminded him unnecessarily. "Think you can carry them in worse weather than this? If not, we'll keep to our lighter weapons."

"I'm capable," Milliardo replied. "We need those rifles."

That was true, but they didn't need to die getting them to their target, Duo thought. He rubbed at his aching forehead. Go away, he willed the pain and the fever. Not now. Not when they are counting on me.

They reached the ice and found it covered in snow and deceptively flat. The clouds were gathering and the sunlight was forcing its way sporadically through them.

"Heero?" Duo called out and the man came up on his right side. "Talk to me."

Heero was frowning. "It's not flat," he warned. "It's a chunk of glacier."

"Which means we could take a wrong step and fall to China," Duo swore. "Mill!" Milliardo came forward. "Get you your proximity targeter," Duo ordered. When Milliardo began to clip it onto a rifle, Duo shook his head. "No. We need it to take readings. The beam will pass through the snow and tell us where the ice and the rock are."

Milliardo grunted in surprise at the idea and then nodded. "It should work... in theory."

"Fei, get the chart up," Duo ordered. "It's almost impossible to map a moving sheet of ice, but it should give us some heads up to potential danger."

Wu Fei nodded and said under his breath, as he called up the map on his instruments, "Technically, China is on our right."

Duo looked sour. "Okay, Australia."

Sally snorted, "Don't become a geography teacher, Commander."

"Laughing at your C.O. is insubordination, I'm sure of it," Duo retorted. He tried to ease the weight of his pack on his shoulders and then ordered, "All right Fei, Mill, show us the way."

The snow crumbled and crunched under their feet. It wasn't hard packed, it was crusty. They put on snow shoes to keep from sinking deep, but the ground underneath was uneven and there was a danger of twisting and falling.

"Large crevice... I think... Nothing's pinging back in that area," Milliardo warned.

Panting and flushed, Duo tried to focus on the small screen in Wu Fei's hands. "There, " he pointed out. "Bottomless pit number one. There's five more before we get across. Good job, Peacecraft."

Milliardo smiled, but he didn't take his eyes off his screen. He swept the area repeatedly. "There," he finally decided and pointed to their left. "There's a large area of solid formation."

"Yes," Wu Fei agreed, but he sounded unsure.
Heero looked ahead of them, consulting some map in his head.

"Heero?" Duo asked. "Final say?"

"It has changed," Heero replied and then looked at Duo with troubled eyes. "Nothing is a hundred percent." His eyes swept Duo up and down, but he didn't comment on Duo's very pale face. He knew they couldn't stop now, not for anyone. "There was a shelf of ice that ran diagonally from this point. It ran over the crevice. It will save us time if it's still there and we can find it."

"'Fat chance percentage, Fei?" Duo demanded.

"Eighty percent," Wu Fei replied without missing a beat, his face grim.

Duo mulled and then pulled Milliardo up close to him, "Scan every inch. We're going to try to find Heero's ice bridge."

Sally was frowning and her scanner was out. "Duo," she warned.

"It's perfectly reasonable," Heero told her, supporting Duo. "Going around would take us far out of our way and increase our chances of being caught in the storm."

Sally looked skeptical. "You are both risk takers. I'd like a more level headed opinion."

"Then you have one," Milliardo spoke up. "I find it reasonable as well."

"Like I said," Sally grumbled as she put away her instrument, "level headed. I'm afraid there isn't anyone like that in this bunch."

"No more argument," Duo snapped as he dug his frozen hands into his pockets. "Move out."

They went slowly, following Wu Fei and Milliardo. They found Heero's ice bridge, but knowing its width and length was a serious problem. They could all imagine the deep crevice they were traversing and their tenuous safety. One miscalculation, and they were going to fall to their deaths.

Adrenalin alone was keeping Duo on his feet. It made his ears ring and his heart beat painfully. He trusted his men and their expertise, but it was all he could do not to yank the instruments out of their hands and double check every reading they took. His responsibility. His call. He didn't want to be wrong. It was one of those moments that had gained him the title of commander, his ability to let it go and to rely on others. Delegating duties, confidence in his people, and the ability to coordinate a group. Everyone had been surprised when Duo had displayed all of those skills. Their image of the hot dogging, joking, idiot pilot of Deathscythe had been a handicap, until they had seen his abilities for themselves.

It happened all at once. Out of the corner of his eye, Duo saw one of Sally's long braids swing. It was his first clue that she was off balance and going down. He grabbed out and swung her around, using his weight as the pivot to get her to safety. That, unfortunately, left him in the danger zone. When he released her heavier weight, the thin crust of ice over darkness, broke under his staggering feet.

"Shit!" Duo shouted, but then grunted as a vice clamped around his wrist and brought him up short. He looked up, swinging wildly over nothingness, blasted by a shrieking cold wind coming from the depths, and saw Heero's face above him.
"Duo!" Heero choked out and looked frightened. Frightened? Duo gaped at him. What the hell? "Duo! Hold on to me! The others have me braced!"

Duo reached up and gripped Heero's free hand. Hanging like trapeze artists, the others began to pull them to safety. It was dangerous. Duo was pelted by crumbling ice and small stones. They nicked and bruised his face. He imagined the entire lip crumbling and all of them falling to their deaths.

A pelting flurry of snow began to fall from the dark sky. They were out of time. Duo gritted his teeth and used all of his strength to literally climb up Heero. A large chunk of stone came loose and fell like a cannon ball straight through the space where his head had been moment before. Heero grabbed at Duo's coat and pulled hard, hauling Duo the rest of the way in one powerful move that shook things from Duo's pockets and ripped the coat along the collar. A knife, a compass, and a bottle of stimulants took the long drop into nothingness.

They all fell into a heap, each gripping the other as if they were afraid to let go. Duo found himself sprawled on top of Heero and the man was holding him tight with both arms. There was a moment where that felt good, and Duo longed to stay there, but he was pushing away in the next instant, forcing his body to move as he wiped at his aching and cut face.

"Get the hell up!" Duo shouted. "We have to run for it!"

Run for it was a loose term for what they could manage under the conditions. Gathering themselves back together, and shouldering their gear, they bowed their heads down against the snow and huddled behind Milliardo and Wu Fei as they tried to get quickly across the ice.

"Thanks," Sally said to Duo as she rubbed elbows with him in their determined huddle. Her arm went around him then and Duo realized that she had scanned him and knew how much the fall had taken away from his strength. He wanted to shake off her help, but he knew that he needed it. "I thought Heero was going to die when he saw you fall," Sally said almost in his ear and Duo turned his head to see her fierce, knowing grin.

Duo didn't reply. He needed his breath for walking and he wasn't sure what to say in return. Heero's frightened expression had convinced him of something that he hadn't been willing to believe in. He still wasn't sure, even with Sally's comment. He thrust it aside in the next moment. Thinking about distracting things like that could get them all killed.

Visibility dropped almost to zero. They were relying completely on instruments, then, and Wu Fei's skill in that area was showing. They made it off of the ice and into a forest, frozen to the bone, but alive. It would have been good to stop, to rest bodies and minds stretched to the limit, but Duo knew that they couldn't afford to do it. They had to reach the next cache. He checked his watch and calculated.

"Keep moving!" Duo ordered, and felt cruel, but no one argued. They knew that stopping, when the snow had a potential to block every route, would find them short on supplies and without a way to get more.

After hours of hellish progress, they passed the cache, backtracked, and passed it again. Wu Fei was swearing, almost sounding as if he were ready to weep, but Duo knew him better than that. It was only the stress and the weariness.
"Chang!" Duo shouted angrily. "Get it right!"

"The storm!" Wu Fei shouted back. "It's interfering with the signal."

"Guesstimate!" Duo ordered. "Stop relying on your satellite and use your head!"

Wu Fei looked frustrated as he used his body to shield his map and to try to determine where someone would put a cache. Suddenly, he took hold of Duo's arm and tugged him to their right. Holding onto each other, they all struggled towards his best guess.

They encountered a wall of rock that shot straight up towards the raging sky and the tops of the evergreen trees. Wu Fei followed it around until the wind and the snow were suddenly blocked. A natural wall, it meandered in a crooked line to the north, jagged and forbidding under their hands.

He was wrong, Duo thought in anguish, but something deeper shrugged that off. Not Wu Fei, he corrected himself and he trusted and let them man lead them further away from their coarse.

"Here," Wu Fei said and was gone.

Duo blinked snow from his eyes, incredulous, and then a gloved hand reached out and pulled him into a low cave. The door was narrow and went on for five feet before it opened out.

"About time," a strange voice complained.

Duo's gun was out and nosing for a target as his other hand lit a glow stick. A powerful looking man with spiked, dark hair, was glaring back at him.

"Stand down, agent," the man said quickly, but he had a gun too, trained at Wu Fei. He was lowering it in the next instant and holding out a hand. "Commander Maxwell, I believe?" he asked, shaking Duo's gloved hand awkwardly as they others came in cautiously. Heero's gun was up and trained over Duo's shoulder at the man, but then he grunted and holstered it.

"Smirkowski?" Heero grunted. "Why are you still here?"

"Too hot for lift off," Smirkowski replied. "My jumpship is buried under ice and snow and I was told to stash myself until the operation was concluded."

Heat units were arranged and making the small cave a warm nest. Everyone sprawled, shrugging off their packs wearily, crusted in snow and more than half frozen.

Duo pulled off his gloves with his teeth, as he eyed Smirkowski and decided that he had never seen the man before. "How did you know who I was?" he asked warily as he sat down with his team.

The man grunted and looked embarrassed. He dug through a pocket and opened up a folded fax paper. He showed it to Duo. It had a rough copy of Duo's Preventer file photo and the hated declaration of interest underneath.

"You're cute," the man said apologetically, as he nervously rubbed the back of his neck with a large hand, "but you're a bit young for me."

Sally snickered and then laughed outright.
"Here," Smirkowski crouched by Duo and held out a steaming cup of tea. "Tea?" Duo made a face as he took it. Wrapped in blankets, he was nestled against some of their baggage, two rifles, and some climbing equipment.

"I have a son your age," Smirkowski said with a grin. "He makes that same expression when I give him his medicine."

"Son? But I thought-" Duo began, puzzled, but Smirkowski shrugged in a way that let Duo know that 'things happen'.

"The tea has some antibiotics in it," Smirkowski told him. "It won't help you soon enough for the mission, but it might take the edge off."

"You are not a doctor," Heero said with an expression that Duo could only call, 'pissed'. He crouched down near Duo as well, putting Duo between himself and Smirkowski, and he began to reach out and take the tea.

Duo pulled the tea away from him and sipped at it, his eyes laughing at Heero's discomfiture. "Tastes like toffee," Duo said appreciatively.

Smirkowski looked embarrassed. "Put a bit of candy bar in it. I didn't have any sugar."

Duo took another sip. He could expertly taste under flavors, and didn't object to any of them. "Thanks," Duo told him.

Smirkowski nodded, gave Heero a look, and then moved away.

Duo appraised Heero, but Heero was watching Smirkowski. "What?" Duo prodded. "You don't trust him?"

"He likes to use 'natural' remedies," Heero complained. "You shouldn't have had the tea. It might make your illness worse."

"Well, too late now," Duo sighed and sipped at the tea again. "This is really good."

"Duo...," Heero began, his eyes on the tea cup.

"Heero?" Duo returned with a smile.

"Out there... when you fell...," Heero began haltingly.

"Yes? I did thank you, didn't I?" Duo leaned close. "You risked your life, when you were supposed to let me drop and have Mill take my position."

"I should have done that," Heero admitted, "but I couldn't."

"No?" Duo felt that Heero was on the edge of an admission. He could see it in the tenseness of Heero's shoulders. Duo's stomach tightened and his mind was already supplying a reason that he
couldn't believe in, not without it coming from Heero's lips.

"A few hours and the storm should lift," Wu Fei announced from where he was sitting, nursing the gain on his instruments."The system is moving through quickly."

"Roger that!" Duo called back without taking his eyes away from Heero.

Heero had stiffened and Duo knew that the moment was slipping away. He reached out and gave Heero's sleeve a small tug.

"Level with me," he asked seriously.

Heero shook his head. "This isn't the place for it." He stood, but his dark blue eyes were searching Duo's. "After," he promised.

"I'll hold you to that," Duo replied sternly and then sighed and sipped at his tea again as Heero walked away to find a place to rest.

"I feel well done," Smirkowski said as he returned and took Duo's empty cup.

Duo was confused. "What?"

Smirkowski jerked his chin at where Heero was preparing himself to go to sleep. "He's the jealous kind. His eyes are like beam cannons. I thought relations between people in a group was against regulations?"

Duo glared at him and said in warning, "If you know what's good for you, you won't repeat that. Heero and me are not a couple and I'm not sure that he would want anyone suggesting that we were."

Smirkowski chuckled. "Okay, whatever you say, but you better not believe that load you just handed me."

Smirkowski moved away and Duo found himself looking over at Heero. Jealous? Protective as hell, maybe, but he'd always been that way, Duo realized. It came to him just how many times Heero had been at his elbow in their confrontations with danger.

Duo sat back and tried to find a comfortable spot as he shook his head and tried to clear it. He couldn't start thinking about any of that. Heero was right... after... whatever that meant...

Duo drifted and he wasn't sure why. He wasn't that sick. He wasn't that tired. He needed to plan. He needed to talk with his people and make sure that everyone was holding up. Leaders walked among their troops, checked on their morale, and rechecked equipment and supplies. Duo couldn't keep his eyes open, though, as much as he tried.

When he came back to the world, he was staring at an empty cave and Smirkowski checking a heating cell. Duo rolled to his feet, staggered, and then shouted in fury, "You drugged me!"

Smirkowski stiffened and turned in a way that let Duo know that he was ready to defend himself. "Po's orders. She outranks me," Smirkowski replied apologetically. "I trust that you're professional enough not to take it out on a grunt?"
Duo's hands fisted and then he was turning away and searching for his gear, hoping against hope that they hadn't decided to strand him with nothing but the clothes on his back. He found his pack and dragged it up. Slinging it over one shoulder, he began buttoning up his parka.

"You're going?" Smirkowski wondered. "You won't make it. Your temp went up to one hundred and five degrees. You're going to be a corpse if you try to finish the mission."

"I'm a Gundam Pilot," Duo growled. "You don't know what I'm capable of. Heero knows. He should have stopped her."

Smirkowski rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, she made sure that I didn't tell anyone."

Duo looked incredulous. "So everyone thinks I couldn't handle a cold?!

"Uh, yeah, guess so," Smirkowski admitted. "Look, Duo... Why don't you see sense?" He suggested in a friendly manner, "I have some hooch I put back. We can have a few drinks, tell some war stories, and keep each other warm."

Duo glared, going cold. "I thought that I was too young for you?"

"You're a shorty, that's all," Smirkowski grinned. "You're not as young as you look, am I right?"

Smirkowski was down and flat on his back with one kick of Duo's booted foot. Snarling, Duo warned, "Better pack up your gear and get the hell out before I get back. Looks like Heero is a better judge of character than I am."

Duo strode out of the cave and then almost fell over. The cold was so intense, his heart beat painfully in his chest and his vision blurred. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to start walking as he tucked his scarf over the lower half of his face and put on his gloves. Fumbling, he brought out his GPS and checked his location.

"Bastards probably have a good start on me," he muttered as he checked the time. The cold was clearing his head, but he still felt hot and his nose was runny. It was hard keeping it from freezing to his face. He could make it, though, he felt. He'd finished missions with gaping wounds. He could finish one with a fever.

"I know my limits, Sally Po," he growled. "You are going to learn not to second guess me."

Duo tucked his head down and made his way over the rocky, snow covered landscape. He had to be careful. He couldn't barge into the rear of the operation if they deployed before he reached them. That would endanger them and himself if they didn't realize it was him. Everyone knew their parts and everyone was an expert, but they still needed his part of the team. He wasn't being arrogant, Duo felt. Milliardo might take his place, if necessary, but that would compromise his own part of the mission. Optimum success depended on all of them being there and working together. It would save lives, enemy and targets alike, if they could adhere to the plan.

"People are not going to die, because I wasn't there," Duo swore. "I can't live with that."

He couldn't rest if he hoped to make it. Duo passed likely spots with a longing eye, but he forced himself onward. He ignored the urge to find a warm place to curl up in and suffer his fever out of the cold. Dizziness came in waves and, at one point, he found himself kneeling in the snow, not sure when he had decided to do so. He forced himself back up again almost at once, but he could
feel his joints aching and his head throbbing with the effort.

"You're going to be shit... even if you do make it," Duo told himself. "Maybe Sally was right..."

Duo shook his head sharply. "Fuck that! She was not right. It's the damn drug Smirkowski slipped me. I just need... to wait it out. It'll be out of my system before I reach the target."

It was easier to deal with the sickness, now that he wasn't to blame. It was all Sally's fault... and Smirkowski's. Duo growled under his breath, "I should have done more to that asshole than just kick him." A rifle powering up stopped Duo in his tracks. He raised his arms, feeling a spot between his shoulder blades twitch in anticipation of getting shot there..

"A strange place to find a lone man taking a walk," a voice said, "Drop your weapons. If I find one when I frisk you, I'll put a blast through your head."

Duo began fumbling, making a show of unzipping his parka. He listened very carefully. He heard only one small sound and nothing else. It was a gamble, but he was almost certain that the man was alone. That gave him better odds for what he was about to do. He eyed the trail up ahead and saw the twists and turns before it dipped down and out of sight. A person would have to be crazy to take it at a run, especially with the sharp drop off to one side. The drop had an unknown bottom. It could be a few feet or a few hundred feet down. Duo wouldn't know until he was right on it, or falling into it.

Duo steeled himself as he tossed aside a small pistol. Part of the gamble was to take a chance that the man's eyes would momentarily follow it, that it would take a moment for him to realize that Duo was on the move, and that the man wasn't a good shot.

Duo sprinted for the trail and took it at a breakneck run as rock blasted all around him. Some of it slammed into his face, but most of it was deflected by the thickness of his parka. He whipped out his secondary gun, but didn't dare turn to fire.

He reached the turn, felt a sharp burn at the top of one shoulder, and then used the sheltering rock to whip around and fire his own weapon. He was far more accurate. His bullet took the man in the neck. The man clawed at the wound and then toppled over. Duo was back up the trail and at his side as quickly as he could. He ignored the pain as he knelt in the snow and searched the man over. He found a radio, a gps, and ID. He read it and frowned, before pocketing it and a code card. Shouldering the man's rifle, he began to feel a prickle of trepidation. The man might be a guard at an outer post, but it was far out of the way of normal traffic.

"Damn," Duo muttered angrily and whipped out his com. He didn't want to break silence, but he didn't have any choice.

"Potential trap," Duo said shortly when Heero picked up the line without speaking. "On your tail, E.T.A. one hour."

"Roger that," Heero replied and the line went dead.

Did he sense anger? There were many things to be angry about, Duo thought grimly. If that man was a rear guard for a troop movement, then his team was in danger. If Smirkowski was part of it...

"I'll kill him myself!" Duo snarled and hurried down the trail, leaving the body to be covered over by the snow.
Duo eventually caught up to the remains of a firefight. He crouched down, gun drawn, and saw the sensor arrays tucked back into the rocks. He swore. It was Wu Fei's job to spot those. Blast marks littered the snow, as well as parka clad bodies. None of them were from his team, but Duo didn't allow himself to be relieved. There was blood everywhere and packs and equipment left behind. Sloppy. Any soldier worth his salt would have taken everything back to headquarters to be gone over with a fine tooth comb. Unless they already knew who they were dealing with, a nagging voice in the back of his mind told him.

"Then why take them hostage..." Duo muttered as he scrounged through packs, found one that was Sally's, and shouldered it. Wu Fei's was gone, being the one full of expensive instruments, and Heero probably kept all manner of weapons in his. Milliardo's was ripped open and and plundered. Even idiots knew the worth of the scopes and clips the man had been carrying, but there were parts for the weapons cache they had yet to reach, and those had been left behind. Another blunder.

Duo kicked at a shattered bottle of expensive cognac. It seemed they didn't have refined tastes. Duo didn't let his guard drop in the slightest, or allow himself to feel confident. Stupid could be mean and stupid could kill valuable team members out of hand.

Keeping low, Duo followed the wide trail of tracks, gun held ready. He hadn't made very good speed and everything was windblown and full of snow, but he was ready for more outer sentry posts and a potential straggler.

This was all wrong, Duo thought, as the track lead away from the target area. He checked his position again to confirm it and wasn't comforted by being right. Were these men even part of their target's forces? What if they had stumbled on a completely different operation? The implications of that had Duo's head pounding with anxiety. He topped a rise and longed to let his shaking knees buckle, if just for a few moment's rest, but Duo stubbornly bit his lip and refused to allow it. He knew that a moment's rest might turn into an eternity in that cold. The wind was picking up as well, and he wondered how long the weather was going to hold. If thing's worsened now... He shoved it from his mind. Concentrate on the here and now, he told himself, don't make up trouble.

Duo took a downward trail and saw the sensor array too late. He saw the light blink and then he was throwing himself forward, taking the sharp, rocky trail at a breakneck run. His lungs ached from the cold, his face felt numb, and his legs screamed for him to stop, but his team was depending on him. He couldn't fail them. He couldn't be captured or killed.

Duo's only warning was a buzz. He ducked and a stun blast went over his head, sizzling the air. Another went past his knee. They wanted him alive. They must have received orders. That was in Duo's favor. He was fast, he was quick, and he didn't have that healthy regard for his own skin that kept men from taking the risks that he was about to.

Duo ignored the sharp drop in the trail and jumped down to the next level. His knees buckled at the impact, but he rolled, came to his feet, and kept running. He longed to drop his pack, but that was as good as cutting his own throat. Equipment meant survival. Unfortunately, it also felt as if he were carrying a very heavy child on his back.

He couldn't keep it up. His lungs were going to freeze solid and his heart was going to burst. A blast against the rocks at his back let him know that he had pissed someone off. They weren't using the stun charge any longer. That was all right with Duo. It made him feel less guilty when he dropped the timed charge in the snow and put on an extra burst of speed.
Burning his bridges. They wouldn't be returning that way, not when the charge took out a shelf of rock and whoever was behind him in a blast that threw him to the ground and showered him with rubble, ice, and snow.

"I'm coming, bastards," Duo growled as he forced himself to his feet and continued down the trail, "and I'm getting my people back."
Duo spun and jammed his gun against Sally Po's head the moment he heard her exhale of breath behind him. Her eyes widened as his finger twitched on the trigger and she waited, frozen, until the mind caught up with reflexes. The gun cocked back then and it was Duo who let out a long, steadying breath. He blinked.

"A little warning next time," he whispered.

"And warn them too?" she shot back as she jutted her chin at the guards past the fall of rocks they were hiding behind. "Just how do you intend to get by them, boss? We don't have our cannon with us any longer. They took that with Peacecraft."

Duo signaled for silence and went back to his surveillance. Questions about how she was free, when everyone else had been captured, would have to wait. The most vulnerable point of the installation was before them and it was as loosely guarded as intelligence had reported.

Sally tapped on his shoulder. Duo looked back and she made a hand signal for 'trap'. Duo nodded, thinking the same thing himself. Everything was suspect now. He dropped his pack and began reducing his load to what he could zip into his clothing. Sally followed suit, taking only her most important medical equipment and a lethal looking black glock. Covering the rest in snow, Duo motioned Sally to follow him.

They skirted the installation, avoiding proximity alarms and surveillance cameras with difficulty. They made slow progress and Duo chafed at it. When the snow began to fall, he was, for once, glad. The snow would help cover their tracks and obscure the surveillance opticals.

"Every building has to breathe," Duo muttered as he found the grating, the heated air melting the snow around it. The security on the venting was tight, though, and Duo was forced to crawl on his belly several yards, disable security systems while the snow soaked into his clothing, and cut through the grating with a small laser. Inside, he had to hang upside down to reach another security system. Once that was disabled, he eyed the very narrow opening and the heat coming out of it. It was going to be hot, tight, and with no room to spare for parkas and overlarge snow boots.

Inching back cautiously, Duo said shortly to Sally, "Lie low. You can't fit. If I don't get back by dark, bug out and make your way back to a checkpoint."

"Not Smirkowski?" Sally wondered in confusion.

"Compromised," Duo replied angrily.

Sally was shocked. Her hand tightened on Duo's arm and he knew what she was thinking. They had left him there, asleep and vulnerable. He shook off her hand. He didn't have the luxury to vent his anger at her, or listen to any apologies. He gave her a stern look as he discarded his parka and his thick boots.

Shivering, Duo growled, "Follow orders this time," and then he was crawling back to the vent and trying to ignore twinges of claustrophobia as he squeezed himself inside.

It was tight and hot, the heated air blasting into Duo's face. It felt wonderful for exactly three
minutes, but, after he had thawed from the outside cold, his fever and the heated metal around him began to slowly bake him. He brought up the installations sketchy plans, that he had filed in his memory, and decided that the heat had to be venting from an operation of some sort below him. He took guesses at what that operation might be, to keep himself occupied, while he inched through the tight space. Weapons manufacturing? Ore processing for shielding? More construction? The objective of Duo's team had been to acquire their targets and nothing more. Once they were clear, the installation was Preventer business and not theirs. Duo wasn't comfortable with that sort of blind, military attitude, but he knew that he would be lucky to get his own people out, let alone accomplish their original mission.

Bitterness griped Duo's gut. He was a commander because he had proven himself in and out of the field. Failure on this grand scale was something that he wasn't ready to accept, yet he wasn't willing to sacrifice everyone to accomplish it, either. There was an alternative to picking and choosing objectives, though, and he grinned. Just like in the war, he thought with relish, and felt the same kick of adrenaline. It banished sickness and weariness and he crawled forward with a renewed energy.

He couldn't make it obvious. Duo chose his target carefully, and then planted a virus from a handheld uplink to a cooling unit's mainframe. The resulting overload and smoke filled the corridor. That overheated unit would trip the shutdown of several other units and the overload would shock the system entirely. Alarms would sound and it would all look very innocent.

Someone might suspect. Duo was ready for that too. He had to save his targets for last and free the men that were most likely equipped to help him. His first choice was Heero, without hesitation. Finding him through his chip, took a moment of sweating and adjusting for interference on a handheld that was limited in its range inside of a building.

Silence was golden. Duo pocketed his handheld and then slipped knives out of their sheathes. With one in each hand, he steeled himself to kill people in a manner that was brutal compared to the sophisticated and bloodless laser weapons of the day.

Duo sneezed and wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. His head felt full of hot pain and a fire was running over his skin. His skin felt chilled at the same time and he shivered without his parka. Duo didn't want to know what that meant. He couldn't afford to let it to slow him down.

Duo found Heero's cell. He scratched that and changed the name to 'interrogation room' when he heard the grunts and the punches.

"Come on, pretty boy! Talk!"

Duo flinched, remembered a similar derisive voice saying almost the same thing to him during the war, when he had been Lady Une's prisoner.

"I'm a man, not a boy," a voice slurred, and there was a flurry of more blows.

"You'll be what I want you to be!" the voice snarled.

"We've shut down your operation," another man said in a more reasonable, calm tone. "All of your agents are dead or captured. Our mole in your organization made certain that we were prepared for your arrival. Everything is secure. We will begin loading the bio material into the launch tubes. Your government has less than two hours to respond to our demands."
Heero chuckled and it sounded as if it were coming through blood. "They'll turn this place into an ugly grease spot. They won't negotiate. We were only sent here to retrieve the scientists."

"I think not," the man replied as if he were amused."They won't chance us getting a missile off before they can do that."

"No?" Heero wondered in an innocent tone. There was another flurry of blows.

"What we require of you, is for you to tell us the frequency of the other two agent's implanted chips. We will find them eventually, but this will ensure that they won't do anything to hamper our-"

Alarms began going off. Duo smiled ferally as two guards outside of Heero's door stiffened and then went inside the room for orders. He had needed them all together. He rushed the door and took them by surprise.

It was bloody and quick. One man managed to get a shot off, but it split the air and slammed into the wall as Duo's knife was flung and thunking into his throat. The three other men didn't stand a chance. They were still fumbling with their surprise and disbelief, that an intruder had invaded their fortress and that someone so small could be any kind of threat, when they died by Duo's hand.

Panting hard and adrenalin rushing through him, Duo turned to Heero. Tied to a chair, the man was a mess of bruises and his lips were bloody. His blue eyes were so intense, that Duo twitched nervously as he cut the man's bonds. He wasn't prepared for Heero to grab him up, cradle his head in one large hand, and bring their lips together in a fierce kiss.

Duo's eyes flew wide and his hands came up to shove Heero back. Heero staggered, but his hands didn't leave Duo. He was looking Duo up and down and feeling for injuries.

"Did Smirkowski hurt you?" Heero demanded.

Duo growled, insulted, "No! Smirkowski didn't have a chance against me...Heero, what the hell was that all about?" Meaning the frantic kiss.

Heero was gripping Duo's shirt with both hands, but he seemed to be getting himself back under control. "I was... worried," he managed."When I found out that Smirkowski was a double agent, I-"

"Later!" Duo barked. "We have to move. I planted a virus. That's causing the alarms. I'm willing to bet not everyone is as dull as those guys, so let's get a move on. We need to release Fei next."

"I'll handle that. " Heero said, coming into full mission focus at last. "If you shut down corridors twenty six, eighteen, forty eight, and eleven, you'll hamper their movements in the installation."

"Will do," Duo replied, "Get your ass in gear, Yuy. I'll go after the targets as soon as I shut down the corridors. Once you get Fei, work on sabotage and releasing the others. We'll meet at the north ridge in one hour, If someone is a no show, they get left behind. I'll be pinging headquarters for dust off."

"Yes, sir," Heero replied and, when Duo darted back out into the corridor and towards his next goal, he felt sure that the man had his act back together again.

Heero's kiss burned on Duo's lips, but he stuffed his shock, confusion, and unanswered questions
into his sub-conscience for later, along with the excited part of him that was whooping for joy.

Duo took two small wounds and took out several guards before he reached a likely panel. Prying it off, he hacked into the system, jammed all the doors on 'safe' mode, and then made his way down to what was serving as the lab/detention deck.

With the security checks off, as if a full blown emergency evac was in progress, Duo found it very easy to get through doors that other wise would have needed DNA scans, pass cards, and eye chips. Reaching the lab, he found his targets milling uncertainly around several downed guards and arguing about how to proceed with an escape. They all wore lab coats and were all past middle age, not promising for any long treks through difficult terrain.

It was then that Duo heard two beautiful words, 'jump ship'. "Where?" he demanded as he stepped over a man with a needle stuck in his neck. He was dead and it was ugly. He supposed acid had been in the syringe.

Two women and three men went defensive, but Duo held out his hands, his gun in one of them, and talked quickly, "I'm a Preventer."

He was surprised when they all relaxed and looked hopeful, "We know," one of the men, a heavy set man with round spectacles, said uncomfortably, "I received a fax with your photo... I wasn't aware that we had met..."

"We haven't!" Duo snarled. "Forget about it. Let's get to that ship."

"It's docked in a lower level," one of the women told him. "It's for emergencies. It launches through a tube on the North side. I'm very sure the rebels haven't found it yet. They were more interested in us and the labs."

Her words put Duo on an even higher alert. "Rebels? You mean, these aren't the guys who built this place?"

"No," she said as she pushed back some graying hair that had escaped her severe bun. "They took over about a week ago and shot anyone who didn't join them unconditionally. I'm afraid most of the people here refused and were killed."

Duo looked down at the dead men. These scientists were not victims. They were criminals, doing experiments that were both illegal and unethical. Their hands were dipped in blood up to their elbows and he couldn't forget that for a moment. "Come with me or I'll shoot everyone of you dead," Duo growled and they were all apprehensive again. "This is not a free ride to freedom. You're all going to a penal colony."

"We made a deal!" a tall, old man with a darker streak in his graying hair retorted. "For our cooperation, we are to be exonerated."

Duo scowled. Leave it to politicians to make a deal with the devil, or devils... "You didn't make any deals with me and you're mine until I hand you over. Now, get moving!"

Duo lost one of his scientists, the bad tempered 'skunk' as he thought of him, just as they reached the launch tube and the jump ship. The rebels were sloppy and at least now Duo knew why. This wasn't their operation, their plan, or the military malcontents that had gone along with it. This was a ragtag gang and they were mean, but undisciplined, and too young to have fought in any war.
Duo felt stupid to lose even one scientist to their hotshot barrage as they poured into the corridor behind them, especially when Duo's more accurate return fire made them scramble and duck for cover.

The ship was big bellied and had short fins. As Duo raked his eyes over it, as they rushed into the tube and locked down the door for launch, he could only find fault with it. It wouldn't evade any serious pursuit. It was only spec'd to carry as many as possible for a short distance, not evade big guns or pursuit ships.

They piled inside and Duo barked for them to strap themselves down. "It's going to be a wild ride, folks. I hope you didn't eat a lot for your last meal!" Duo called out as he threw himself into the command chair and began turning on systems. He cut the computer chatter and expertly over rode security checks and launch sequences. Then it was only left to mutter a prayer, to any god that cared to listen, and hit the boosters.

Not exploding immediately was a good sign. The launch tube doors opening, with a spray of snow and ice, was another. The splatter of gun fire from turrets was not. The rattle ping against the hull was unnerving, but Duo couldn't evade it as he turned the big ship on it's heel and took a long turn towards the dust off point, hoping against hope that Heero and his people would be there. He opened a secure line to Preventers and called for immediate back up.

Duo wasn't sure what warned him. He couldn't hear over the protesting crumpling of over stressed hull, the gun fire, and the roaring engines that were being told to break the atmosphere to the left instead of straight up. The satisfaction in that, was knowing that he was scorching the installation into slag under the boosters as he did it, taking out guns and a launch pad in the process. It took all of his attention though and he didn't have any to spare for passengers that had to be insane not to be strapped down. When a chill of trepidation tingled along his spine, Duo automatically whipped around and fired his gun. It took one of the men in the face. The motion sent blood and parts of the man all over the ship.

Duo was shaking, wondering what had possessed him. He didn't have time to check the man, to know whether he had been an actual threat or not, as he wrestled the yolk of the ship and brought it to heel, landing with a whirlwind of rocks and snow on the flattest point he could find.

"Heero," Duo muttered. "Be here, be here, be here..." It was a mantra as he unstrapped. The heat from the ship was melting everything and sending waves of distortion and steam into the air. One support wasn't on even ground and the ship moaning with stressed metal and lurched.

"Get unhooked and out of here!" Duo barked. "We're sitting ducks!"

"What was your plan?!" One man snarled. "To kill us all and escape? We're hardly three clicks from the installation. They'll recover us for certain!"

Duo grimaced as he pointed his gun at the man and looked down at the corpse. The dead man had an acid syringe clutched in his rigid hand. Duo felt sick, but then determined. "Get moving or I'll drop you right here. Your rebel friends are going to have to sort out their systems before they can launch anything. It's the men on foot we have to worry about. If you do what I say, you'll live until Preventer's can reach our location and pick us up. They'll drop from orbit and we won't be able to board until cool down, so I'm hoping your buddies don't have anything bigger than those guns."

Duo hit the hatch. He waved his gun. "Get off and get away from the ship. Don't touch anything and move fast. The heat's still pretty high on the boosters."
Sally made her appearance as they cleared the heat of the landing zone and she made a short signal that she was alone as Duo put her in charge of the scientists.

"Evac," Duo told her and she nodded, even as she looked pained. "I'm going back for the others." He didn't wait for her startled protests. He cut her off by ordering sharply, "First priority, Po. Watch them. They are not friendly."

"Yes, sir," Sally replied, but her eyes were angry as she slapped several tension bandages on his wounds and handed him her parka. Duo didn't complain, though he felt somewhat disconcerted when it fit him.

"If they aren't clear of the installation, then I'll rejoin you," Duo promised, though she hadn't asked for one. He wanted her to know that he hadn't forgotten all sense or procedure. "I just want to be there to cover their asses if they make it out."

Sally nodded, jaw firming, and then she trained her weapon on the scientists. "Over there!" She ordered, motioning to some rocks. "It'll give us some cover and allow us to access a back trail escape if any of them show up."

"It's foolish to remain here!" One of the woman wailed. "It's suicide!"

"For us, perhaps," Sally replied as she gave the woman a push towards the rocks, "but I doubt they'll be so careless with your lives."

Duo grinned at her back, not letting her see his pride in her, and then he was running as quickly as he could back towards the installation. He was winded and over heated after only a few yards. He refused to slow and his heart began to pound wildly in his chest. As his vision blurred and his head began to throb in time to his heart, he began to wonder if something as ridiculous as a cold could actually kill him.

Gun fire. Duo ducked down, gun nosing for a target. He topped a rise, burned black by his boosters, and enjoyed the warmth briefly as he tried to get his bearings and a look at what the enemy was firing at.

The figures were black dots against the snow before they were running for cover among the dappled black rocks all around the installation. They disappeared as quickly as that and Duo blinked to clear his eyes as he tried to find the best way to reach them. The pursuing men slowed and fired into the rocks.

"Good," Duo panted. "They don't have the instruments to know that she ship went down and they're scrambling to evac the installation now, running after targets for spite and to slow down the chance for radio contact and attack. The viruses will keep their ships on the ground until they bypass to manual." Duo knew his own skill and added time to it. It was close, but only if the Preventer evac ship attacked them rather than picked up the scientists. Duo knew how much of a chance he had for that scenario to occur. It had been made very clear what the main mission was all about.

Duo began climbing down rock and snow until he found an easier trail, and then he moved as quickly as he could over the uneven ground towards his people. Sally had their first priority well in hand. Duo was going to take care of his priority now.
"You better be there, Heero," Duo growled, "and you better have all my people with you."
"Let me guess," Duo snapped as he rounded on Milliardo. "He's sacrificing himself to guard your retreat?"

Milliardo lifted a pale eyebrow, amused, looking cool and collected even though his face was cut and full of bruises and he was moving at a fast trot. "Of course."

Huddled in on himself and moving quickly in makeshift shoes of tied cloth, a coatless Wu Fei said, "It is an honorable way to die."

Duo suddenly stopped retreating with them and scowled. "He can be honorable under someone else's command. I'm going to go get him."

"That is also honorable," Wu Fei snorted, "and expected."

Duo glared. "I'm not that predictable! Both of you get to the jump point and leave Heero to me. Don't wait." He jerked a thumb at Wu Fei. "Carry him. Chang weighs as much as a shoulder held buster rifle, so I know you can manage, Peacecraft."

"Less," Milliardo chuckled as he grabbed an indignant Wu Fei and slung him over one shoulder. "Unless you want frostbite, I suggest that you assist me by being still," Milliardo growled when Wu Fei tried to get back down again. "Why did they take away your shoes? Did they engage in toe torture?"

As Duo began jogging further down the trail, he heard an angry, muffled retort from Wu Fei. Duo couldn't help a fierce grin, but it quickly dropped off when he heard a spate of gunfire up ahead. He whistled in code and didn't expect a reply as he made his way to where he thought Heero was hiding. He was off by a few yards and a few boulders, but he was soon staring down the barrel of Heero's gun, the fierce blue eyes of his team mate glaring at him from behind the site.

Heero managed to look both frustrated and relieved. Duo jokingly looked wary and asked, "You're not going to kiss me again, are you?"

Heero blushed and looked away towards where Duo assumed the enemy was hiding, waiting for a good target. "That was... I..." Heero scowled darkly and decided not to continue.

"Later," Duo replied, but a devil made him add, "When I can appreciate it."

He saw Heero start out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't have time to spare for anything more than getting Heero past his embarrassment and back on his game. As for himself, he was beginning to worry, especially when he felt the need to sit down and simply try to breathe. If anyone was going to stay behind, he decided, it was going to be himself. He didn't think that he could make it back to the jump site, running and in a gunfight. Convincing Heero that it was necessary was another thing.

"No," Heero suddenly said.

"Huh?" Duo started.
"You can make it," Heero told him confidently.

"Think so?" Duo grinned, the fact that Heero knew him that well, making him feel warmer than his fever.

"I know so," Heero replied with a smirk, and then aimed his gun and fired off two shots.

Duo wiped the sweat from his brow. "Did you actually see a target?" he wondered as Heero reloaded with a new clip.

"No, just a best guess," Heero replied as he checked his load.

"What'cha got left?" Duo asked and hated how he couldn't say the words properly. He was fading and running out of time.

"Just this clip," Heero replied. "You?"

Duo shrugged. "Nothing that can blast through rock. We're going to have to move. If I fall, don't stop. That's an order, Heero."

"Yes, sir," Heero replied and sounded sincere in his response.

"You're bull shitting me, aren't you?" Duo panted as he levered himself onto his feet with Heero's hand under his elbow.

"Yes, sir," Heero replied in the same tone.

"We'll talk about charges of insa-insab- whatever, later," Duo said with difficulty. "Now... move your ass agent, and let's bug out."

Heero fired another shot at the distance and then Duo was suddenly being hauled forward at a run by Heero's tremendous strength.

They made the jump point, but Duo didn't remember much of it. He was seeing red and his heart was hammering in his chest. He felt the sting of a bullet kissing skin twice, and fell full length once. Heero kept him up and moving, though, and all but threw him into the open hatch of the ship. It was hovering just off the ground, engines roaring and heat blasting into their faces. Duo felt the g of lift flat on his back on cold metal, and the wet of a snow flurry in his face, and then his mind passed into no man's land and he couldn't tell what was real or what was a fever dream.

There were moments when Duo almost regained consciousness. He remembered hearing voices arguing and wished they'd be quiet. He felt needles prick him and the dragging pain of an IV and a catheter. There was a smell, antiseptic and harsh, and hands that turned and lifted him occasionally. Finally, things slowly drifted back into focus and he heard voices he recognized.

"Is there a reason why the nurse isn't doing this?" Wu Fei's voice. Duo could almost imagine that lifted, thin eyebrow and the arrogant expression on the man's face.

"The man was too rough," Heero's voice replied. Something slid over Duo's skin that felt cool and strange. Water? Alcohol? It tingled."

"Heero, this is most unlike you," Wu Fei said and sounded worried. "You've hardly left this room.
Duo is in capable hands. Do you feel that you owe him a debt for your life?"

Something Wu Fei would understand, Duo thought blearily.

"We're soldiers... agents," Heero replied. The wetness let off and a dry towel began passing over where the wet spots lingered. "You don't keep score like that."

Wu Fei was quiet and then he wondered, "Does he know?"

Know what? Duo wondered and tried to open his eyes. They felt sticky and as heavy as lead weights.

"I... I think so," Heero replied. "He said that we would... talk about it later."

"Then you don't know whether he is...interested?" Wu Fei seemed very uncomfortable by the subject.

"No," Heero replied.

"Then, perhaps you should reconsider administering his next bath?" Wu Fei said disapprovingly. "It is one thing to have an impersonal nurse do that task, but someone he knows? Someone under his command? Do you see the potential for... awkwardness..., Yuy?"

"I only wanted..." Heero stopped and Duo could hear him moving as if to leave. "I suppose you're right."

Duo found the strength to reach out. He found flesh and closed on it weakly. "No," his voice was papery thin. "Don't go. Tell me... what the hell happened?"

Duo's body didn't have the strength to think much of a sponge bath, even by someone he was attracted too, but it still made him blush to know that Heero's hands had just been all over him. When Heero settled a blanket over him, he was glad for the security, the warmth, and the embarrassing distraction. He needed to pull himself together. He needed to focus. He needed...

"Duo?" Heero said and Duo could tell that he was leaning close, offering it's own kind of distraction.

"Present," Duo said, but then coughed in the next moment and found a great deal to cough up. Heero held him until he finished and then eased him back onto his pillow. Duo's lungs ached.

"You contracted pneumonia," Wu Fei informed him. "You're stabilized now, but very weak. You're being fed fluids and antibiotics intravenously. Down time, estimated three months."

Duo's eyes flew open, given strength by his outrage. "Like hell!" he snapped back hoarsely.

"It's necessary," Heero told him. "They have very good treatments, but you will be very short of breath and tire easily until they are effective."

Duo tried to remember their evac. "I was shot..."

"Grazes," Heero assured him.
"Now they're going to think I'm a candy ass," Duo grumbled. "Duo Maxwell, taken out in the mission by the flu."

Wu Fei snorted and slipped on his jacket. "I see that he's safe and in good hands, Yuy. I think that I will spare myself the whining stage of our commander's recovery."

"Sure, run..." Duo groused weakly and then sank back into his pillow, the room spinning.

"Duo?" Heero called anxiously.

It was a moment before Duo could respond. "Okay... Just tired."

"I'll tell the others that you've decided to stay among the living," Wu Fei said and then Duo heard the click of his shoes retreating and the swing of a door.

"He's damned confidant," Duo replied, "I don't feel that good."

"Should I call the doctor?" Heero wondered.

"Nah, just don't like feeling like this," Duo replied as he rubbed at his eyes with a shaky hand. "Is Doctor Groenig taking care of me? He's my favorite. He's the only one who knows what the hell he's doing."

"Yes, I'm taking care of you." A doctor with a computer pad was suddenly looking down into Duo's eyes. He was East Indian and wore a pair of round glasses.

"Shit! Didn't know you were here," Duo exclaimed, blinking eyes at him. He smiled in relief in the next moment. "I'm glad you're here, doc. You know I trust ya. You always get me patched up fast."

The doctor coughed and held up a fax. "Yes, well, I am a married man, Agent Maxwell, and while I am flattered by your interest..."

The door swung open and a male nurse came in to collect the bathing supplies. He saw the paper in the doctor's hand and laughed, "Hey, I got one of those junk mails too. What a nut job."

Duo frowned, his mind slowly lining up and making sense out of something that had been putting two and two together in the back of his thoughts. "You're not on my address book. Why did you get one?" The man shrugged. Clarity punctured the fever fog and Duo's hand gripped Heero's arm tightly.

"The scientists got them too... and our little traitor..." Duo squeezed his eyes shut, trying to battle weariness and stay focused. "That means it's propagating through email address books. Everyone I know and everyone they know..."

Heero was suddenly alert and pulling out his cell phone. "That means that we can pick up the virus and find it's footprints. We can find out who else might have been helping inform the enemy of our movements."

Duo heard Heero talking on his cell, informing headquarters to begin the search. The virus may have eaten up its source, but it wasn't eating up its trail to other computers and fax machines.

"Duo?" The doctor checked Duo's temperature. "Time to let your partner there take care of things."

"Okay... Just tired."
You need to rest. Your heart rate is too elevated."

"'kay," Duo mumbled, exhausted now, by even that effort. "Good to know I can solve a case even mostly dead. Heero can take care of it now. The guy's a rock... my rock... my Heero... That's why... That's why I love the guy..." Duo heard his own slurred voice say that last as if someone else were saying it. Everything went very quiet as alarm made his heart thud. He hadn't meant to say that. His exhaustion had made his mind forget to keep it inside his brain.

Heero was suddenly there in his fading vision, dark blue eyes intense and needy. "Duo, sleep. We'll... We'll talk later... love."

Later, Duo thought as he was dragged under into unconsciousness. When was it going to be later? He wanted it to be later now.
"Is there anything else you need?" Heero asked, leaning in close and looking anxious as he handed Duo a steaming cup of coffee.

Duo snarled irritably, "Stop hovering and sit the hell down, Yuy!"

Heero closed up like a clam, his facial expression settling into the one that Duo was familiar with, the one that was scowling and fierce. This was the Heero he knew, not the man who acted as if, given a word of encouragement, would have slept on the floor and spent his every waking moment taking care of him.

After being released from the hospital, Duo had returned to his apartment, determined to take care of himself and get back to duty as soon as possible. It had become very apparent, unfortunately, that he had overestimated himself. Everyone had volunteered to help him. Heero had cleared the field with a snarled, "It only takes one person to help Duo. I will be that person."

That had been disturbing enough, but to have the man constantly showing up at his door to bring him prepared food, to bring his cleaned clothes, and to clean his apartment while he could hardly stir from his bed, disturbed Duo greatly and pricked at his pride. While he needed that help, he couldn't complain. Now that he was weeks away from returning to duty, and able to do things on his own, it was time to talk to Heero and get things straightened out between them.

Heero settled on the couch beside Duo. Duo sipped at his coffee, warming his hands on the mug, as it soothed his throat. After a few moments of gathering his thoughts, he asked Heero, "Do you remember when I was shot in that raid in Antigua?"

"Yes," Heero replied, looking down at his hands.

"You were in the gym," Duo continued. "I limped up to you, fresh out of micro surgery, with my wounded arm strapped, and said, 'Heero, I've been shot.' I was about to tell you to take over training exercises, but you grunted, without looking at me, 'I suggest only using the leg weights today, then.' That's the guy I know called Heero Yuy. Who's this guy sitting next to me?"

Heero frowned.

"Why are you acting this way?" Duo demanded. "It's not like I haven't almost died before. It's not like we haven't run dangerous missions before. What's going on?"

"Is this... the talk?" Heero wondered quietly and his blue eyes looked sideways at Duo nervously.

"Do you want it to be?" Duo wondered, suddenly just as nervous.

Heero nodded, his jaw bunching, and then he replied, "We've known each other since the war without having... a relationship. We've worked together closely and never..."

"Did you want that?" Duo asked.

"Yes," Heero replied.
"So did I," Duo admitted.

"Then..." Heero struggled. Duo didn't blame him.

"I... didn't think..." Duo chewed on his lip and then put his coffee cup aside on a side table. "Okay, so we were so good at being professional and tough guys, that we never let our guard down long enough to attempt anything closer."

"I respected you," Heero said thoughtfully, trying to find his own words. "I wanted to work with you and the others. I didn't want to compromise that dynamic."

"Maybe, " Duo suggested with sudden insight, "We were just too young and too damned confused?"

Heero thought about that and then nodded.

"Okay." Duo narrowed eyes at Heero. "So... what's with the change? Why are you suddenly... acting like... I'm gonna break or... you have to show me you care?"

"I thought..." Heero ran a hand through his chocolate hair. "I want you to know... that I'm interested."

"I got that already," Duo replied and then cocked his head at Heero. "You don't have to change. You don't have to be all soft and wishy washy. I'm interested, Heero, interested in you."

"Then... What should we do?" Heero seemed at a loss. "How should we proceed?"

"I'm a virgin, remember? Unmapped territory," Duo reminded him. "We have to... wing it." He grinned, stalked across the space between them, and then hooked a hand behind Heero's head. "Do me."

Heero frowned. "I don't think that's what we should do."

"Why not?" Duo turned and put his head in Heero's lap, looking up at him and still grinning. "Do you want to date? We've been together for years."

"You're not completely well," Heero clarified. One of his hands tentatively rose to touch a lock of Duo's hair as if he couldn't help himself.

"I think I can do that much, Heero, especially if you drive," Duo moved his head a bit. "I think you're prepared enough or is that your glock in your pants?"

Heero blushed deeply.

"Look, Heero," Duo told him, "If I'm going to fast for you, just say so and I'll back off. It just seems to me that we both know what we want, and how we feel, so let's do something about it."

"Is it just sex you want, then?" Heero asked seriously.

Duo snorted. "No, it's not. That's just a perk I get along with feeling the way I do about you. I'm crazy for you, Heero. Maybe I've always known that I wanted you. I sure as hell didn't give anyone else a chance."
Duo was suddenly silenced by Heero's lips on his, hard. Too hard. Duo struggled and pushed Heero's face up, scowling. "Damn it, Heero! Take it easy. That's flesh and blood, not Gundanium." He slowly pulled Heero down again and stopped him just above his lips. Gently, he let his lips touch Heero's. Duo frowned and asked, "What did you eat before you brought me my coffee?"

"Kosher pickle," Heero replied and then smirked. "If we're having trouble at this stage, I think we should train more before implementing the entire operation."

Duo sighed. "I see your point." He adjusted his pants, "But I hope you aren't suggesting that we do research or take lessons?"

"Only with each other," Heero chuckled.

"I'll go along with that." Duo sat up and coughed. He eyed Heero. "So, I've heard people talk about... gay sex... but... okay so I have a few vids, too, and... does it hurt?"

Heero looked suddenly uncertain.

Duo went wide eyed. "Does it?"

"I hurt you simply kissing you," Heero said. "Perhaps you should... initiate."

"Top?" Duo asked and his voice rose a nervous octave. He cleared his throat again. "Uhm, I guess I can do that, but, how...."

"We need some lubrication and condoms." Heero clasped his hands in his lap.

Duo noted Heero's sudden tenseness. "You've never been... bottom?"

Heero pushed a pillow into his lap and took a deep breath. "Duo, if this isn't the time for sex, then maybe I should go, so that we won't be-"

Duo was suddenly in Heero's arms and pulling him down flat on the couch. "Screw all this! You're trying to be something you're not and I'm trying to be something I'm not. I know what I freakin' want and I've waited long enough!" He began unzipping his jeans.

The vid screen beeped and Une's voice asked politely, "Duo? It's Commander Une. We've found our mole. I thought that you would like to sit in on the operation debriefing. It's in one hour."

Duo untangled himself and threw himself at the vid. He hit the on button and said, "I'll be there!"

"Good. I'll save a seat for you. Une out."

Duo found his shoes and shoved them onto his feet. When he grabbed his coat and car keys, he suddenly remembered and looked back at Heero. He found Heero already with his coat on and at his elbow. Duo grinned. "Coming?"

"Of course," Heero smiled back.

"See, that's who we are," Duo said, clapping Heero on the back, "Let's remember that when we get back here."
"What the hell?" Duo snarled as he pointed at Rachel seated beside Wu Fei. "Why isn't that bitch in restraints?"

Rachel glared at him and crossed her arms over her breast. "Duo, I wasn't responsible for those emails and faxes." She tapped her forehead. "I do have a brain, in case you hadn't noticed during all of our missions together. Why would I ruin my career over a vindictive prank?"

Une sighed from her position at the head of the meeting table. She slid a photo and a file across the table. Duo caught it as he sat down beside Milliardo and Sally. Heero settled in the chair beside him, leaning sideways to look at the photo as well. "Kirk Jasper? I've never heard of him."

"You wouldn't," Une said as she made a steeple out of her fingers and looked over her round glasses at them. "He's a janitor. He overheard Rachel confiding to her close friend about your 'date', Duo. He confessed that he was secretly in love with Rachel and that he was angry on her behalf. He decided to get revenge for her sake. After we followed the footprint of the virus, we were able to ascertain that only one Preventer's computer wasn't infected, Jasper's."

"I told Commander Une that it wasn't me, but she thought that it was best if I made myself scarce until my innocence could be proven," Rachel said. She narrowed eyes at Duo. "So, do I get an apology?"

"Later," Une said irritably. "We do have a debriefing."

Rachel looked livid. Duo sank down in his chair, recalling acutely all the terrible things that he had said about Rachel. "You can see why I thought..." Duo muttered, but Une tapped her pen on the table sharply and he closed his mouth on the rest of his excuse.

"Who was the mole?" Heero asked, getting back to business.

Une slid copies of another photo towards each person. They found themselves looking at an elderly woman.

"Carol!" Duo exclaimed. "She's one of our best agents. What the hell did they offer her?"

"Her son's life," Une replied. "They were holding him hostage."

Milliardo sighed. "She should have come to us. We could have freed him. Is he dead now?"

"Yes," Une replied, her expression tight. "He was a casualty in our latest operation. He was working for our targets. The 'kidnaping' was to gain his mother's cooperation."

"Slick," Duo said. "Sick, but slick."

They all gave their mission reports, then, and discussed them. It was Duo's job to report insubordinate operatives, especially Sally Po. She had been instrumental in helping his people abandon him against his orders. Duo kept the information to himself, though. He'd never been one to follow all the rules. If his people needed disciplinary measures, he would be the one to give it. Besides, Duo thought that Sally had already learned her lesson. It was unlikely that she would take matters into her own hands again.
The meeting dismissed and Duo found himself walking beside Rachel. She stopped and faced him in the hallway outside the meeting room, the others still inside and talking as they gathered their things to leave.

"Duo," she said as if she were trying hard to control her temper. "Tell me one thing; When you told me that you were gay... and a virgin... was I really the first one that you ever told?"

Duo blushed and ducked his head, hands sunk in his pockets and eyes hidden by his bangs as he gritted out, "Yeah."

"You trusted me," she said sadly. "I betrayed your trust when I told my friend. I'm the one that screwed up."

Duo looked up then, surprised. "I guess... I guess I said some nasty stuff..." He held out his hand. "Let's forget about this, okay? It's done and over with."

Rachel hesitated and then reached out and shook his hand. Duo grinned and she smiled. "So," she said. "About to lose the 'Virgin' in front of your name? It looked like Heero was staking his claim in there."

Duo felt hot with embarrassment. "Trying to," he admitted.

"A kick boxing match, a couple of beers, and he'll be ripping your clothes off," she advised.

Duo snickered. "Think so?"

"Worked for me... well, our version... almost," Rachel amended and then laughed. "Better get back to him. He looks jealous."

Duo looked over his shoulder and saw Heero standing in the doorway to the meeting room, giving him a look that was partly anxious and partly challenging. "See ya, Rachel," Duo said. When he reached Heero's side, he asked, "Ready to go?"

"Yes," Heero replied and then smoothed a hand along Duo's arm almost awkwardly. Duo caught his hand before he could withdraw it and squeezed it reassuringly.

"Let's go home," Duo said warmly and gave Heero a tug towards the elevator.

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Duo held the little plastic bag nervously as Heero took their coats and tossed them over a chair. Being at Heero's apartment, instead of his own, made Duo feel self conscious and off balance. He didn't know where to begin. He liked planning missions, not first time sex.

"We can wait," Heero said and Duo looked up to see Heero standing very close, _expression serious.

Duo remembered Rachel's joke, beer and kick boxing. Maybe he wasn't that... macho. Maybe he did need a bit of romance... or foreplay. He wasn't sure. He did know that he didn't want to just unwrap his newest purchases and spread his legs. That made it seem too much like he didn't care, that he just wanted to 'get off'.
"I don't know," Duo said uncertainly.

"I do," Heero whispered. He moved in close and kissed Duo, hard mouth pressing against his lips, calloused hands taking hold of him, and harder body pressing up against his. All muscle, all strength, all Heero.

After the kiss, Duo let himself be held. He liked that and couldn't remember the last time that he had just... let himself go. Heero's hand slid under the weight of his hair at his neck and pulled Duo even closer. Duo could feel Heero's heart hammering. The man was as nervous as he was, Duo realized.

The awkwardness fell away suddenly. The contrived 'first time' was suddenly spontaneous and warm and not bought and paid for at the corner market. They kissed and held each other for awhile longer and then Heero was tugging Duo towards the bedroom. Duo met Heero's smile with his own and allowed himself to be led.

Rain pattered against the window there, making a soothing music as they sank onto the soft bed and kicked off their shoes. Hard kisses turned to open mouthed and hungry ones. Hands pulled at zippers and buttons as they undressed one another. When they were finally lying together naked, Duo smoothed hands over Heero's hard body.

"I never..." Duo swallowed and tried again. "I mean, I dreamed, but I figured it would always be just that, a kinky dream."

"Me too," Heero sighed against his neck and kissed him there tenderly.

That undid Duo completely. He clutched at Heero and was overwhelmed by his need for the man, his emotions thundering through him in time to his wildly beating heart. Heero held him until he calmed, until he believed that it was real and that Heero wasn't about to vanish in a poof of hopes and dreams.

Thunder rumbled. Heero dimmed the lights and lightning flashed and played over the walls as they began to kiss and touch more urgently. "I love you, Duo." It was a long breath of sound, soft and almost lost in the rain as Heero rose above Duo and reached for the bag.

Duo tensed a little, but then he smiled and tried to relax as Heero uncapped the lube and rolled on a condom. It didn't kill the mood, it enhanced it. Heero was being careful. He wasn't rushing to quench his own needs. When he was prepared, he bent and kissed Duo's stomach, running a tongue in a rough swirl around Duo's belly button. Duo gasped, ticklish, and arched up against the sensation.

Heero pulled Duo towards him, large hands cupping Duo's ass as he raised him into position almost in his lap. Legs spread on either side of Heero, Duo swallowed hard as he felt Heero's slick fingers at his entrance.

It wasn't easy. The sensation went from pleasure, to uncomfortable prickles of pain, to pleasure again. When the fingers withdrew at last, and Heero put the blunt end of his erection against Duo, they paused like that. Fingers had felt good, but this was wider and different. It was already pushing uncomfortably even against the stretched flesh there.

"It's okay," Duo told him with only a little shake to his voice.
Heero's look of pure warmth, love, and anticipation told Duo that this was more than sex, that this was the first step into a deeper relationship. Lightning highlighted the curve of Heero's back as he bent Duo almost double and pushed forward.

Duo groaned as that head defeated all resistance and worked it's way inward. It wasn't as painful or as strange as he imagined. There wasn't a rise of instinctive outrage that another man was so obviously dominating him. On the contrary, Duo wanted more. He flexed and forced Heero in deeper, clenching hands into Heero's ass to drive him down. Heero rolled his hips under that grip and shoved.

"Want you," Duo hissed impatiently as Heero stopped and seemed to want to rest. "Do it. Come on!"

Heero nuzzled the skin that he could reach and replied, "I don't want to come right away, Duo. Give me a moment."

Duo chuckled and it came out as a nervous sound. His hands knotted in Heero's wild hair and he waited until Heero regained control. Heero rolled his hips again, then, pulling up and then shoving inward again deeply.

"Yeah!" Duo groaned. "This is so damned good!"

Heero began to move faster, pumping his hips in earnest. That made Duo come first in a hot spurt across both their bellies. He let out a yell at the power of the orgasm, blinded and panting as sensation overwhelmed every nerve in his body. He was only vaguely aware of Heero coming as well with a deep, drawn out moan that almost sounded like a beast in pain.

Wetness oozed down the crack of Duo's ass, but he was warm and content to stay under Heero as they both recovered. Finally, Heero pulled out and reached for the kleenex on the bedside table. He cleaned them both, tossing the used kleenex carelessly aside with one of them containing his broken condom.

"Damned thing didn't work," Heero muttered.

Duo felt a split second of worry, but Heero looked embarrassed as he added, "Not that it was really necessary."

Duo frowned as he pulled Heero down to him and covered them both with a warm blanket. "Why not?"

Heero wrapped an arm around Duo and pulled him close as he whispered in his ear, "I'm a virgin too."

Duo started and then laughed. "At our age, nobody will ever believe us."

Heero chuckled, but then grew serious. "I tried... with other people, but it never seemed right. I wasn't interested in them at all. I wanted to tell you how I felt, but there were always missions and we were so busy finding our place; getting our positions with Preventers. I thought you might be gay, but I was afraid to hope."

"Same here," Duo sighed, but then grinned. "So we popped each other's cherries. Can't ask for
better than that." He eyed Heero. "I think I'm supposed to ask, 'Was it good for you?', now."

Heero gave him an intense look and replied, "It was better than anything I've ever felt before."

Duo kissed him and said, "Me too. I don't think it was just the sex, either. It was being with you that made it really good."

Heero ran a hand along Duo's back and cupped one ass cheek. Done talking romance, and knowing that what they had between them was love, it was back to basic need and Heero's hard erection let Duo know that he was very needy. "Can we... again?" Heero wondered.

"Yeah," Duo purred in a sexy voice. "Go for it."

Heero was up and sliding Duo towards him eagerly then. Duo moaned as Heero entered him again and, as the man began thrusting, he smoothed hands along Heero's strong back. "Mine," he growled and felt an intense satisfaction and a completeness to his life that had always been lacking.

"Mine," Heero echoed and that felt just as good.

The rain began to pound the window pane in earnest and it felt very primordial. As Heero came a second time, the heretic part of Duo had a thought, an image of them both offering up their virginity as sacrifice to some god for a new and better life together. It made him clutch at Heero possessively.

"All right?" Heero panted.

"Now I am," Duo replied as he grinned fiercely and pulled Heero down for a passionate kiss.

THE END

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