## Summary

He watches them fall one by one when he closes his eyes. It doesn't matter if it's not real. It's his fault. That's real enough.

"Bad dream?" Trowa asks him.

The worst.

## Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

It's over. They've failed.

*He*’s failed.

Quatre knows it the moment he sees Deathscythe explode on his monitor.

And just a moment before Duo had been joking about how easy these skirmishes were becoming: “Looks like White Fang's all bark, no bite.”

Until the Virgo materializes out of nowhere, the blast from its beam cannon tearing Deathscythe in half at the waist, point-blank, obliterating the cockpit. Duo's voice cuts off mid-sentence. He never saw it coming.
Quatre can't believe what he's seeing. He can't breathe, let alone scream.

Trowa does that for him, shouting Duo's name like he genuinely expects an answer. But there is no answer. There's no one left to answer.

Then Wufei's panic in his ear: “What! Another wave? But we... No... Where did they come from?!"

I don't know! I thought we were in the clear!

Quatre scans his HUD, he knows he must be surrounded, he can tell from the fire bombarding them, but there's no sign of the enemy. Why can't I see them?

Altron's arm shoots out toward a mobile doll that was right there a second ago, only to have it blasted from the body. Two Virgos surround the gundam and latch on. Another seizes the severed arm and, to Quatre's horror, turns the beam trident back on Altron, thrusting it up under the gundam's “ribs,” penetrating the cockpit.

Quatre can tell from Wufei's scream that he's alive, but wounded. No idea how badly, only that he sounds in unbelievable agony.

The rest of them have no choice but to surrender. Quatre sends the transmission himself, and Heero backs him up: “It's the right thing to do. This battle's already lost.” Trowa curses under his breath, a rare slip. He won't argue but he wants to keep fighting until the end.

But he's the one, not himself, that Quatre is desperate to save now. He and Heero. And Wufei, if it isn't already too late. Quatre couldn't bear it if another one of them died because of him. Surely that and the shock of losing Duo, the reality of it having not yet sunk in, are the only things still holding his mind together.

The White Fang lacks OZ's sense of basic civility. No sooner do the three uninjured come out of their suits with hands raised than their arms are yanked roughly behind their backs, restraints slapped on their wrists.

Someone knocks Quatre's helmet off, rough enough to wrench his neck and shoulder and leave his ear ringing.

“Well, well,” a smug voice mutters over him, “if it isn't the Winner scion, in the flesh. I'd heard rumors, but you can't trust everything you hear. Lucky for Daddy he didn't live long enough to see his darling boy turn traitor.”

Quatre can hear the evil intent in the man's clenched jaw, the curl of hatred in the way he says the word: traitor.

Quinze. Quatre recognizes him from his broadcasts. There isn't anything he wouldn't do or order done, Quinze's voice promises, to humiliate Quatre. To drag the Winner name through mud. To make Quatre wish he had died out there in space with Duo.

Too late. It doesn't matter what they do to him now. Quatre can't imagine anything can hurt worse than the guilt quickly reaching critical mass in his heart.

Until he sees Wufei.

“Huh. I'm amazed he's still alive,” Quinze says as Wufei's captor drops him on the deck.
Wufei gasps and falls forward, in too much pain to carry his own weight, too much pain to even draw a full breath, but his pride makes him struggle to at least rise to his knees. A hopeless task when they even restrained his hands behind his back.

Out of nothing but cruelty. Wufei's side is a scorched and bloody mess. The beam trident may have cauterized the wound as it impaled him and melted the astrosuit to his flesh, but the internal damage must be severe. It's clear Wufei no longer poses a threat. But that isn't their captors' point.

Another one lifts off Heero's helmet, and whistles. “Pilot Zero-One! Boy, if you knew the things we've been dreaming of doing to you, after all the trouble you've caused the Colonies. Suppose you'll find out soon, though, huh.”

Heero glares openly back, promising death, for all the good that does him. If any of the gundam pilots will be singled out by the White Fang for revenge, or to be made an example of, surely it will be Heero.

“This one's kind of pretty for a pilot,” sneers the man holding Trowa. “But we'll fix that quick enough.” The way he ruffles Trowa's hair turns Quatre's stomach. “Been a little short on entertainment around here lately.”

Quatre tries to get Trowa's attention, but Trowa keeps his eyes down. Even now, he must be thinking up a way out of this. He might look beaten, but he wouldn't just give up. Just like when he infiltrated OZ, Trowa must be thinking about playing the long game.

Which is what Quatre should be doing, too. After all, that's what he plugged back into Zero for, isn't it? For a winning strategy? There must be a way out of this, if he just puts his mind to it . . .

“What do we do with them, sir? That guy—” a nod in Wufei's direction, “—won't last much longer.”

“Kill them.”

“Sir? Even the Winner kid?”

“As long as the gundams and their pilots exist, Earth will use them for propaganda. They're a threat to the cause. As such they must be eliminated. Immediately.”

“You bastards,” Wufei grunts/growls/sobs with what strength he can still muster—like he knew this was coming, he knew this was exactly what it was all leading up to but he prayed he was wrong, “you fucking cowards—”

“You can't do this!” The words burst from Quatre's throat, fueled by outrage that cuts to his very soul—a madness consuming him from the core out that he hasn't felt since he watched his father die. This injustice cannot stand. He won't allow it. Someone will have the sanity to stop it, surely. “We have rights, as prisoners of war—”

Quinze's hand cracks hard across his face. It's all Quatre can do not to cry out, but he won't give their captors the satisfaction, if none of the others will.

“Do this one last,” Quinze says, glaring down at Quatre. “The Commander says Winner's the brains of the group. I want him to know before he dies that his failure as a leader is what got his friends killed.”

Heero chooses that moment to wrench himself free. He must see an opening, or else knows he'll lose any chance to act if he doesn't do it now. Before his captors can stop him, he charges headlong at Quinze—
A shot rings out through the hangar bay.

Heero falls to the deck in front of Quatre. Gasping for breath, his eyes wild as they seek out Quatre's. Like there's something he needs to say, something he urgently needs Quatre to understand, but Quatre doesn't know where or how to start.

Then those eyes glaze over, the only sign of the life that was so strong just a moment ago the pool of dark blood that continues to grow beneath Heero's body.

No.

“Heero?”

This can't be happening!

“NO! Please, Heero, talk to me! HEERO!”

Quatre struggles against his captors. He needs to get to Heero's side. He needs to know Heero's still in there somewhere, wounded but alive. He can't be dead. After everything he's survived—Heero can't die like this! He can't!

Please, God—not again!

Someone's boot kicks out the back of his legs, their hands on his shoulders forcing Quatre to the deck, but even on his knees he refuses to stop fighting. What good does surrender do them now? Heero. . .

Forgive me, Heero. It's my fault. I thought I was saving your life, but I was wrong.

I should have had a better plan.

You trusted me. And look what I did to you.

“Quatre.”

Trowa's voice snaps Quatre's attention to him. He's on his knees, too, one of the White Fang soldiers holding him rough by the neck of his astrosuit.

But he doesn't seem to care. It's Quatre his eyes search desperately, picking up where Heero left off, even while everything else about Trowa remains strangely removed from what's going on around them.

“Look at me,” Trowa says, so calm that Quatre can't do anything but obey. Quatre can hear it in the sadness of his voice: that he wishes they had more time, that things had turned out differently. That he forgives Quatre completely. “It's going to be okay.”

No, it's not! How can you say that? How can it ever be again!? Another bang.

Quatre flinches. In his peripheral vision, he sees Wufei fall, and this time Wufei doesn't try to get back up. Quatre knows he's gone without looking over. He feels the loss—the void growing as another piece of his soul is ripped violently out.

But there's something in the way Trowa's eyes stare into his, and the hypnotic tone of his voice, that leaves Quatre with a strange, out-of-place feeling: This has all happened before.
“You're going to be okay. Do you hear me, Quatre? Don't be afraid—”

The muzzle pressed to his temple flashes, and Trowa's body crumples to the deck.

Quatre tastes blood as his heart finally collapses into itself. Now there's nothing left. Nothing but this black hole inside his chest sucking all his rage and all his hope so deep into itself that nothing escapes.

He raises his face to his executioner and stares the man down, daring him to do it, to get it over with, put Quatre out of his misery. He's not afraid. How can he be when his worst fears have already come true?

The man raises his pistol, and Quatre stares down the black hole of the barrel. What will happen when it collides with the one inside his soul? He watches the man pull the trigger. A deafening roar. Then—

Nothing.

No pain, no breath. Just blackness and bodilessness, and the sum total of all his regrets. How did it all go so wrong so fast?

Wait.

Go back to the beginning.

Let me try that again. I can fix this! I know I can do it different next time!

Quatre wakes with tears on his face and a sob in his throat, clawing to get out. His heart hammering so hard and fast he wonders if it will kill him before he can calm it down. He fumbles for the light.

And when it comes on, illuminating the small cabin inside Peacemillion, he sits up in bed and tries to catch his breath.

“Damn it. . . .”

Zero.

Quatre knew something like this would happen. He begged Heero not to make him use the system again, for fear of something just like this. Just when Quatre had begun to think he was over these dreams—

What are you trying to tell me, Zero? Why do you have to do this to me now, when everything is on the line?

Why—why in God's name did you have to show me that?

Eventually his heart returns to its normal rhythm, but when it does, the tremors settle into place, along with the nausea, and the cold. The kind of cold that makes him feel he has ice running through his veins. The cold of space. Quatre's teeth chatter and he can't stop shaking.

It was too real.

Even now, even knowing perfectly well it was nothing but a terrible nightmare, the feelings are all too real. He can't shake them off. For all Quatre's heart still cares, his friends are dead.
And he killed them.

It probably should surprise Quatre that Trowa keeps his cabin door unlocked, but it doesn't really. Who on this ship would wish the gundam pilots any harm?

Besides, Trowa sleeps light enough to wake at the intrusion.

“Quatre?” he groans, still half-asleep. Of course he knows who it is before Quatre can speak. Trowa turns over onto his stomach, grasping his pillow in bare arms like it's a lifeline pulling him to the surface of consciousness, blinking bleary eyes. “What time is it?”

“Still early,” Quatre tells him. He doesn't move from just inside the door. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you, I just——”

_I had to see you. I had to know you were still alive._

_I had to show myself that it was just a dream._

He should be reassured by the evidence. But he's not.

“Can I . . . Is it okay if I stay? You don't have to stay up with me. I just can't be alone right now.”

It takes every bit of self-control Quatre has to keep his voice steady.

But Trowa seems to know his trouble already. He doesn't ask questions. Just rolls onto his side and peels back the covers, just enough to make clear it's an invitation.

It would be rude of Quatre not to accept, but he can't say he's ever shared a bed with anyone before. Shuttle flights aside, the closest he's come is having Heero's bedroll next to his. And Heero slept fully-clothed, ready to spring into action or flight at a moment's notice.

Here on _Peacemillion_, everyone else has lowered their guard, for better or worse. It won't matter what they're wearing if they suddenly lose pressure, or are blown into space. Trowa doesn't seem the least bit self-conscious that he's in nothing but his underwear, as Quatre climbs in beside him, fighting the lesser gravity for the right to settle down.

Trowa just stares patiently back. Like he could stare forever and never tire of it.

Quatre can feel his face warming up the longer it goes on. “You should get your rest,” he says, determined not to flinch from meeting those eyes. “Don't force yourself to stay awake for me. I don't think I'll be getting any more sleep tonight anyway.”

“Bad dream?” Trowa says.

“The worst.”

And it seems Trowa knows exactly what he means without specifics. It seems he must have had the same sort of dream when he says, gravely, “Ah. I see.”

The space between those two sentences says it all.

“I was afraid something like this would happen when Heero installed the Zero System in Sandrock.”

“I thought you conquered the Zero System.”
“So did I!” Yesterday, on the battlefield of space, it felt as though everything had fallen easily into place. Time slowed down, and Quatre could see all the pieces on the board. He could see what each one was going to do before they did it.

He had felt like a god. Like all his anxiety and self-doubt had been for nothing. Not once during the battle did Quatre feel like he was losing his grip on who he was, or that he was doing the wrong thing.

Until he lay down and closed his eyes.

Until his mind started to wander.

“I don't know if Zero's uploaded itself to my brain,” Quatre says, “or if it's just holding a mirror up for me to see my own worst fears reflected back, but either way I'm sick of it. I'm sick of feeling like my thoughts aren't my own. I'm not afraid to die, Trowa. But . . .”

_It's not my death that I'm afraid of._

Quatre can't bring himself to say it. To say those words—_I dreamed I saw you die right in front of me, and there was nothing I could do to save you_—feels like making them true, and the vision, the feelings that accompanied it, are already too fresh.

He can still see the gaping wound in Wufei's side. It haunts Quatre when he closes his eyes. Along with the regret that he never got to know Wufei as well as he should have, even though right now Wufei's probably with Altron in the hangar, making adjustments. Quatre remembers the fun they had last night in _Peacemillion_’s canteen, Duo making them all laugh while he lost badly to Sally at poker, like they're never going to laugh like that again. Like Duo's already gone.

And that wretched emptiness, when he watched Heero die—the wretched emptiness of knowing _This is happening. And it's all my fault._

It doesn't matter if it was all a lie. Real grief wells up in Quatre's throat, but he's not going to cry, not even here, where he's safe. Not in front of Trowa.

Only, “It was _so real—_”

“Hey.” And suddenly Trowa's hand is cupping the side of his face. “Look at me, Quatre,” he says. (Look at him, Trowa says, just like he said in the dream.) “I'm still here. _I'm_ real. I'm alive. We're both alive.”

Yes, Zero must have led him to the same dream, at least once before. Or else how would he know?

Trowa hooks his fingers on Quatre's neck, his thumb gently rubbing the shell of Quatre's ear, in a desperate attempt to ground him here, to this reality. Trowa would tear out this dream and all memory of it like a shorted fuse, that touch swears, erase every last line of Zero from Quatre's code, if it were within his power to do so.

But it doesn't help the way he surely intends it to. Quatre's only waiting for him to say the other lines from the script: _It's going to be okay. Don't be afraid._ Even as the gun is aimed at his head.

Instead, Trowa says, “I promise you, I won't die before this is over.”

Why did he think that would make everything better? He might as well challenge God to roll the dice. “You know that's not a promise you can make.”
“Nevertheless.” Trowa’s eyes are deadly serious, their intensity holding Quatre’s to them. “I am
making it. I wouldn’t bother saying it out loud if I didn't intend to keep it.”

Maybe this is the part where Quatre should promise the same, but he's too much of a realist. It would
feel like a lie, and he's always been terrible at lying.

But Trowa, it seems, doesn't care if Quatre returns the favor or not.

“You know how you’re always saying I saved your soul? Well, you saved mine, Quatre. Before I
even realized it. Or knew that I had anything worth saving.”

Before? He must be talking about when they first met. Trowa had acted so cold to him then. Not
hostile, just . . . robotic. Like a mobile doll. Like a condemned man just waiting to meet the time and
place of his death. No use for emotions when you won’t be around long to enjoy them, or deal with
their consequences. So don't give anyone a reason to miss you when you're gone.

What was it Quatre did, he wonders, that changed that? Was it their impromptu duet, or something
he said?

Or just trusting Trowa? Just having faith in him implicitly? Because it was nothing, Quatre wants to
say. *I didn't do anything special. Nothing you didn't deserve.*

“I should have told you when I realized it,” Trowa says, “I should have told you the moment I saw
you again, but I didn't get the chance.”

He's being generous. Quatre doesn't deserve it. “Because I threatened to blow up a colony.” *And
then I nearly killed you. I thought I had.*

But Trowa won't hear his excuses. “I still could have told you. All the more reason I should have. I
could have told you the moment everything came back to me. I could have said it last night.”

“You're saying it now.”

And Trowa smiles, because Quatre has sprung the trap Trowa laid for him and he couldn't have done
so more beautifully.

“I'm saying it now. I want you to know that's what's real, and never forget it. So that if anything
should happen to me out there—“

“Please,” Quatre squeezes his eyes shut, “don’t—”

“If.” Trowa trudges on, against Quatre's wishes, “anything does, I don't want you to blame yourself
for it, Quatre.”

Hearing his name is what pulls Quatre's gaze back to him. The warmth in it, echoing the warmth of
Trowa's smile—and how could Quatre ever want to close his eyes on that? “I don't ever want you to
think it's somehow your fault, or that you failed me. Nothing could be farther from the truth.”

It's too much. When Trowa starts to pull back his hand, Quatre can't bear to let him.

He seizes Trowa's hand in his and pulls it to his lips. Presses a kiss into it and twines his fingers tight
with Trowa's and doesn't let go, so that that promise Trowa made can never be unsaid. So that God
Himself, or whoever's out there watching them in space, can see that Quatre heard, that he witnessed
it, and now it can't be undone.
And he kisses that hand in gratitude, for Trowa knowing just what he needed to hear, even if it is a lie.

It's a kind lie. It allows Quatre to pretend, if only for the rest of the night, that his dream was nothing but a random firing of neurons. He can't chase it away, but he can write over it with this, right here, this memory of Trowa's skin, warm, *alive*, against Quatre's lips.

“Well,” Trowa teases him, “now *I* have to survive, don't I? Because I have one more thing to come back for.”

And Quatre laughs, even though it hurts. He can't tell anymore if this pain is his heart mending, or breaking all over again, but it's worth holding on to.

For as long as he still can.

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End Notes

Title comes from Muse's *Eternally Missed* (Bellamy, 2003). The lines "I just don't care if it's real/ That won't change how it feels" in particular inspired me to write this.

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